

PENTECOST 15 - DANIEL 12:1-4 -*The Time of the End*

The first half of the book of Daniel had exciting stories of lions, fire, and stories of resistance against “the man” in the form of King Nebuchadnezzar. In contrast, the second half presents four apocalyptic visions, the first of which we heard last week, with the vision of the four beasts.

This last chapter of Daniel launches the final scene of the four apocalyptic visions. In a previous vision, Daniel sees an angel who speaks of a “Prince of Persia” who will wage war and defeat many powers, and in the process defile the temple. A king from the North shall arise and wreak havoc on the land. Some will flee (Trans-Jordanian states), some will fall (Egypt), and some will follow this king (Libya, Ethiopia), but the king abruptly dies. As with any powerful monarch, this event is expected to bring a period of chaos in the wake of a sudden power shift.

Last week we read that Daniel’s people are given a special name: “the People of the Holy Ones of the Most High”. This name marks the special relationship among Daniel’s people, the Most High God, and other inhabitants of heaven, who in Daniel are variously called angels, watchers, princes, men, and holy ones.

Today’s reading is part of a longer discourse that began two chapters earlier, but was omitted in our assigned reading. A “man”, or angel, dressed in linen, with a face like lightning and eyes like flaming torches, speaks with Daniel, touches him, and gives him strength to stand. This angel, also called “one in human form”, explains to Daniel that he has been fighting against the “Prince of Persia” and will later fight the “Prince of Greece”. Alongside him fights Michael, “one of the chief princes”. The angel who speaks with Daniel tells him, “There is no one who contends with me against these princes except Michael, your prince.”

This passage provides important background. The title “prince” refers to a superhuman, celestial being who represents and has responsibility to protect a particular people. The identification of Michael as the prince of Daniel’s people suggests that Michael has been their guardian from the very beginning of their existence. It emphasizes to Daniel and his audience that when they do not have power to contend against their enemies, the greatest of all princes, Michael, fights

on their behalf. A situation may seem hopeless, but what Daniel's oppressed people can see and hear does not tell the whole story. Behind the scenes, forces more powerful than those on earth shape the destinies of peoples and nations.

Up to this point, Daniel's visions have portrayed a succession of warring empires who subjugate God's people, century after century. Toward the end of each vision Daniel sees a king, sometimes symbolically portrayed as a horn, the horn of the fourth beast that was part of Daniel's vision last week. His pride reaches to the heights of heaven and his lies lead many among the Judeans to forsake their covenant with God. This king desecrates the sanctuary, proscribes Judaism, and forces people of Judea to worship a foreign god. In later Christian interpretation he becomes identified with the Antichrist.

At this point, we are introduced to a transition in both time and space. The opening phrase "In that time" signals a temporal shift from the present to a future *eschaton*, or *the final event in the divine plan*. Within the passage, "that time" is paradoxically filled with both anguish and deliverance. The book of Daniel is set within the political system of the Babylonian empire. This passage recognizes the particular severity of the moment, describing an upcoming time as "distressed", even more distressed than any other prior time since the primordial age. But the passage also indicates that the persecution is of limited time and will soon lead to a period of deliverance. These are not two different time periods, but rather the time of unprecedented anguish is also a time of salvation.

"That time" occurs within a new spatial framework. The introduction of the angelic character of Michael (Hebrew translation "*Who is Like God?*") moves the setting from earthly to otherworldly realms. Michael is not merely introduced, but described as "The great ruler", implying a level of superiority beyond the earthly rulers of previous chapters. In today's chapter, Daniel uses the word "arise/stand" twice: (1) Michael arises/stands; (2) He is the one who "arises/stands above the children of his people". The verb invokes a call to warfare in a spirit that parallels military activities, both in historical narrative and prophecy. This call to "rise" is long-awaited.

