

PENTECOST 14

DANIEL 7:1-28 - The Four Beasts

Daniel 7 marks a significant shift as it introduces the first of the Danielic apocalypses. In contrast to the previous chapter, where dangerous animals (lions) posed a threat to Daniel, the beasts in this chapter represent a cosmic and political menace. Daniel 7 marks a critical change here. As the only fully developed apocalypse in the Old Testament, the book of Daniel introduces elements common to later apocalyptic literature. While in previous chapters, Daniel was the dream interpreter, here, Daniel is the dreamer, or better put, the visionary. Since “dreams and visions” take place at night, the text indicates Daniel’s status as a visionary. Keeping with apocalyptic tradition, despite his previously demonstrated skills, Daniel requires interpretation for his dreams and visions.

Daniel’s dream takes place in the first year of a king’s reign. In the monarchic world, the first regnal year marks the beginning of a new era. It is time to imagine a better world to come, especially if the life under the previous king spelled misery for the people. Today we can compare this to the results of an election where a new party comes to power with promises of a better life than under the previous government. With the change of administration, one can dwell on hope. Daniel records his dream, apparently realizing that it contains an important meaning for his time and the future.

Once again, Daniel is portrayed as the recipient of heavenly mysteries, which he receives through dreams and visions. His vision centres on four beasts, some of which are hybridized, such as the lion with wings or the leopard with wings, while the other appears more or less in its natural form, like the bear. The fourth beast is described less in terms of its appearance and more in terms of its terrifying nature. It possesses large, crushing teeth and ten horns, from which a single horn with human eyes emerges, speaking boastfully.

In modern days dreams are unfathomably psychologized, but in antiquity the dream was a way to get in touch with the religious or spiritual world. In dreams, they considered that one often receives revelation and even prescriptions for difficult illnesses. The rich images of these dreams sponsor or require thoughtful

interpretations. According to the Talmud, a dream that does not receive an interpretation is like a letter left unopened.

Daniel's dream has the backdrop of "the great sea". In the biblical world, the sea represents the world of chaos. Out of the troubled waters, four different beasts emerge — each with distinctive characteristics. Daniel, who is known for providing insight and confidence in the first half of the book, is terrified by the monstrous vision. However, Daniel does not wallow in fear.

He does not remain perplexed. He approaches one of the heavenly attendants to seek reliable understanding. In the first half of the book, kings and nobles turned to Daniel when they encountered incomprehensible dreams and questions. Now Daniel himself must turn to another being to understand what is going on.

The vision in this chapter concerns four beasts that emerge from the sea. Like the four-part statue made of gold, silver, bronze and iron in an earlier chapter that represents earthly authorities, these individualized beasts stand in for a series of earthly dominions. Unlike the metal beast's fourfold image, these beasts emerge from the sea indicating the cataclysmic nature of the events. Incorporating the ancient Near Eastern mythology relating to the sea and waters as elements in the control of primeval chaos, the passage swiftly indicates that by the sea giving up these four beasts, chaos is "again let loose on the world".

The emphasis on the uniqueness of each beast makes sense when the fourth beast occupies Daniel's interest. The bulk of the interpretation is given to him. Grotesque figures form the heart of apocalyptic literature, and overlooking them can easily lead to misunderstanding the point of the text. The brief extract of interpretation here requires battle with the dangers, confrontations, anarchy, and struggle ushered in by the presence of these beasts.

Asking for the interpretation, Daniel seeks to know exactly what it means. Hope cannot be constructed on fuzzy falsehood. The faithful, who fight against the false gods and oppression that threaten the life of the faithful, desire to be guided by the truthful understanding of what is being revealed in the dream and vision.

According to the interpreting angel, these beasts represent kings of the earth. In other words, this is a historical drama, or a panorama of history. The interpretation lays bare the beastly nature of these kingdoms. Their behaviour is marked by pride, greed, violence, and terror. They rise one after another, suggesting that in spite of their brutality they will not hold sway for long. The beasts, which signify empires, rise and fall.

