



## Saint George and the Dragon

*Jim Forest*

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True stories become streamlined into legends and legends become compressed via symbols into myths. The St. George of myth was a knight in armor who fought a dragon to save a princess, but the real George never saw a dragon nor did he rescue a princess in distress. We are not even sure he had a horse or possessed a sword.

A Christian convert born late in the third century after Christ, George was one among many martyrs of the early Church.

What made George a saint among saints was the completely fearless manner in which he openly proclaimed his faith during a period of fierce persecution when many other Christians were hoping not to be noticed. According to one ancient account, George went to a public square and announced, "All the gentile gods are devils. My God made the heavens and is the true God." For this George was arrested, tortured and beheaded. The probable date of his martyrdom is April 23, 303, in the town of Diospolis in Asia Minor, today's Turkey. His witness led to the conversion of many and gave renewed courage to others already baptized.

In early icons, George was shown dressed as a soldier and holding the cross of martyrdom, but in the course of centuries the dragon legend emerged. It has been told in many variations, but in its most popular form it concerns a dragon living in a lake who was worshiped by the unbaptized local people, who in their fear sacrificed their children to appease the creature. Finally it was the turn of the king's daughter, Elizabeth, to be sacrificed. While going toward the dragon to meet her doom, Saint George appeared riding a white horse. He prayed to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then transfixed the dragon with his lance. Afterward Elizabeth led the vanquished creature into the city. Refusing a reward of treasure, George called on the local people to be baptized. The king agreed, also promising to maintain churches, attend church services and show compassion to the poor.

From a journalistic point of view, the dragon story is a complete invention, yet what better way is there to symbolize the evil that George actually confronted and defeated than to portray it in the form combat with a fire-breathing dragon? George fought and was victorious over an adversary which enslaved and terrified most of the people of his time. The white horse George rides in the icon, a graceful creature as light as air and as fearless as his rider, represents the courage God gave to George as he faced the power of death. It is the courage God gives to any Christian facing martyrdom or, for that matter, much smaller challenges.

This beautifully-illustrated book, with 13 full page illustrations, relates the often-told story of St George and the dragon, with an afterword that looks at the real meaning of the legend.

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