The angel who speaks to Daniel reveals that this proud king, persecutor of Daniel's people, will meet his end "with no one to help him". The phrase "in that time" is repeated three times, identifying this moment as a decisive turning point. In "that time" of horrible persecution and of the persecutor's death, Michael, warrior-angel and prince of Daniel's people, will stand up. The people will be delivered, all who are "written in the book". To be written in this book is to be registered as a citizen, not of an earthly city, but of God's kingdom. This people will experience distress like nothing ever before known. "That time" of greatest anguish will be the moment of their salvation.

The paradox of anguish and delivery is manifest in two groups of people. Both groups share the following commonalities: (1) they were asleep; (2) they will awaken to a fate that will last for the ages. But aside from this, their fates are polar opposites. For one group, the awakening will lead to shame and death. But for another group, the address of "your people" specifies a small group within a collective identity as the hearers of this apocalyptic message. It is a qualified group of "all who are found written in the book". Most will recognize the connection to the idea of a written document in Revelation, but it also bridges to earlier movements in the Old Testament that ascribe a growing awareness of textual authority.

Our reading today considers a question that these days may be all too real for those of us beleaguered by the free-fall of the economy, climate change, droughts, storms, wars, conflicts and overwhelming numbers of refugees - all realities that may leave us with little if any hope: How does one speak about hope when one is threatened from all sides, in the instance of Daniel, trapped by the violent actions of empires crushing the least of these, when there is a very real possibility that the faithful may not survive?

Daniel faces these fears head-on, speaking of a time of anguish that has not been seen before. But within this dire reality, this text also speaks of God's presence and liberation, becoming one of the first Old Testament texts to formulate something of a resurrection hope.

This is followed with the retelling of history in which one encounters a birds-eye view of one empire following upon another, with leaders abusing their power and acting as they please. Within these power struggles, the wise prove to be exceedingly vulnerable, succumbing to sword and flame, and suffering capture and ruin.

At first glance, it may look as if history is running its course with little or no intervention at all from God. However, it is important to note that this retelling of history is enclosed by references to God's guardian angels fighting on behalf of Israel. So God's presence and liberation is mediated by means of the "protector of your people", the celestial being Michael who now appears as the saviour of those believers whose names are recorded in the book of life.

Even in the most devastating of times (perhaps triggered by the attacks of Antiochus IV on Jewish identity, by abolishing the Sabbath and sacrificing pork in the temple), the author can remind his audience of God's sovereign rule. The elevated role of angels who are employed as messengers and military officers fighting on God's behalf in these texts points to an increasingly bureaucratic view of God's rule that serves the purpose of countering the worldly power of any and every empire that threatens the faithful.

The author of Daniel maintains that in light of the grim reality that the wise ones may not only suffer, but may even be killed, the faithful who have persevered, will be vindicated, shining like bright lights in the sky. Matthew writes, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father's Kingdom. Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand." For the believers who found themselves in extremely treacherous conditions where the threat of death is an imminent reality, it became very important to be able to depend on life after death.

This idea of many (not all) of those who sleep in the dust of the earth waking up to eternal life is a new development in the Old Testament that probably grew out the extreme duress that gave rise to the apocalyptic visions in the second half of the book of Daniel.

The vast majority of passages dealing with death are much more concerned with the proper burial. But rather than obsess with the specific mechanics of an afterlife, the heart of the text is to provide hope. God is redemptive, even when it does not appear so in this life. The introduction of the afterlife in this passage is intended to provide relief for those suffering, and for those who grapple with a perception of God as distant in the midst of chaos. This closing chapter of Daniel is a culmination of many challenging situations for the faithful, in the narratives with Daniel in the foreign court, as well as in the apocalyptic visions. In a world where the growing perception was that the world lies in ruins, and where the lives of the faithful were not only threatened but taken away, the only hope for redemption or salvation would be in the sovereign God who has the whole world in his hands.

Earlier texts, such as Isaiah, that spoke about Israel's dead living again and the vision of the dry bones coming back to life in Ezekiel, likely referred to the restoration of Israel as a people. However, it seems that in Daniel, this moves beyond this view of restoration to the resurrection of individuals who are judged based on their deeds "at that time" — which in terms of the apocalyptic genre would refer to the *end of time*.

