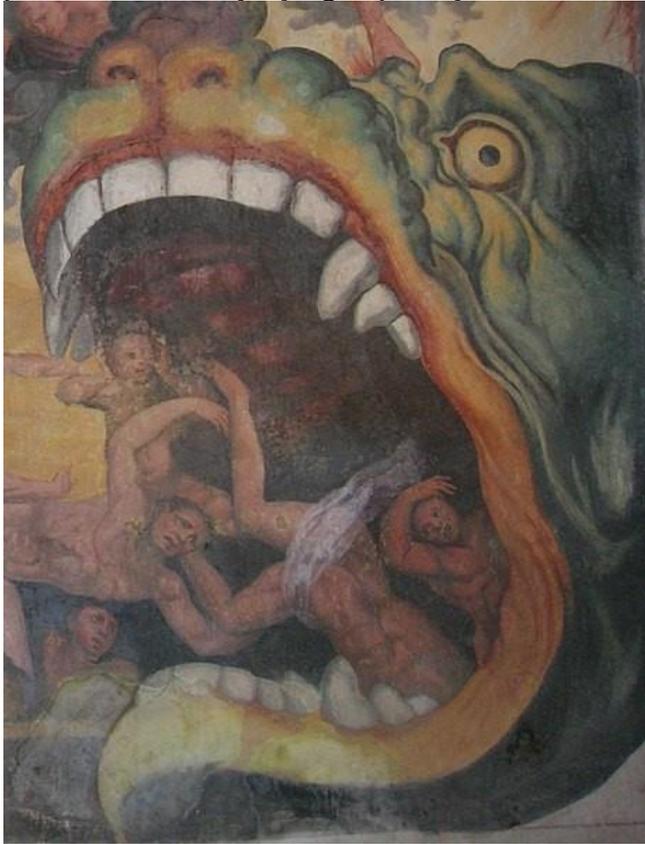


Pentecost 2020 (Ps104; 1Cor12:3b-13)

God gives breath to all living things. God is concerned about your breathing, putting the Spirit into you, sustaining life with every breath, for you and all creatures. I know some you are lamenting and angry about the breath taken from George Floyd. We'll come back to him, and back to you.

But I want to start with Leviathan.

The first image seems to be among very few pieces in art history trying to portray Leviathan.



(The other shows it's become a popular reference in Hollywood, though.)



Leviathan came into the Bible, picked up from other near Eastern religions. It's the biggest creature, the most fearsome. As a sea-dweller, it gets looped in with or recast as the dragon or greatest among sea monsters or the hugest whale, for modern minds who need to fit it into a scientific taxonomy rather than leave it as mythically marvelous. Jewish rabbis portrayed the horror of Leviathan by saying no living creature could endure even a whiff of its odor. So, not a very pleasant creature to be around, for sure.

The sea was a place of fearful chaos for ancient humans, and Leviathan ruled that realm. It also, then, gets simply associated with evil. In some of those stories from other religions, a god has to fight the evil sea monster and defeat it for the goodness of life to come out of the sea. Even within our closer heritage, a passage from between Testaments figured that in the most fantastic fish fry ever, God would serve the slaughtered Leviathan to the saints to start the endtimes feast. At last, it would be conquered and be the one devoured.

But then there's the way Leviathan pops up in our Psalm today. God made Leviathan for sport. Fun? Humans find it scary and ugly and evil and chaotic, to be avoided at all costs, ultimately to be overcome. But God created it, gave it breath, gives it food, and evidently even enjoys it.

