

## Release the Kraken

TEXT: Romans 8:31-39

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on November 12, 2023*

Across the seven weeks of this series on monsters, I came across an essay from May of 2020 called “Release the Kraken: Why We Need Monsters in These Times of Crisis” by Dr. Bayo Akomolafe, a Yoruba psychologist, author, and activist.

Two parts of that piece jumped out at me. The first quote I pulled says, “Changing the means is the same as changing the ends. It is not the case of adopting new means to old ends. One does not merely arrive, one co-enacts arrivals with journeys.” Underneath the hood, his words are another way of stating the old adage, “If you do what you’ve always done; you’ll get what you’ve always gotten.” A change in behavior is needed if we want a different result.

But he also means to say that, since any change in the means we use to achieve our ends will necessarily change those ends, we need to think long and hard about the change and look for unintended consequences. Since at least the Industrial Revolution, we have moved quickly to achieve what we believed to be the same ends just with newer technologies. Volumes could be written about the unintended consequences of the technology changes—some wonderful and liberating, some monstrous and deadly, most a combination of both.

To that thought, Dr. Akomolafe brings the problem of deeply entrenched systems—systems that have been built piece by piece by many people and societies over time, but that are now so embedded in our world that we don’t even see them anymore. They’ve become “just the way things are.” They’re now just what we consider normal, expected, and even healthy; never realizing that a good number of those systems are now causing, not helping, the seemingly intractable problems we face. They’re intractable in large part because they operate invisibly, deep in the ground of “normal.”

This is where Dr. Akomolafe sees an indispensable role for monsters. Monsters are world-breakers. Monsters destroy infrastructure; they decimate systems; they tear up the ground called “normal.” If you survive a monster attack, the only way forward is through. Because today’s world is not just broken, but under existential threat by toxic, but deeply entrenched and almost invisible systems, Akomolafe believes monsters are necessary to root them out. And so, he writes,

“Release the Kraken! Unleash the primal on the familiar, disturb the edges, dispute the layers, find a place of stillness, press your ears to the ground to feel the rumblings of things outside your philosophy, linger by the shrubbery, improvise new rituals, pay homage to the nonhuman, and acknowledge the wilds whence you came. To release the Kraken – that monster of Norse-Grecian lore – is not merely to call upon a monster, it is to liberate ourselves from the tyranny of a particular plot. It is to acknowledge our own flailing limbs. It is to dismember ourselves.”

I can think of many particular plots in our world that have become tyrannies, some of which are in the church. I am your pastor today in no small part because the monster of Covid-19 disrupted the tyranny of “We’ve never done it that way before” in the church.

I left parish ministry after thirteen years in the local church to become Executive Director of the Massachusetts Bible Society because, as I approached fifty years old and looked at the remaining years before retirement, I thought, “I probably have two more churches left in me. Do I want to come to the end of my next 20 years of round-the-clock labor and say, “Well, there you have it. Two more churches are now willing to sing new hymns?” My answer to that was, “No.” I felt called to do more and found a place that was open to change. So, in 2007, I jumped.

But when the pandemic hit, I watched every church of every stripe be totally dismembered by that monster. Never mind *new* hymns; congregations couldn’t sing *any* hymns without literally killing those in their communities. A simple choir practice in Washington State in March of 2020 infected 52 people and two of them died. Churches were kicked out of their buildings, with even outdoor gatherings limiting the number of people who could be present and rules for the distance that had to be kept between them. I saw my colleagues beaten down as they scrambled to figure out what to do.

In the same month Dr. Akomolafe was writing about releasing the Kraken, May of 2020, Episcopalian bishop and Choctaw Elder, Steven Charleston posted these words to Facebook. I’ve shared them with you before:

"Now is the moment for which a lifetime of faith has prepared you. All of those years of prayer and study, all of the worship services, all of the time devoted to a community of faith: it all comes down to this, this sorrowful moment when

life seems chaotic and the anarchy of fear haunts the thin borders of reason. Your faith has prepared you for this. It has given you the tools you need to respond: to proclaim justice while standing for peace. Long ago the Spirit called you to commit your life to faith. Now you know why. You are a source of strength for those who have lost hope. You are a voice of calm in the midst of chaos. You are a steady light in days of darkness. The time has come to be what you believe."

