

“Apocalypse Now”

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

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This week as Wednesday Bible Study was ending... many folks in the group expressed fear and awe that I would take up the task of preaching this week from not one but two Apocalyptic books. Both Daniel and Revelation are books of The Bible that are often ignored... they are like the weird family member of the biblical text that we don't want anyone to know we are related to or associate with us ... The reason for this is that they are simply put... weird and terrifying... and throughout history have been misused... I will be honest and tell you that as pastor of Hagar's Community Church – the congregation I served on the inside of a prison- I actively discouraged my congregants from reading either of these books of the bible. It was always a hard NO to doing a Bible Study in Daniel or Revelation (which they often requested) because I know there is a temptation to use or interpret these texts in harmful ways... it takes a certain amount of faith maturity to engage these texts faithfully and not get carried away trying to interpret modern day events through them.

But today I'm going to ask you to sit in the discomfort as we take a deep dive into some weird and puzzling scripture.... And together we are going explore what God has to offer... because even though these text are weird and uncomfortable... they are in fact a part of our sacred text.. and have just as much to tells us about who God is in our world as does The Psalms, Exodus, or the even the Gospels....

To begin we need to understand what Apocalyptic literature is and what Apocalyptic actually means. In pop culture the word Apocalyptic means end of the world, gloom and doom, and fire falling from heaven.... But this is a science fiction Hollywood understanding of the word... rather the word apocalyptic is rooted in the Greek word for “revelation.” So an apocalypse is an uncovering or an unveiling of truth that cannot be seen with human eyes or understood with the human mind. So both visions found in Daniel and Revelation are apocalyptic in that they reveal the nature of the empire(s) under which the authors are living and the truth that God is in control and will ultimately defeat all evil in this world. An Apocalypse is God pulling back the curtain and giving you a glimpse of God's vision... and an Apocalypse is being allowed to slip behind the curtain and see our world through spiritual glasses.

Have any of you ever read Harry Potter? I am a huge Harry Potter fan- in the fifth book of Harry Potter- there is in my opinion a perfect illustration of an Apocalypse... Harry goes to a meeting at his friend, Sirius Black's house- But When Harry arrives at the given address... the house is not there. Harry is super confused and ready to leave when one of Harry's travel

companions says a spell and reveals that the house is hidden out of view of muggles (non magical folks). The spell is a revelation revealing that things are not as they seem. With your human (or muggle) eyes you cannot see the house, but with magic you are given a glimpse of the truth. and that is what apocalyptic literature is like... with your human eyes there are moments when it does not seem or appear that God is at work in the world or in our current circumstance, but with this special revelation, and the pulling back of the curtain you are shown that God is indeed completely in control... and you are shown truths about our world that you cannot see with just your own human eyes or understanding.

This genre tends to pop up in communities that are experiencing trauma and oppression. And that is because Apocalyptic Literature is at its core resistance literature... it's purpose is to give strength and courage to those who are suffering persecution and encourage those at the margins to not to lose faith in God's promises. And... When reading these books we have to keep in mind that it is literature written by and for those who are not in power- and so as modern American Christians we cannot see ourselves as the main character.... rather we have to ask questions of ourselves... we have to keep in mind that this literature is both revealing truths about who God is... and also how our actions and affiliations in this world are hurting others. The symbolism throughout both books should spark your imagination, and I think it is important to note that in its current context these books were potentially funnier than you might think... The authors are making caricatures out of the rulers and empires that are oppressing and traumatizing whole communities- so these books are sort of an ancient version of a Saturday Night Live Presidential skit. The original audiences for both Daniel and Revelation would have understood this genre much better than we do today.

The coded language in both books are not to be read as some blueprint for prophecy that is to come in the future... but rather the codes used in both Daniel and Revelation is a function of these books being resistance literature. It would have been dangerous to the writers if these books were read by those in power... so the coded language makes these books look like nonsense to those in power, while being able to bring hope to the folks living in the margins. I saw something like this happening all the time at the prison where I pastored... the incarcerated women had all sorts of different ways to communicate with each other that could not be understood by the Correction Officers- they would even write in code in letters that they sent home... knowing that all of their communication was closely monitored- and they could get in trouble if the wrong person read the wrong thing.

So now... Let's turn to the book of Daniel... Daniel is a book that is found towards the end of the Old Testament. You may have heard in Sunday School the story of Daniel and the Lion's Den- where Daniel is thrown into a lion's den and rescued by an angel who closes the mouths of the lion. That story is found in the book of Daniel.... And that is the same Daniel who is having the wild and terrifying dream in today's text. While Linda was reading today you may have been thinking... "what is going on here!?" There are beasts coming out of the oceans... and then one beast that has a talking horn? This makes no sense...

In Daniel's vision four Different Beast come out of the Sea- the beasts do not look like any known creature on earth... they are to be seen as "spiritual beasts" and they are meant to seem grotesque. The Sea from which they come is supposed to bring up images of the watery chaos from which God created from in the beginning. Out of the chaos, God created a good and ordered creation, but humans and human institutions who do not follow the ways of God return to the chaos and become wild untamed beasts.

After seeing the beasts Daniel's vision continues and he is taken to the throne room of God- where he sees God (the Ancient one) on the throne and a figure and called the Son of Man who is given authority and dominion over the whole world- and who eventually destroys all of the wild beasts. When we read this text we automatically assume that Jesus is the Son of Man (in the gospel's Jesus refers to himself as such)- but for the author of Daniel the Son of Man figure would have represented a messianic hope- a king that will come and vindicate God's people against the beastly kingdoms of this earth. **

This text is using highly symbolic imagery that Daniel's audience would have been familiar with. The four beasts are mythical caricatures that represent four of the empires under which the Jewish people suffered. Scholars debate exactly what these beasts represent but it is generally agreed that The lion: represents the Babylonians; the bear: the Medes; the leopard: the Persians; the dragon: the Greeks- We know each of these great civilizations and their contributions to the world from our history books, but from the book of Daniel we get a glimpse of the evil nature of these empires and the way that these kingdoms oppressed and traumatized those who were not in power.