This same notion comes at the end of the book of Job. Job had been suffering. He swore it wasn't punishment that he did something wrong. It's so bad, he demanded an answer from God. So God gave a speech out of a whirlwind that put Job in his place, by which I mean God reminded Job he is a

small part amid this big creation. The capper of God expounding is a whole chapter on Leviathan where God says things like:

*“Can you catch Leviathan with a fishhook?  
Will it beg you for mercy?  
Will it agree to work for you,  
to be your slave for life?  
Can you make it a pet like a bird,  
or give it to your little girls to play with?  
Will merchants try to sell it in their shops?  
If you lay a hand on it, you’ll certainly remember the  
battle that follows.  
You won’t try that again!  
[Check out] Leviathan’s limbs and  
its enormous strength and graceful form.  
Its teeth are terrible!  
The scales on its back are like rows of shields tightly  
sealed together.  
When it sneezes, lightning flashes!  
Its eyes are like the red of dawn.  
Flames shoot from its mouth.  
When it rises, the mighty are afraid... gripped by  
terror!  
Iron is nothing but straw to that creature.  
Stones shot from a sling are like bits of grass and it  
laughs at the swish of javelins.  
Its belly is covered with scales as sharp as glass.  
Nothing on earth is its equal.  
Of all the creatures, it is the proudest.  
It is the king of beasts.” (NLT)*

Yowser. You can tell that God is a little over-the-top excited about the Leviathan. And it’s exactly this creature that humans dislike so much, find so fearful and repugnant. God still delights in it and enjoys it. At the very least, it is part of the creation God sees as very good and sustains with each breath, with the gift of the Spirit.

What about Leviathan now? We encounter Leviathans, uncontrollable, chaotic, fearful beasts that can’t be overcome. Leviathan may be the coronavirus. It may feel like racism. It may be violent destruction of property. Leviathan may be all the other evils in your life, or things you just wish were gone and can’t control.

So what is God’s perspective, as you deal with Leviathan? Certainly I assert God’s sorrow at death, the loss of life, the fear and suffering you are dealing with, and some people more than others. God’s compassion is always for life. That is the

ultimate promise we’ve held for 50 days of this Easter season and more.

When we encounter Leviathan, the huge, terrible other, the bad we want to get rid of and, if we can’t deal with it, we’d just as soon that God would, some of God’s words about Leviathan from Job fit for us: don’t get too close. You won’t forget if you do. You can’t control it. It’s bigger than you and is deadly. Those may be cautions from God, about knowing our place. But I’m not ready to say that God is dismissive of what terrifies and overwhelms us, simply treating it as sport or delight.

But it definitely makes me reconsider our language. I’ve noticed how our interaction with the coronavirus, for the main version we share in these weeks, is so typically in martial terms, that we are at war with this enemy, fighting it while it attacks us, with people who are on the front lines.

I get nervous about anything that too sharply says there are good guys and bad guys, and wanting to be on the winning side. It can be stirring and motivating and helpful for some people, but I avoid the language of fighting cancer or disease, for example, partly because it can seem like some didn’t battle hard enough and lose the war.

Such stark divisions also categorize racism and brutality against black people by police officers, that presume excessive force is not only necessary but all too acceptable and common. On the opposing side, it invites people around me downtown yesterday to be shouting “F\*\*\* the police!” with some going on to cause damage.

Fighting fire with literal fire, or watching anger on one side of a fence being hurled at shields and weapons on the other side, doesn’t seem like the way to resolve this. Even if there are reasons on either side—and I would clearly justify one over the other—still I’m not sure it’s helpful.

When seen in my clergy collar and asked by a young African American woman why I was there, I said because I was sad. The violence. The injustice. The fear. The unheard cries. That it didn’t need to turn out like this. She and a friend said they were sad and tired but felt they had to stay. In one ironic awareness of common humanity, one young

man was yelling at a line of police officers “Go home to your families.”

I wanted to be there to instill a pause, a break in the division, something that helped people stop seeing the other as an enemy, that could make voices heard without destruction, especially of life.

In interactions trying to subdue or control we find we can't dominate the other side and enslave it, just as Leviathan. Suffering compounds. It seems only to lead to regret.

If we want to say we are at war with the virus or racial violence, what about the collateral damage for those who don't resist as well? What about ways the violent sense of the disease has amplified to violence against people who look Chinese? What about businesses and homes caught in the line of fire? What are the costs, and who is being drafted and forced to sacrifice? What if it's not something that can be defeated, as our winner-take-all culture frames it? What if we don't win?

If the Leviathan has been set loose among us, and as we try to find our place in all of it, where's God?