The interpretation section begins with: “*I, Daniel, was troubled by all I had seen, and my visions terrified me.*” Daniel finds the visions confusing and terrifying. And though not introduced in the chapter at any point, Daniel describes the attendant as “one of those standing beside the throne”: “*So I approached one of those standing beside the throne and asked him what it all meant.*” These attendants function as the other-worldly beings that translate the mysteries of the heavenly sphere. Although commonplace in Zechariah, the need for an interpreting angel with a skilled visionary like Daniel points to the vast difference in the languages of the earthly and the heavenly spheres. Daniel not only needs help to understand the visions, but since the visions trouble him deeply, he requires assurance that the future to which he is moving would be beneficial to him.

In this chapter, Daniel enters into the visions as a participant, or the empathetic visionary. Therefore, he cannot help but be impacted by the unfolding events. The need for details, information, explanations, as well as assurance, prompts the request for an interpretation. The interpretation quickly rushes to the conclusion and provides a quick summary of the events. The explanation represents what we have come to know as the conclusion of all classic battles between good and evil: good will eventually triumph.

Those who read this story in Daniel 7 understand what it means to live in times of uncertainty, where the resolution of conflicts remains doubtful. We find ourselves like Daniel in the midst of bewildering events that affright and confuse: intensifying wars and conflicts in the Middle East, Ukraine, and other parts of the world. Political conflicts, kidnapping, and violence are creating fear in places like Gaza and Haiti.

The apocalyptic nature of the text heightens the tension by shifting from seeing

earthly powers as redeemable and beneficial to being threatening and destructive. We enter into a vision and an experience of struggle and confrontation with little clear evidence of the outcome until the interpretation: *“But in the end, the holy people of the Most High will be given the kingdom, and they will rule forever and ever.”*

The outcome of the battle in Daniel’s visions represents the handing of the kingdom over to “the holy ones of the Most High”. Historically, most interpretations understood “the holy ones” as divine beings in keeping with the use of the term in other parts of the Old Testament and consistent with the apocalyptic nature of the text. In the event that the term refers to human beings, it may designate them as a specific historical group that fits within the immediate purposes of the text such as the Maccabees or persecuted Jews under the rule of Antiochus IV.

Readers of apocalypics in the ancient world were not merely passive bystanders to the events of their day. They received apocalyptic accounts both to assure and encourage engagement in a struggle that for many could be described as life and death. Even with the faith that the outcome would go in their favour, apocalyptic literature required readers to do more than stand on the sidelines or accept that a promised victory forecloses on their involvement in the struggle.

The genre or literary form of the texts, is not about whether they are true or untrue. Just as Jesus can use parables for teaching and truth telling (which are, of course, technically fiction), the Bible can use the fantastic images of apocalypics to proclaim God’s ultimate victory over evil — and, for Daniel, the coming demise of the Greek tyrant Antiochus Epihanes — without requiring or endorsing a vision of this world (or the next) that literally follows the script of these passages.

But it is not the final point. The final point is that in the midst of this highly troubled and dangerous world, God is present, a God more powerful than all the beasts — a God who loves and nourishes rather than hates and devours. It is in this God we are given hope and meaning, life and salvation “forever and ever”, as the text announces.

What are our devouring beasts? What is it that plagues the people in our time and place? Greed, lack of empathy, dying children, hunger, lack of clean water, homelessness, various addictions, violence in the home, hatred, intolerance?

For Daniel, most interpreters agree, the beasts represented the powerful kingdoms of Babylon, Media, Persia, and the Greek empire of Alexander the Great, which had, consecutively, dominated and then literally subjected Israel for some five centuries by the time the book was written.

What does it mean that many in the world today, rightly or wrongly, would describe the American “empire” in similar beastly language — even as we sometimes demonize the Islamic world for the attacks of some who claim to represent it? What will we Christians, do in the face of all this?

The figure that follows the terrifying beasts is the vision of “one like a human being” (“*son of man*” in the Aramaic original). These seem to be the heart of the chapter, and we could almost stop with the mere arrival of this person and be comforted already. To see a human figure “coming with the clouds of heaven” is itself a relief, following all those monsters.