For believers facing death, the belief in resurrection expresses their profound hope in a sovereign God who will triumph over the forces of death, restoring the believers to life. Resurrection is promised for some of those who have died. Two fates await those who wake from dusty earth. One group will wake to life eternal. Another group will wake to reproaches and eternal horror. This word "horror" or "abhorrence" occurs only one other time in the Old Testament, in the final verse of the book of Isaiah. The scroll of Isaiah culminates in a vision of new heavens and new earth, a promise that God's people will endure forever, and a final warning: those who come to worship the Lord will see the corpses of the ones who have rebelled against God.

Spirituals like "I'll fly away" with its words: "Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away; to a land where joy shall never end, I'll fly away," and "Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home" capture this resurrection hope.

Furthermore, this belief in the resurrection would become increasingly important in New Testament texts that elaborate on the images preserved in these texts from Daniel based on the New Testament community's experience in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Among those who wake to eternal life, another group is singled out: "those who are wise," who have "made many righteous". The angel previously told Daniel of these "wise" ones. In the midst of persecution they will give their lives in nonviolent witness to God's revelation. They are teachers and martyrs. By their courage and truth they will help others to remain faithful to the covenant. Their reward will be to shine like the stars of the firmament. These wise teachers will counter eternal reproach with eternal witness to the light of truth.

Two other images in this text are worth exploring. First, the image of those who are found "written in the book" that will be described in Revelation as "the book of life", as well as in Psalms, Isaiah, and Malachi, constitutes a compelling image of the importance of being remembered. Reminiscent of the scores of photos and memorabilia of the Holocaust museum that witness to the existence of millions of Jewish men, women and children, the book of life becomes a powerful image of redemption; of the faithful that will not be forgotten by God but vindicated — even if their perpetrators try their best to erase their existence.

The image of the "*maskilim*", the ones who are wise and who are said to have led many to righteousness, directs our focus to what this text says not only about the sweet hereafter, but also about this life. Much like the suffering servant in the servant songs of Isaiah, the faithful are themselves skilled in justice, living a life of service rather than self-interest.

This last chapter of Daniel deserves special focus for a few reasons. First, as the conclusion of the book of Daniel -- how a book ends impacts how we interpret the book as a whole. Secondly, it contains the earliest reference to the now-widely-held belief in the resurrection of the dead at the end of days, when humanity will be judged and sorted in the afterlife between those who will inherit

“everlasting life” and those who will face “shame and everlasting contempt.”

Throughout the book of Daniel, a central theme has been God’s work in the context of human empires. Here this theme reaches its culmination as the empire of death itself comes to an end, and history’s players are divided between the righteous and the unrighteous. This ultimate sorting of humanity represents the final victory of God’s kingdom over all earthly powers.

The timing of these events is also of great significance. The resurrection and judgment will occur after “a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then”. This theme of God’s deliverance coming at the eleventh hour, when crises reach their peak and circumstances seem most dire, is a recurring motif throughout the book of Daniel, evident in both the court tales and the apocalyptic chapters.

Even in the most dire of circumstances, we are left with hope. These faithful offer a model of looking beyond oneself to how one can be of service to others, how we can be good stewards of God’s amazing creation. This is a perspective that may be worth embracing in these days in which one quite often is astounded by the selfishness and the greed that have not only been the cause of the financial collapse as well as the desecration of our environment and awe-inspiring creation.

From the Book of Daniel, we learn that there is always hope for the resurrection of our communities and society through the loving service of our caring siblings. There is hope for the resurrection of God’s creation, the flora and fauna, the air and water, as more of us around the world are made aware of the devastation and their contribution to it. The awareness brings understanding as we all become loving and caring stewards of God’s Creation.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE FOR SEPTEMBER 1, 2024

Creator and Redeemer, as we approach you in prayer and thanksgiving, open the eyes of our hearts to live each day in awe and wonder at your Creation. Open our eyes to see your magnificent handiwork in all living and nonliving things. Instill in us a desire to live with your creation with respect, and with a willingness to see our interdependence with one another, reliant on your Creation in our daily lives. Make us walk in beauty and balance. Make us open our hearts and minds. Make us speak the truth. We pray for your community, the Church, the Body of Christ. We pray for all our relations in the circle of life throughout all Creation. Give wisdom to those chosen to be our leaders and teachers. In peace, we pray to you.

