

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, *Rector***  
**Calvary Episcopal Church**  
**Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**  
**on The Feast of St. Michael & All Angels**  
**October 1, 2023**

Dragons are real. They may not be giant lizards that fly or breathe fire or guard a hoard of treasure. They make look like anything else... or nothing at all... but that does not make them less dangerous or destructive. If you ever met one, you know they exist.

In mythic stories of the west, dragons represent evil. In the Bible, the dragon is a symbol for Satan or the Devil, the deceiver of the whole world. It is part of an epic saga in which good ultimately triumphs over evil at a cosmic scale. We tend to think of evil in a vast scale of nations or systems or various “isms” or groups of “others.”

That may be partly true but the wrestling between good and evil is also always personal... played out in the souls of ordinary people every day. One writer said, “The line between good and evil runs not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart.” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn from the Gulag Archipelago

That is, the heart and soul of each of us, whether we are aware of it or not, is the place these conflicts occur in the decisions we make, the words we speak, and the deeds through which we put our faith in action or not. You *can* change the world by always starting with yourself.

The ultimate symbols of God’s good conquering evil and even death are the empty tomb of Easter and the Cross. Another classic image of this, we celebrate today, is the archangel Michael. St. Michael is often depicted as a warrior with a sword or spear slaying Satan in the form of a dragon. Good and evil are personified.

St. Michael’s Day is our patronal feast. Our name, Calvary Church, is in honor of the hill on which Jesus was crucified. It marks the place where death was ultimately defeated through forgiveness and love on the cross of Jesus. It would not be fitting to have a celebration on Good Friday that commemorates that event. Instead, probably about 80 years ago, we began to observe St. Michael as our patron saint and celebrate this feast.

We do not know the exact reasons why the Rector, at the time, chose St. Michael. It is likely we already several images of Michael in church that appealed to a sense of adventure and the hero’s journey consistent across cultures and time. A young person leaves home to find her way. She learns from wise mentors, encounters increasingly difficult challenges and temptations, forges her identity through sacrifice, conflict and friendship, and comes face to face with the symbolic dragon to free the captives or win the prize. That is every hero story from Moses to Jesus to Luke Skywalker in Star Wars to Ellen Ripley in the Aliens movies.

I think the Rector choose Michael as the patron saint because it points to every person’s heroic journey. St. Michael reminds us that *you* are called, by God, to be not the focus but the hero in your own story. You are called to imagine your life as a journey in community, learn from mentors, face challenges and temptations, forge an identity through sacrifice, conflict, and friendship, and choose between good and evil to free yourself and others.

Life would be much simpler if it was as straightforward as a movie. No one seems to have to earn a living or take out the trash in a movie. We could blast our way through problems with a lightsaber or laser without consequences. We could tell the good guys from the bad, know the best path, and resolve all our problems in under two hours. But there appear to be no more dragons and no more heroes in the world.

We can, of course, deny all this or focus on a million temporal things that have no lasting consequence other than to keep us distracted from our call. Every hero has the choice to continue the journey of discovery or stop.

If you choose to embrace a life of faith, this hero's journey, it will require something of you – everything in fact. Slaying dragons is not for the faint of heart. You will face many battles within and without but will not be armed with a sword or spear, a blaster or your own treasure.

Your real power to fight evil within and without is the same tool that Jesus used, forgiveness. In all the temptations and battles Jesus faced, that was his greatest power. Forgiveness, on the Cross, is how Jesus defeated evil, sin, and death for all time. Forgiveness is the same super or holy power given to each follower of Jesus.

Jesus had a lot of tools in his bag. We know he cast out demons, healed the sick, and raised the dead. He could do whatever he wanted. Jesus chose, instead, to forgive as his greatest act. What is this power of Jesus that slays even the mightiest or most subtle of dragons?

First, to offer this is always your choice. You have agency or power to influence your own outcome by forgiving someone. You also have the choice *not* to forgive. The first place to practice is with yourself. From what have you *not* forgiven yourself that you are too ashamed or embarrassed or hurt even to consider. Face that dragon first, always.

But what about other people? If another person hurts or causes trauma or sins against you, it is your choice to forgive them or not. If they apologize, the choice is clearer and easier to make. I'm sorry I said those hurtful things to you. I was angry or hurt or fill in the blank and did not mean them. You might even find reconciliation.

What do you do when someone hurts you and is not sorry? They meant to do it and will do it again. Or, they cannot apologize because they are far away or dead or you are not speaking to one another? Are these not little dragons that will grow if not confronted?

It is less clear but the options are still the same. You can forgive or not. The question would be, why *not* forgive? Because he does not deserve it! I will make her suffer by withholding it. If you don't forgive... the other person will not care and you are still stuck with the pain.

What do you do if you get a non-apology, apology? A friend of mine told me a story that shed light on a problem I have been trying to sort. My friend and family moved to a new city for her husband's work. She found a job working in a local store. One day, her supervisor started yelling at her in front of other people for some minor thing. When the supervisor left, other staff consoled her and said the boss was just like that sometimes.

The next day, the supervisor showed up to work and went to see my friend. She was expecting a half-apology like "Sorry I yelled at you but I was angry at something else and took it out on you." We have all faced that. Most people generally accept that and move on.

Instead of that, the supervisor said, “You may not know but I have bad allergies and can only use specific laundry detergent that does not agitate my skin or sinuses. I accidentally bought some Tide detergent but can’t use it. Here, this is for you.” The supervisor slid the detergent across the table and left. She realized that was the closest thing to an apology she would get. My friend now refers to that phenomenon of a non-apology as a “gallon of detergent.”

Many times over the years I have been offered a metaphorical gallon of detergent, rather than an apology, but had not recognized a pattern until my friend told me that story. Perhaps you have dealt with apologies like this before. It can be a lunch, a strange present, or the other person saying something nice about you publicly. Even though this is a transactional understanding of relationships, you still have to decide if you will forgive the other person or not. How do you fight a dragon like that? The same as the others. You always have agency and power.

Forgiveness is rarely a one-time event but is a process. Like grief and healing, it comes in stages. We have to process the events to be ready to forgive. If you forgive someone, that does not mean you are reconciled. That only comes from a change in behavior, trust rebuilt over time, and seeking each other’s well-being. It must always be mutual or it is not reconciliation. God may forgive and forget but people usually do not.

What if, for whatever reason, you choose **not** to forgive? The Bible says, “Be angry but do not sin.” (Ephesians 4:26) That is, be mad or hurt but treat the other person with respect as a fellow child of God as best as you are able. The behavior or hurtful words of another person toward you says far less about you than it does them. The attack is information about them, not you.

If you do not address the hurt, it is very likely the case that the hurt or trauma will not go away but fester and spread. Writer Anne Lamott puts it this way, "Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."

Desmond Tutu said, “Without forgiveness, there is no future.” It stops and dispels evil rather than allowing it to spread. If we do not forgive and let the hurt or trauma out, the poison builds up and becomes contagious. The whole system can become poisoned. We can become a victim or seethe with anger but that is not the life that Jesus modeled or calls us to embody. A friend of mine said it this way, “Pain is inevitable while misery is optional” (Dennis Maynard).

That is the most important reason to practice forgiveness. It is good for the soul. Holding onto anger or hurt or trauma is like holding a venomous snake. It can bite someone else you don’t intend or it can bite you over and over. Forgiveness is the process of letting it go, safely.

To be like Christ, to be a hero in the story, is to fight evil, inside and out, not with a sword but with forgiveness... your most powerful tool. We are called to live out the hero’s journey where the “...the line between good and evil runs... right through every human heart.” Dragons are real but so are heroes.