Many years ago I believe that I slipped through the veil and saw the world anew- I had an apocalypse of my very own. I was a freshman in college at Lee University- which also happened to be in my home town. I had lived in Cleveland for the majority of my life and did not think there was anything new to be learned about this small and frankly sleepy town. But one evening while driving home I somehow got turned around and ventured over "the train tracks" and suddenly was lost in my hometown. God's Honest Truth... I had no idea where I was... nothing looked familiar and I was completely lost- I actually wondered if had I slipped through a time warp.... Of course this was before the days of GPS or Google maps so I was left to figure out how to get home in my own hometown. You may have a hunch as to what happened... Cleveland is a traditional southern town and my driving error that took me over the train tracks revealed to me the historical segregation of Cleveland TN. I had driven into the black side of town... of which, until that very moment, I had no idea even existed- which is how it was possible for me get lost. I have reflected on this experience ever since. I think this was the first moment that I had an inkling of understanding that the world was not as it seemed (to me).. and even though I did not think I was racist nor did I feel as though I had benefited from White Privilege... this experience revealed to me that I did in fact need to do some self-examination... that the world was not as it seemed.. and I was in fact blind to the realities of my fellow black brothers and sisters. That unbeknownst to me I had come under the influence of the beast named White Supremacy.

The unveiling or revelation in Daniel is two fold- In the visions we see that God is in control and will vindicate those who suffer but we also see the beasts of this world as they truly are... Beasts that need to be defeated. And I wonder if what is truly terrifying about this revelation is that we have become accustomed (and possibly even comfortable) with the beasts who rule our world... and we do not want them to be confronted by God or upended.

One of my new favorite television shows is The Morning Show on Apple TV- it is a drama series about a morning news show... and it is full of drama and tension and one of my favorite actresses, Jennifer Anniston is in it... and in one of its most recent episodes one of the characters Corey – the CEO of the News network- is talking to a fellow co worker who had suggested that they check in on their employees and see how everyone was feeling... - and Corey responds saying:

“go ahead care about the world, or fall in love on your own time... here feelings they drain your life blood, they turn your eyes gray... caring about me cannot be your problem... caring about other people limits your ability to make self-serving decisions... and what is good for you is good for the company because it owns you and it owns me...” (The Morning Show, Season Two Episode 8)

Because I was preparing for this sermon I immediately stopped and rewound the episode... I thought to myself- that quote is the definition of how the beasts of the world function... The Beasts of this world tell us that we have to care for ourselves over our fellow humanity..... that the goal of our life is power and wealth and self sufficiency... and that allegiance has to be to the empire to succeed.

In our Revelation text today we encounter another apocalyptic text.. This time the book is written to Christians who have begun experiencing persecution by the Roman Empire. Revelation opens with a vision by John.. and in this vision we see Jesus on the Throne: in John’s vision we see Jesus as “the Alpha and the Omega,” The one who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty....

Today we are celebrating Christ The King Sunday- the last day of the liturgical Calendar... which marks the end of Ordinary Time and moves us to the threshold of Advent, the season of hope, a season to prepare for Christ’s coming to our world.

Christ The King Sunday - “centers on the crucified and risen Christ, whom God exalted to rule over the whole universe. Today we celebrate of the lordship of Christ... we look back to Ascension, Easter, and Transfiguration, and we look ahead to the appearing in glory of the King of kings and Lord of lords- the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, today we see Christ who is the center of the universe, the ruler of all history, the judge of all people. In Christ

all things began, and in Christ all things will be fulfilled. In the end, Christ will triumph over the forces of evil.”¹

But on the Christ the King Sunday the revelation- The Apocalypse Now- is that Jesus is a very different king than our earthly kings...

Jesus is not - “the brute, top-down power of a tyrant, but instead the true, bottom-up power of love and grace.... What is true power? The power that takes the form not of a supreme monarch or Emperor but of a humble servant. The power that, faced with the world’s cruelty and contempt, takes the form of the cross — It’s this power — true power — that Jesus comes to embody and declare.”² and the more we follow after this king, the more of Christ the king we keep in focus and attempt to be more like... the more we will become aware of the beasts of this world.... And the less we will find ourselves in allegiance with them. I know for me that my faith in Christ has been the driving force in my life to pursue the call of becoming an anti racist.

As we go forth today we are called to be a church that is open to seeing God’s revelation... The Apocalypse that is Now... That Christ is king... a different kind of a king- a king that died as a common criminal to bring salvation to the world, the kind of King that chose to love and forgive his enemies rather than seeking revenge... a king who loves us and who chooses to be with us no matter the circumstances.... Even though we are living through a time of world history that is full of instability, change, and fear about our future, we can know from Daniel and Revelation that Jesus is King, his kingdom is here and we have hope in our future... and We are called to follow our King, Jesus, rather than the beasts who are in power in this world... Amen

Let us Pray:

Holy One, enthroned in glory over all creation, you are a shepherd to the lost and the least. Teach us to see your face among the poor— feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting those who are sick or in prison— so that we may share in your eternal realm prepared from the foundation of the world; through Jesus Christ, who is coming indeed, to reign with justice, compassion, and love.

Announcements:

¹(<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/christianyear/christ-king-reign-christ/>)

² (<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/christ-the-king-lectionary-commentary>)