We call upon the Earth, our planet home, with its beautiful depths, soaring heights and deep waters, its vitality and abundance of life, and together we ask that it may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the mountains and deserts, the high green valleys and meadows filled with wildflowers, the snows, the summits of intense silence, and we ask that they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the land which grows our food, the nurturing soil, the fertile fields, the abundant gardens and orchards, and we ask that they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the forests, the great trees reaching strongly to the sky with earth in their roots and the heavens in their branches, the fir and the pine and the cedar and we ask that they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the creatures of the fields and forests and the seas, our brothers and sisters the wolves and deer, the eagle and dove, the great whales and the dolphin and we ask that they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon all those who have lived on this earth, our ancestors and our friends, who dreamed the best for future generations, and upon whose lives our lives are built, and with thanksgiving, we call upon them too ... that they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the nations of the world to hear the cry of those who have suffered loss of homes, lives and hope because of the effects of climate change. May they hear the cry of those whose communities, schools, churches, hospitals, roads and infrastructure have been damaged. We pray for justice and for peace and we ask that they may teach us and show us the way.

We pray for all victims of war and violence. We pray for countries where the greed for oil and gas are leading to war. We hold in our hearts those areas where fossil fuel projects have destabilised communities and human rights abuses have occurred. We pray for areas where climate change has led to drought, and conflict over water and resources is taking place. May we respond to the cry of the Earth and those living in poverty, as peacemakers who challenge the violence that threatens us all and we ask that they may teach us and show us the way.

We pray for Our Redeemer Lutheran, Penticton, and Trinity Anglican + Lutheran Church in Port Alberni. We pray for: Bishop Kathy, Bishop Susan, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers as they lead their congregations in these challenging times of climate change and natural disasters around the world. We pray for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

We pray O God that you would sustain those who respond when wildfires roar, keep them safe from harm and hold them in your sheltering embrace so that they may complete these burdensome tasks, return home to their families, and keep the lives and homes of all they protect safe from harm. We pray for all the evacuees, those who have lost their homes, and those waiting to return to survey the devastation, that you give them strength and hope to rebuild their lives and communities.

We pray for healing of Bishop Kathy and Pastor Kristin Steele. Give them strength to recuperate and surround them with your love and compassion so that they may return to serving you and your people.

O God who holds each one of us, we lift our hearts in prayer for the students around the globe who are beginning a new school year. Help students, educators, and grown ups who raise children navigate the busier season and the additional stress that it may bring. This time of year brings additional tasks for most of us, and the sudden change of pace can cause anxiety. With all the changes and challenges we face, we often think, 'How can I possibly manage this?' In these times, remind us that you are there holding the burden alongside us.

Holy God, God of love, we pray for family and friends who are suffering: those struggling physically or emotionally, those working to overcome mental illness; those facing challenges at home or at work; those grieving the death of a loved one. We pray for those caught in the grip of substance use disorder, and their families and friends. We grieve that lives continue to tragically be cut short through overdoses of dangerous street drugs. We pray for those individuals who seek a corner of privacy and safety on our property. Help us as your people of Grace to discern how to address this issue in ways that uphold the safety of all.

Creator, you made the world and declared it to be good: the beauty of the trees, the softness of the air, the fragrance of the grass speak to us; the summit of the mountains, the thunder of the sky, the rhythm of the lakes speak to us; the faintness of the stars, the freshness of the morning, the dewdrops on the flower speak to us. But above all, our hearts soar, for you speak to us through your Holy Spirit and with the power of Jesus the Christ, in whose name we offer these prayers.

Amen

Our Father ...