His post hit me like a lightning bolt. The reason I had left the local church in 2007 had been stomped into the ground by the Covid monster. Literally no church could do things the way they always had been done. At 61, it was time to put up or shut up. I was as prepared for this moment as anyone could be. "Go!" said God. "Now. If you wait, it will be too late." I jumped again, and after a totally implausible series of events, I landed here at Crawford a mere two months later.

As I realized Dr. Akomolafe's essay and Bishop Charleston's post both hit in May of 2020, it gave me a new lens for my role, as we all wonder how to be faithful to Jesus as the many-tentacled Kraken is unleashed on the world. What my particular background has prepared me for is not to play Beowulf and slay the Kraken with my bare hands.

But it has prepared me to work *with* the Kraken, directing its energies to "unleash the primal on the familiar, disturb the edges, dispute the layers, find a place of stillness, press your ears to the ground to feel the rumblings of things outside your philosophy, linger by the shrubbery, improvise new rituals, pay homage to the nonhuman, and acknowledge the wilds whence you came."

I'm not sure what that looks like, in practical terms, but as I probed Dr. Akomolafe's writings more this past week, I found a fuller picture. In another piece called "A Slower Urgency: We Will Dance with Mountains," he introduced me to the African saying, "The times are urgent, let us slow down." He writes,

"Slowing down is...about lingering in the places we are not used to. Seeking out new questions. Becoming accountable to more than what rests on the surface. Seeking roots. Slowing down is taking care of ghosts, hugging monsters, sharing silence, embracing the weird...The idea of slowing down is not about getting answers, it is about questioning our questions. It is about staying in the places that are haunted."

Everything we are taught in western society is the exact opposite of all of that. And it has not served us well. In fact, it has not served us at all. It has only created more monsters, which create even greater feelings of urgency, which make us ramp up to desperate speed until we collapse upon ourselves.

I suspect Akomolafe's remedy is more likely to result in a truly changed world. We don't have to be the lemmings dashing over the cliff, just because we've always done that before. We don't have to be the men in the Milgram Experiment who push the button just because authority figures tell us to, despite the screams from the other room. What if greater urgency demands not greater speed but greater deliberation? What if the deformity of a monster is not a problem to be solved but an invitation to greater imagination?

The "Release the Kraken" essay invites us to dismember ourselves. That sounds pretty unpleasant, and it generally is, but within it lies a hope. The opposite of dis-member is to re-member, to put together things that have been torn apart. That's the opportunity that every dismembering monster presents—the pieces can be re-membered, put back together, with a chance to fix the flaws that allowed it to be destroyed in the first place or even to create something entirely new in its place.

We can re-member things the way they always have been; and sometimes that's exactly what's needed. But in many, many cases, the dismembering monster was a by-product of a toxic system, and putting it back the way it was starts the deadly cycle all over again.

Whether Covid was a deadly pathogen escaped from a lab or the result of a transmission from wild animals sold as food in an open-air market makes little difference. The systems of engineering bioweapons *and* the systems of destroying natural habitat to exploit its resources for food and profit need to be dismembered and then re-membered for different ends.

While the dismembering often happens quickly, the re-membering is where urgency demands that we slow down, question our questions, and stay for a time in the places that are haunted. While there, we have time to befriend the ghosts and hug the monsters, until we can re-member a world that carries within it the seeds of a different destiny than the one that has just done so much harm.

But how can we fend off our natural fear of those haunted places to allow us to linger there long enough for that necessary work? Ah, that question brings us—at long last—to our Scripture reading for this morning.

Last week we entered the haunted cave of our own souls, invited into our own monstrous depths by St. Paul in the seventh chapter of his letter to the Romans. There we found him paralyzed by his inability to control his inner monster. No matter how much he willed himself to do what was right, he would inevitably make the wrong choice.

He proclaimed himself a wretched man—a prisoner within his own being. We discover Paul, the ultimate perfectionist, is at war with himself as he realizes that he is not—and cannot become—perfect. He will live, and die, as a person who screws up.

Paul shows us that struggle, because he knows he isn't alone; and his confession at the end of chapter 7 leads to the surprising pronouncement at the start of chapter 8. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Winding your way through most of Romans 8 is a difficult affair, as Paul tries to explain exactly how he arrives at that conclusion, which he's been hinting at since chapter three. But what is clear is where he lands at the end of the chapter, and I think the way out of our fear of lingering in the haunted places can be found there, in verses 38-39:

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." We simply can't be separated from God's love. Not by anyone or anything. Not monsters, not ghosts, not haunted places.

