

President Thomas W. Gillespie of Princeton Theological Seminary delivered this Commencement Address in the Princeton University Chapel on May 15, 2004

There Be Dragons

By Thomas W. Gillespie

- Ezekiel 29: 1-9a
- Revelation 20: 1-10

In the workroom of the president's office, on the wall above the coffee maker, hangs a framed piece of artwork enclosed in glass. A medieval castle appears in the distant background. A dragon lies on its back in the foreground, slouching up against a tree. The dragon is using a lance as an after-dinner tooth pick, and scattered all around are pieces of a knight's armor – breastplate, helmet, shield, and all the rest. Beneath this scene a caption reads:

*No matter how hard you work,
No matter how right are you are,
Sometimes the dragon wins.*

That bit of wisdom is important to remember when you are a seminary president. It is also sage advice for seminary graduates who enter into the practice of ministry. And it also explains the selection of the two dragon passages from the Old Testament and New Testaments for reading at this commencement.

In the Bible, of course, the dragon functions as one among many symbols of evil. Paul Ricoeur has taught us to distinguish a symbol from a sign and a myth. In his book, The Symbolism of Evil, the French philosopher argues that a myth is identified by its narrative character. It tells a story. By contrast signs and symbols are terms. Both refer us to realities that transcend language, but with a difference. Symbols are dense and opaque. Symbols give us something to ponder, to think about. As Ricoeur puts it, "The symbol gives rise to thought."

But why, you may ask, should we be thinking about dragons as symbols of evil on the festive day of our graduation from theological seminary with our freshly awarded academic degrees? The simple reason is that your degree has hopefully prepared you and further prepared you for the practice of Christian ministry in several forms. And, Christian ministry, from the time of the apostles until this very day, involves warfare, spiritual warfare to be sure, but warfare nonetheless. The Letter to the Ephesians explains it this way:

For we are not contending against flesh and blood,
but against the principalities, against the powers,
against the world rulers of this present darkness,
against the spiritual host of wickedness in the heavenly places (6:12)

That does not imply that the dragons we face are ethereal fantasies. Evil takes human form and conscripts institutions. Ezekial saw the dragon take shape in the kingdom of Egypt, in the person of Pharaoh and his official policies. As a prophet he spoke for God against the dragon and thereby put his life at risk. Prophet or not, going up against the likes of Pharaoh could get you killed –

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literally. As Dean Armstrong is fond of reminding, in the Old Testament it was only the false prophets that the kings and the people listened to gladly.

That is why the Ephesians text continues with the exhortation to “take the whole armor of God” – girding your loins with truth, putting on the breastplate of righteousness, shodding your feet with the gospel of peace, taking the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God – “that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand” (6:13).

Yet even then, as the art piece that hangs on the wall over the coffee maker in the work room of the president’s office attests:

No matter how hard you work,
No matter how right you are,
Sometimes the dragon wins.

In other words, no matter hard you have worked academically during your years at Princeton Theological Seminary, no matter how politically correct or orthodox your views may be, the world is not waiting breathlessly for either your prophetic voice or your evangelical zeal.

At the time Christopher Columbus sailed west in search of a new world, his flat earth maps showed the ocean fading off into an unknown infinity. And at the edge of the ocean’s frontier were written the words, “Beyond this point there be dragons.” Indeed, beyond the walls of this great cathedral chapel *there be dragons* waiting for you if you undertake Christian ministry.

Pastorates are terminated.
Marriages fail.
Professorships flounder.
Children disappoint.
Wars continue.
Injustice prevails.
Poverty persists.
Racism endures.

The point is that sometimes the dragon wins.

So what do we do when it happens? Cut and run? Perhaps, but not necessarily. For the dragon does not always win. There are moments and seasons of victory in life and in ministry. Ministers witness the transformation of human life by the power of the gospel. Counselors see the healing work of the Spirit of Christ. Teachers observe the growth that comes to students as their horizons are expanded by new knowledge and perspectives. And all this occurs in the assured hope that the warfare is not an eternity of win some, lose some. Nor will it ultimately be lost altogether.

James S. Stewart tells of an oil painting depicting Faust engaged in a chess game with the devil. Faust, you will recall, was the man who gambles his life with the devil and lost. The look on Faust’s face in the painting is one of

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abject despair. He has been reduced to a few pawns, a knight, and his king. From across the board the devil leers at him in anticipation of his expected victory. According to Stewart, chess players from around the world came to the gallery to study the board situation, and all agreed that the position of Faust was hopeless. Indeed, the painting was entitled “checkmate.” One day, however, a chess master stood before the painting in deep contemplation. Other viewers came and went, but still he pondered the position of the pieces on the board. People in the gallery were startled when this chess master shouted out, “It’s a lie. The king and the knight have another move.”

This is the vision of John, the Seer of Patmos, the author of the Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation. His vision is that the king and the knight, the One who sits on the great white throne and the lamb who was slain, the Father and the Son have another move, indeed the last and the final move. And with that end-game move the dragon loses – big time. That is the whole point of this piece of apocalyptic literature that concludes the canon of the New Testament – God wins in the end. History is goal oriented – oriented to God’s eternal purpose for us and all creation.

It is God’s story and it includes our stories, our lives, and our ministries. And we serve in the confidence that the Lord Jesus Christ triumphs over the dragon at the end of the story.

Yes, there is a piece of framed artwork on the wall above the coffee maker in the work room of the president’s office that depicts a dragon enjoying himself after victimizing a knight. And the caption read:

No matter how hard you work,
No matter how right you are,
Sometimes the dragon wins.

That is a true statement. But remember, the dragon wins only sometimes, not always. And, in the end, it is the dragon who is defeated – forever.

So go forth from your graduation forewarned that beyond the bounds of this chapel “there be dragons.” But go forth in the confidence of John’s apocalyptic vision. In the end God wins – shares the victory with us.