Interpreters disagree about whether this figure is meant to be an angel, Israel, the Messiah, or someone else, but the key is that it is human. God deals with us and saves us, even in the midst of beastly terrors, through human means, in human form. Because of this, the New Testament is able to use this passage from Daniel to describe Jesus as the “Son of Man coming in clouds” at the end of time. In Mark’s Gospel we read: “*Then everyone will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory.*” and Jesus said, “*I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God’s right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven.*”

Given the hope and strength of that safe home, we need not wait either for the end of time to confront the beasts of this world — again, whether personal, political, or mythic. The “Son of Man”, who comes to face down the powers of the world in Daniel, will finally be seen in the Gospels to be our Lord Jesus, but the title applies often in the Bible to all of us — sons of men, daughters of women, human persons,

saved and set free by God to make a difference in the world now.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR AUGUST 25, 2024

Caught between joy and despair, we yearn for the fulfillment of God's desire beyond the brokenness and neediness of this life. We offer thanksgiving for God's presence with us and petitions for the transformation of the church and the world.

Life-giver, Pain-bearer, Creator of all that is good, day by day you sustain the weary with your word and gently encourage us to place our trust in you. Awaken us to the suffering of those around us; save us from resorting to unhealthy actions or words that deepen any hurt; give us grace to share one another's burdens in humble service.

For a spiritual renewal: that God will transform our fears into hope, selfishness into love, and for growth as disciples: that we may place ourselves at the feet of Jesus to learn and understand the gift he alone offers.

For growth in hope: that God will instill in our hearts a trusting reliance that God is always with us and for a Spirit of compassion: that God's love will guide us as we walk with all who have experienced loss and support them in their grief and pain as they hope for healing and a new beginning.

For those mourning the death of a loved one, that they may know the compassionate presence of Christ in their time of loss; and for those suffering emotionally, mentally, physically, for those facing terminal illness, and those healing from surgery, especially Bishop Kathy and Pr. Kristen Seele, that they may rest in God's embrace and experience God's abiding presence with them.

For an end to racial and ethnic prejudice: that we are freed from the threat of differences but embrace and welcome the gift of diversity: that the church be freed from constricting traditions; that our society be freed from centuries of violence against the other. Break down the walls we create that separate your people by race, culture, or faith tradition.

For refugees and displaced people: that those who have lost their former way of life may be guided forth to a new beginning; and for the growth of peace throughout the world, particularly in the Holy Land, Ukraine, Sudan, Haiti and all areas of conflict throughout the world: that God will open new pathways to resolve conflicts and bring opportunities and well-being to all people.

For your church and its devoted leaders: invigorate their varied ministries; encourage new avenues of praying and proclaiming the Good News: Bishop Kathy, Bishop Susan, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers with hearts full of love for your church; for pastors, priests, and deacons serving in full communion congregations; for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara. Today we also lift up the congregation of Christ the King Lutheran in Surrey – Rev. Nicolas Alexandre.

For all firefighters, evacuees, and volunteers as they fight and try to subdue wildfires throughout the provinces, territories and other regions of the world. Give them strength to deal with losses and trauma. Protect all wildlife as they flee the fires. Restore the lands, waters, and air with new vegetation.

For all people and nations as they face seasonal typhoons, cyclones, hurricanes, rains and flash floods; for all who live in areas of earthquakes and volcanos. Keep them all safe. We hold in prayer all who have lost family, hopes and crops as a result of weather phenomena. For the healing and restoration of your holy creation, that hills and valleys, lakes and rivers, forests and coastlands be restored to the beauty you created: that the cleansing waters of the world be kept healthy and whole.

For a quick resolution to labour disputes that potentially may disrupt rail service and air travel across our country and beyond.

For hospices and for those who work with the dying. Keep them strong, fill them with compassion, and give them peace to do their difficult and challenging calling with dignity and sensitivity: for those who work with individuals living with the effects of substance use disorder. Use front line support workers and first responders to make a difference in people's lives, to help them to restart their life anew.

Gracious God, all that is on our hearts and in our minds we place before you, trusting in your loving kindness and mercy, knowing that you love us just as we are and hear our prayers and petitions. Strengthen us to be witnesses of your love to others. May your will be done according to your eternal purposes. All this we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus the Christ. **Amen**

Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught...

Our Father ...