Genesis 1:20-23 Sermon during Covid in Lent

Today, in our Lent series on creation, we reach one of my favourite days. Who doesn’t like a sea monster?? It appeals to my imagination, and brings back memories of stories about monsters of the deep, Krakens, and because I’m Scottish, Nessie! It’s almost sad for the birds that they get a little overlooked in it all. Day five of creation relates to day two, where God separated the waters and the sky – today fills them with life.

Today, our rainbow of creation gets a lot more colour added to it. We had black and white on day 1, then blue on day 2, green on day 3, and then perhaps yellows and reds for the stars last week on day 4, but today we have all sorts of shimmering colours, iridescence, colours not even visible to the human eye, and bioluminescence. The world is becoming a really wonderful, colourful place ahead of humanity’s arrival.

On day five of Creation, we have God creating, inspecting, blessing and then commanding his newly formed creation to go and fill the world. This is God’s normal pattern, but today is the first day that God addresses his creation directly once they are made, commanding them to get on with making the world teem with life and joy; exercising their colours and markings to find a mate, settle down and nest. Like we’ve been saying, there is something really sad about extinctions and human-led habitat destruction, which reduces the colour and variation which was packed into our world at its inception.

As always, there is loads to talk about in just these few verses, so today, partly because it appeals to me, we’re going to focus on the aquatic side of day five and sea monsters in particular. In verse 21 God creates again. This word ‘create’ is only ever used of God in the Bible. It is distinct from any other creative or imaginative action. It is God, and God alone, who creates. And today he creates sea monsters and all the other things that move, with which the waters swarm. He creates the really big marine creatures and also the smaller ones.

The question for me is why a distinction is made between the big monsters and the smaller aquatic life forms? There isn’t the same detail in bird life, and no hint of where penguins stack up in this, which always amuses me. Why draw lines of size in the creation of water-based life alone?

The significance, and therefore the thing I want to talk about today, is to do with parallels with other creation accounts, like we talked about a few weeks ago. In Babylonian myths and Ugaritic texts relating to the god, Ba’al, the sea monsters are the enemies of the gods. They do battle with the gods and the gods must fight to subdue them. These primordial monsters stalk the waters looking for anything, even a deity, to fight and devour, and the gods earn respect and power by overcoming such resistance.

This gives us the context for the importance of verse 21. God creates the sea monsters, inspects them, pronouncing them as good, blesses them and commands them to multiply. This is an absolute contrast to the other creation stories circulating at the time. Not only is there no hint of a war, a rivalry, or even a grudge between the sea monsters and God, but they are good and blessed and obedient. The sea monsters are really, really big, but they are still creations just like everything else.

There are other times in the Bible where sea monsters are talked about, particularly using the archetypal language of Leviathan which pops up from time to time. And occasionally, this language talks of God overcoming the monster, like in Psalm 74 and Isaiah 27, but on these occasions, it is mythic language being used to demonstrate God’s power and judgement – a kind of hyperbole from a human point of view if you will. This doesn’t contradict the Genesis account, because the language is being used to do something different: to illustrate God’s power to act in judgment. However, the Genesis account on day 5 admits no such myth. Instead, we have God absolutely in charge over all his creatures in contrast to all other creation stories.

So why is this important for us today? Is it just the case that if Nessie exists, she is also subject to God’s commands to be fruitful and populate Loch Ness whilst irritating generations of photographers and submarine enthusiasts?

Sea monsters were the stuff of legend; the powers that couldn’t be contained with which the gods had to prove themselves. No such proof is required of our God’s power. Sea monsters become puppy-dogs in God’s presence. Perhaps that is why Nessie has all those humps sticking out of the water in the cartoons – she is so busy bowing down to her creator! Our God is immeasurably greater than the strongest and most violent forces on our planet. He is the creator and undisputed ruler, and nothing else can even begin to compete for his crown.

This is important for us because it brings a few things into sharp focus. Firstly, it brings Jesus’s suffering and death into a different context for us. Nothing, not even the might of the Roman empire could challenge God, and therefore Jesus isn’t a sad case of bitter circumstances. He is God giving himself up voluntarily. He is the creator God letting himself be fed upon my minnows. When we see that, we get a completely different view of what it means for God to provide for our salvation through Jesus.

Secondly, Leviathan – Sea Monsters - are the archetypal existential threat to life. Today, maybe that’s Covid, or terrorism, or nuclear holocaust, or climate change. All these things are no threat to God. We might, like Jewish poets of old, cry out to God affirming that if it came to a fight against these things, God would win; but in reality, there is no contest. God is the absolute, unrivalled ruler of the world and nothing can touch him. Like Nessie bows down to God, so does Covid and climate change.

Finally, though there’s so much more to say, there are other things in our world which claim to be a rival to God. An old example, not so much relevant today, is the crazy assertion that somehow science is at odds with faith. The irony being that people like Richard Dawkins use this Genesis account to bolster his argument. Instead, this Genesis account puts science firmly within the realm of created things. Even the great sea monster of science is a created thing and is no match for God. In fact, God creates science, inspects it and says it is good, blesses it and encourages it to multiply! That’s how our God deals with all aspects of his creation. The more we learn about our world, the more the knowledge multiplies and fills the earth, the more we are fulfilling God’s command to his creation. There is no war or conflict.

The same could be said of secularisation, humanism, materialism, and so on. None of them can really claim to rival God. Generally, they are facets of creation that we, as humans, are holding up as rivals – as potential sea monsters – forgetting that to God, sea monsters are play things, created and obedient. We need not fear, and we may engage with these things with confidence.

So whatever monsters we see around us, God is God – unrivalled, unchallenged, and supreme. We are privileged to be made by this God and given our special space in his world… but that is a story for next week. This week, we thank God for the assurance of his care and protection and for the amazing aquatic world which has so much to show us. Amen.