Our God hears and responds. Our belief is not ultimately of a good god defeating the evil, of God slaying the dragon, vanquishing the beast, killing for the sake of life. Our God known in Jesus was dying for the sake of life, and that, then, is about restoration and healing and reconciliation, about the power of love and not of hate, not of vindictive retribution but of justice and peace, of the fullness of all things.

And in that fullness, each thing has its place. I'm clearly not saying in God there is no bad or good, no wrong or right, but that our perspective and judgment are limited. More fully, as it said it in our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading, “each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” The Spirit is enabling us each for life.

In these days of striving on behalf of the common good, I want you to hear that you have been given the Spirit in your own way, your own place, and that is worthwhile and in service of life.

There are a variety of gifts. Some are given through the Spirit gifts for healing, or gifts for order, to another is given a rigorous attention to

science, or gifts of utmost planning to envision months ahead, to another through the Spirit striving for justice, to another is given care in sending cards, some through the Spirit are parenting and trying to find energy to make it through the day okay, to another is given the voice of protest to rally for life, and to some is given prayer through the Spirit, or calm and patience, or appropriate anxiety and frustration and even anger, or a work ethic, or courage, or sense of risk, or of beauty, or concern at current events, or tears of compassion, or the lift of laughter, or dreams of the future.

Whether young or old, of any gender, you have a variety of gifts, various services, a variety of activities, allotted individually, chosen and activated by the Spirit.

Somehow the Spirit is working through just exactly who you are in your place, the parts you claim as your best traits and the stuff you wish were different or are maybe even ashamed of. And it's not because you're good or bad, but through it all, the Spirit is working on behalf of life and to delight God. It's constant, with every breath, until you breathe your last. And then that's still not the end of the Spirit's work.

That is what you may know and trust. So thanks be to God, and Hallelujah.

Hymn: “God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale”  
(ELW 740)

Lord, listen to your children praying.  
Lord, send your Spirit in this place.  
Lord, listen to your children praying.  
Send us love; send us pow'r; send us grace.

We lament. We cry out as we face Leviathan. In things too big for us, too scary, too chaotic, too deadly. We lament.  
Lord, in your mercy,  
you hear our prayer.

We shout. In anger at what should not be. In death that should not happen. At systems that are broken. We shout.  
Lord, in your mercy,  
you hear our prayer.

We beg. For clarity on what to do, for some assurance that we have gifts for such a time as this, for your Spirit to be with us, and again inspire us. We beg.  
Lord, in your mercy,

you hear our prayer.

We speak. On behalf of black lives, for peace with justice and justice with peace, for better social policy, in concern for our neighbors. We speak.

Lord, in your mercy,  
you hear our prayer.

We remember. These in our community who are ill, suffering, or shut in... Those with work difficulties and discernments. Those hoping for healing. Those changing medications. Those in stress, in depression, in mental illness, under abuse and the work of Domestic Abuse Intervention Service. Our families who are in harm's way, and those whose lives are always in harm's way. We remember.

Lord, in your mercy,  
you hear our prayer.

We remember more. Students finishing school years, especially graduating seniors. Those missing friends and family and events like swimming. Our synod, as they also remembered us in prayers in this week. These members this week... We remember.

Lord, in your mercy,  
you hear our prayer.

We praise, with the places we find joy in these days, in a beautiful day, with green growth and bright sun. At outer space excitement. At the birth of a grandchild. We praise.

Lord, in your mercy,  
you hear our prayer.

We cry, with a family on the death of a niece, and as an aunt nears death. We cry with ongoing grief at the deaths... We cry at the death of MCC chicken Naomi... We cry at the death of George Floyd. We cry at the 24,079 deaths from COVID19 this week. We cry, and We hope.

Lord, in your mercy,  
you hear our prayer.

We pray. For all this, we can only commend ourselves to our risen Lord Jesus and pray, Come, Holy Spirit. We pray.

Lord, in your mercy,  
you hear our prayer.

Lord, listen to your children praying.

Lord, send your Spirit in this place.

Lord, listen to your children praying.

Send us love; send us pow'r; send us grace.