

This is one of those stories that could just be seen as the power of God to work miracles. For some people that's enough.

Some scholars have gone to great lengths to find evidence outside the Bible to prove this happened. Some computer simulations have shown ways it could have happened. There doesn't seem to be any real proof. But this is God after all, and faith and proof are not the same thing.

Others simply find the story too fantastical to believe.

Others may say well jolly good for Israel, but God hasn't done anything miraculous for me.

In particular, those who are suffering in some way may find the story especially troubling – those who are unjustly captive or severely ill or victims of ongoing violence. Why isn't God helping me?

The response – just have faith, trust God – is often too glib for those who feel as trapped as Israel did.

Others read the story and are at least somewhat bothered by the death of Pharaoh's army at God's hand. I mean they were just doing their job, right? They're bothered by what appears to be a God of vengeance. And honestly, others see in the story a God of vengeance...and cheer. Hooray for the good guys!

None of those approaches are really wrong. But there's a cosmic dimension to this story that I find more helpful than any of that.

It's a dimension of creation versus anti-creation, chaos and death vs life and recreation, the dragon versus the dragon slayer.

Wait, what? Dragon? I don't see a dragon in the story!

In the biblical story, the deep, raging water of the sea is a symbol of chaos and death. And the serpent of the deep is the king there. The dragon.

Remember at creation there were the waters of chaos and a wind from God blew over the waters. Out of those waters, God made dry land to appear. God put boundaries on chaos – God held back the waters of chaos and the monster who ruled there.

Although Genesis doesn't directly talk about the sea monster, other places in scripture do – most notably Job, where the description is clearly very dragon-like.

So, there's the start of this cosmic dimension to the story. The forces of un-creation or anti-creation – the deep, raging waters and the dragon – are tamed by God. They aren't

destroyed, but God puts boundaries on them. God pushes back the waters of chaos so that creation can flourish.

But the dragon wasn't eliminated. The waters of chaos were still there.

So to talk about the story we read today, I'm going to use dragon and sea sort of interchangeably as symbols of death...of chaos. And both appear here in this story.

Again, you say, where is the dragon? In this story, Pharaoh is the dragon. Ezekiel even described Pharaoh this way: 'I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, you great monster lying among your streams.'

So let's look at Pharaoh. Pharaoh in the Exodus story is essentially the most powerful symbol of anti-creation.

He enslaved the Hebrews. He was afraid they would rise up against him and remove him from power. He also needed workers for his many building projects.

He hatched a plot to kill all the boy babies born to the Hebrews...to thwart the actual forces of creation. That was foiled by the Hebrew midwives who subverted his command.

Then he had all the boy babies thrown into the Nile river to drown.

Pharaoh was powerful. Although he's never named, there are some things that make Ramses II a good candidate. He was considered a successful Pharaoh. His military was top notch. The building projects he undertook signify prosperity and a time of peace, largely through military dominance. But he remains for God's people a symbol of death and chaos.

Now Moses and the Israelites have escaped – God has led them to freedom. But now standing at the edge of the sea, it looks like death and chaos will win after all. Pharaoh and his army are thundering towards the Israelites.

Before them lies the sea – that place of chaos and death. Behind them, the dragon breathes down their backs. They are caught between the dragon and the dragon's deadly lair.

Then God intervenes. Just like at creation, God places a boundary on chaos. God pushes back the walls of the sea. No longer is the sea working on behalf of the dragon.

Then, God actually uses that sea of chaos to destroy the dragon. A force that seemed it would work on Pharaoh's behalf is instead turned against him. The people of Israel walk

through the waters to freedom. On the other side of the sea God will shape these people to become the ones who will partner with God to hold back chaos...to fight the dragon.

This story isn't about just one time in history. It's about all the times that death and chaos threaten God's good creation. It's an assurance that in the end, God will win, not chaos.

Of course, the ultimate dragon slayer is Jesus. Except Jesus doesn't slay the dragon by killing it. Instead Jesus defeats the dragon by letting it kill him. And then rising from the dead.

The dragon represents all the forces of evil that work to destroy creation – it represents all the forces of anti-creation.

Jesus' death and resurrection is the defeat of the dragon. That defeat is still working its way out on earth, but Christ's victory is assured. Until the end of all things and the final defeat of the dragons, we will continue to contend.

So who are the dragons in our world now? Even a brief look at the news gives us a pretty solid array of candidates.

Violence against women has been much in the news lately. Many of us personally know women who have been victims of rape or abuse. Those who commit acts of violence – whether physical or emotional – are in the grips of the dragon's power. Their own desire for power and control rivals that of Pharaoh.

Like Israel, God has shaped us to partner with God to defeat the dragon - the dragon whose fiery desire for power and control leads to bruised and battered bodies and minds. It's a daunting prospect.

But even seemingly small acts begin to chop away at the armor of the dragon... every time someone holds back the chaos of violence in another person's world...every time someone shows love instead of hate...every time someone speaks up for another...each of those result in a little victory against the dragon.

Every time someone tells the truth about a powerful person's acts of abuse or sexual harassment and violence, it's a small victory against the dragon.

Every time someone stands up to the oppressive powers of an empire or a nation or a corporation, it's a little victory against the dragon.

Every time someone sees or hears about a sexual assault in process and stops it and calls the police instead of looking away, the dragon loses some of its power.

Every time accountability, consequences, and transformation free an abuser from the grips of the dragon, a victory is won.

God acted dramatically on that seashore. But on the other side, God called that rescued people to be the agents of a new world...a world where the dragons of chaos would not win.

In Christ, victory over the dragon is assured. In the meantime, we are called to be in the army that works to defeat that dragon – the dragon of chaos and evil.

But, and this is really important – we are not called to defeat that dragon with violence, with retaliation, with vengeance. We are called to defeat the dragon in the same way Jesus did – with self-giving love. With the courage to confront evil, but not to fight evil with evil.

That is such a hard sell in a world that so depends on violence. Jesus flipped that whole script.

When we use violence to solve problems, when we use coercive power, then we all too easily become the dragon. It happened to Israel. Israel's own kings became more like Pharaoh. Maybe on a smaller scale, but still. And that ultimately sends them into exile.

Next week we'll rejoin this band of Israelites at the foot of Mt. Sinai. God will give them the framework for a people who will defeat the dragon with love – love of God and love of neighbor.

But for today, we rejoice with Israel on the other side of the sea. We rejoice in God's mighty act to free them from the grips of the dragon. And we pray for God's guidance as we contend with the dragons of our own time.