That confidence in God's abiding love and presence is noteworthy because this is part of a letter Paul is sending to the church in Rome, around the year 57-58. Three to four years before writing this, Nero had ascended to the emperor's throne in Rome. Nero's persecution of the church is legendary and he will sever Paul's own head from his shoulders about ten years hence. Nero was a cruel, authoritarian monster with a special disdain for monotheistic religions that refused to worship him.

When Paul quotes Psalm 44 to the Roman church in this chapter, saying "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered," he is referring to what is actually happening to the recipients of his letter. And yet, Paul is not running from that monster, but asking to be brought directly into the belly of the beast. The whole purpose of the letter to the Romans is to convince that church to become a home base of support for him to take the gospel further west to Spain.

It's Paul's utter confidence in the unending, inescapable love of God that propels him to spread the message of grace as far as he can and in all the places that he can, regardless of the monsters that await him on those journeys—and there were many.

Paul does sometimes get it wrong—something that his particular personality finds utterly abhorrent. But instead of living in the fear of messing up; he plows forward, knowing that "there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus." The God of love has his back, and anyone he can possibly convince of that will find themselves transformed. He knows of what he speaks, because such a transformation has happened to him.

Paul was, after all, once a monster himself. When we first meet him in chapter 7 of the book of Acts, he is proudly overseeing the stoning of Stephen, known today as the first Christian martyr, although Stephen was a Jewish believer in Jesus like all the rest at the time. Stephen dies at the end of chapter 7, and the first verses of Acts 8 tell us,

"That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul [which was Paul's Hebrew name] was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison."

That right there is monster behavior. And once Saul has sufficiently locked up believers in Jerusalem, he takes his monstrous persecution on the road, heading to Syria and the city of Damascus to hunt heretics in the synagogues there. On that road to Damascus, he's blinded and knocked from his horse by a brilliant light. He hears the voice of Jesus ask

why Saul is persecuting him. Jesus tells him to go to the city and wait to be told what to do. Still blind, Saul has to be led into the city, where he didn't eat or drink for three days.

God then gets in touch with perhaps the greatest unsung hero in the Bible, a man named Ananias. God tells Ananias to go find Saul and restore his vision. Ananias has heard of Saul—everyone had heard of Saul—the monster, ravaging the synagogues and imprisoning anyone he found who believed in Jesus. Some of those in Damascus were there because they had fled Saul's persecution in Jerusalem.

And now the monster has come to their city, but oh, the luck! The monster has arrived weak and vulnerable. He's blind—hasn't had anything to eat or drink in days. The usual hero story would have Ananias seize the moment, take his sword, and strike him down. But God gives Ananias different instructions. Ananias is to go meet the monster with compassion and heal his eyesight. Ananias isn't happy about that, but he does as God asks.

As a result, Saul is healed, baptized, and almost all the rest of the New Testament tells us, frequently in Paul's own words, of the roughly three-decade transformation from a monster to a saint that follows. That transformation was only possible because Ananias brought compassion rather than a sword to a vulnerable monster.

By the time Paul writes his letter to the church in Rome, two of those three decades are behind him. He has a large agenda for this letter. But here at the end of Romans 8, the exact center of the 16-chapter letter, Paul writes of the confidence that has become the center of his own life; the thing that allowed him to go on after he met the horror of his own monstrous failings; the thing that moved him forward after being shipwrecked, beaten to a pulp, run out of town, and thrown into a prison, shackled to the wall.

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Not even condemnation for Paul, the monster. Love wins; or, as Paul had written a few years before, while trying to calm conflicted factions in the church in Corinth, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Decades earlier, at the time of his vision on the road to Damascus, Paul likely would have put faith on top of that trio. Love might not even have made the top three. But, by the time he writes this letter to Rome, that has changed. Paul now knows beyond a shadow of a doubt what has brought him across land and sea; through storm and trial.

At last, Paul understands what he saw in the eyes of Ananias when Paul's blindness fell like scales from his eyes all those many years ago. To love another person is to see, not a monster, but the very face of God. “Whatever you have done to the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

If Paul's whole life were put to music—the decades-long journey from sin to redemption, from monster to saint; the finale at his passing might sound something like this...

(Choir—Finale, from *Les Misérables*)