

**Here Be Dragons**  
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Wow, what pressure there is to come up with “the last sermon.” What to say, or to say again? What words will sum it up and be memorable? What scriptures will have just the right message and tone? This has been a month of “last things” and, with some things beginning and other things ending, it has been a tumultuous time. It’s been a time of ambivalence, really, as we, together, have walked a line between the joy of new ministries and opportunities, and the sorrow of a good relationship ending.

It is in the middle of a similar tumult that we find the people of Israel, in the reading from Ezra. Here’s what has happened. In the year 587 BCE, the Temple that was built by Solomon was destroyed, and the people were exiled and removed to Babylon. It was a time of great grief, as people longed for home. The psalm that says, “By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down, there we wept when we remembered Zion.” [recent songs by Don MacLean and Boney M] comes from this time.

A generation later, the Persian King Cyrus decreed that they could go back to their homeland.

The scene from the third chapter of Ezra picks up a couple of years after they have returned. Although the people have returned to their worship and rituals, the Temple has not yet been rebuilt. On this day, the foundations of the Temple are being laid, and there is great rejoicing – trumpets and music and shouting. The sounds of joy and victory – “YES! It’s finally happening!”

But in the background, there are people weeping. These are the ones who remember how it used to be. The ones who were carted off to Babylon, and they have dreamed of this day and they have missed their land, and they remember the glory of the old Temple. They have made the best of their exile, building houses and having families, and tending gardens and dreaming of this day, and now it is here.

So, there are tears and laughter. And in the din, you can hardly tell the difference. Sorrow and joy flow mingled down.

Something is ending, and something is beginning, and who knows what is ahead?

It is a moment of beauty – a necessary grief, mixed in with the joy of new things.

It is the pause, before the next thing.

But they can’t stay there, forever. They must move into a new way of being. They need to complete the building of the Temple, and they need to forge their community, built around their faith.

I suspect that some of those tears – of joy and of sorrow – may have also been in fear. Because nobody really knows what’s in store. The path ahead is not clear.

In the 1500’s many maps showed the known lands, but often the unknown lands and waters were decorated with strange and mythical beasts. There is one item, the Hunt-Lennox Globe, built in 1510, that has the words, “Here be dragons” in the unknown area off the coast of Asia.

The words, “Here be dragons” have become a meme in themselves, representing the great unknown, because, truth be told, we don’t really know if there are dragons out there, in the future – in the abyss that yawns ahead.

I’m reminded, though, of the contrasting stories of St. George and St. Martha, and their respective dragons.

In the story of St. George and the dragon, St. George saves the world and a maiden, of course, from a dragon, by killing it with a sword.

I much prefer the story of St. Martha, Martha (apparently the same Martha as in the Jesus stories), comes upon the dragon, who is a killer and who eats people, sprinkles it with holy water and ties her sash around its neck. The dragon is tamed, and she leads it back to town.

I wonder if this story of St. Martha was on the mind of George RR Martin, when he created the character Daenerys, who is the only one who can work with dragons in the Game of Thrones.

In any case, the woman tames the dragon – that symbol of the fear of the unknown – and makes it her friend.

Possibly the most intriguing story I've heard recently, about monsters that can scare us, comes from a CBC interview with Guillermo del Toro.

del Toro tells the story of a time when he was about two years old. He and his brother stayed up late, watching a TV show called *The Outer Limits*, which had a monster with a bald head and giant eyes. He was terrified, especially since, later on, his brother snuck back into his room with a stocking over his head, and two fake fried eggs for eyes.

This traumatized the poor kid terribly. He began to have nightly lucid dreams – dreams that took place in his own bedroom, with monsters coming out of the closet. The green shag rug was, for him waves of green fingers. He couldn't get out of the crib, ever, and repeated got in trouble from his mom for wetting the bed.

One day, he stood on the edge of the crib and made a deal with the monsters. If they would let him get out of bed to go to the bathroom, he would be their friend for life.

del Toro made friends with the monsters, and he found lifelong companionship. The blessing of the monsters was that they reflected his own humanity and his own imperfections, and allowed him to feel accepted.

Guillermo del Toro is a filmmaker, and many of us have come to know and appreciate his creations in films like *Pan's Labyrinth*. But he considers his great work to be last year's Academy Award winner, *The Shape of Water*. The friendship that del Tormo has found in his monsters, oddly, has been healing for many more people, as they have seen their own humanity and imperfection reflected in claws, scales and fins. It has allowed countless viewers to befriend the unknown.

One of the constants in anyone's life is the reality of change. The reality of encountering a turn in the road where one cannot see the path ahead as clearly as before. A people returns from a foreign land and has to start over, knowing it can never be the same. A young adult moves away to university. A painter sells a work of art. A family pulls up stakes and moves to a new city. An professional loses a job and begins anew by starting a business. A young boy faces his fears and makes a decision that changes his life. A minister leaves a congregation for a job in the wider church.

At the crossroads, there is necessary grieving. It is a moment of beauty - a healthy grieving. But it is not healthy to stay there, embraced in the circle of grief, forever. As much as God is in that grief – consoling and holding and speaking words of encouragement, God is also calling from down the path. The Holy One calls her beloved ones to turn and see what adventures lie ahead. He calls his beloveds to turn towards the call and see what fulfillment there is in store.

It can be scary. At first glance, the future may look like it's full of waves of scary green fingers. It may look like there are dragons in the shadows.

Or, maybe, there are unexpected companions, and blessings from surprising places, and adventures to which only dragons fly. We won't know until we go.

Peace be with you, my friends, and may you always know the presence of the Holy One.