

Today our Old Testament lesson contains the strange imagery of Daniel ch7. This part of Daniel is an apocalyptic text. That makes it the same genre as the book of Revelation. There are certain types of Christians who spend an inordinate amount of time with Daniel ch7. They're the same ones who look to the book of Revelation and try to match up all the strange Biblical images with current events.

You probably know the type: the horns on the beast represent the nations of the European Union; Vladimir Putin is the antichrist; the mark of the beast is a computer barcode.

Well, these sorts of Christians try to do the same thing with Daniel ch7. That makes Daniel ch7 seem like a strange choice for an Old Testament lesson for All Saints' Day. And yet, when we look at what this chapter says, and what it does not say, we find a message of hope for our world today.

In the beginning of chapter 7, we're told that the prophet Daniel saw some visions during a dream. He relates that he saw a vision of great winds stirring up the sea. Remember, the Jews were desert people. Any time they mention the sea, it's going to be a negative image. For them, the sea is a place of storm and danger and chaos.

And sure enough, out of this chaotic sea, Daniel sees 4 great beasts coming out of the water.

Now our reading skips over the verses with the descriptions of the beasts. And if you read these verses, you might think they seem more appropriate to Halloween than to All Saints Day.

The first beast is like a lion with eagles' wings, but the wings are later plucked off.<sup>1</sup>

The second beast is like rampaging bear with three tusks.<sup>2</sup>

The third beast is like a leopard with four bird's wings, and four heads.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth beast has iron teeth and ten big horns.<sup>4</sup> And if that's not weird enough, another little horn sprouts up among the 10 big horns. And that little horn has eyes and a trash-talking mouth.<sup>5</sup>

Now, the modern apocalyptically oriented Christians look at these 4 beasts and try to match them up with current geopolitics. Almost all of them associate the lion who loses its wings with the collapse of the British Empire. And they link the bear either to the former Soviet Union or to modern Russia. But then they usually disagree about the leopard and the 4th beast.

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<sup>1</sup> Dan 7:4

<sup>2</sup> Dan 7:5

<sup>3</sup> Dan 7:6

<sup>4</sup> Dan 7:7

<sup>5</sup> Dan 7:8

However, it's highly unlikely that the original readers of Daniel would have said, 'I just don't understand what this beast that looks like a lion represents. I guess I'll have to wait 2,000 years until something called a British Empire arises.' No, no, no.

The visions in Daniel would have meant something to his original audience. These beasts would represent something that had meaning in their time. The beasts to them wouldn't represent the British or the Russians, but rather the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and maybe even the Romans.

But whether you look at these beasts as ancient or modern, the common denominator is this. Kings, empires, rulers, nations... they all rise and fall. And they sometimes wreak havoc on the earth. They sometimes unleash destruction in various ways.

Daniel sees these visions, and we're told his response. Our reading picks up again with Daniel's words:

"As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me."<sup>6</sup>

Daniel sees these forces in the world around him, and he's worried and terrified. Perhaps you are, too.

It's a rough time in our nations' history. We're going through a season of hyper-partisan politics. We've got hotly contested midterm elections this week.

Heck, these days the election cycle seems to be going on constantly with little reprieve. We have people on both sides promising peace and prosperity, if only we elect them. And we have people on both sides forecasting disaster and doom if we elect their opponents. We have other people who are cynical, who refuse to vote.

We have many people worried about the situation in the world today. And yes, I'm a parent. I worry about the world my children are having to navigate as young adults. And while we only currently have grand-dogs and grand-cats, I do worry what kind of world my potential future grandchildren might have to deal with.

But then, I remember that dark shadows are nothing new.

I grew up with Vietnam and Watergate. The threatening shadow of the nuclear mushroom cloud loomed large during my childhood.

My parents grew up under the shadow of Hitler and Stalin, with World War II and later Korea.

My grandparents grew up in a world of Czars and Kaisers, of World War I, the Russian Revolution and economic depression.

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<sup>6</sup> Dan 7:15

In every age there are beasts that rise from the sea.  
Babylonians, Persians, Romans.  
Nazis, the Soviets, Terrorists, Drug Lords.

And with Daniel, it's tempting to say, "My spirit is troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrify me."

Daniel ch7 contains these dark visions. But it also offers us three images of comfort. Yes, the geopolitical beasts snarl and rampage and destroy. But we are given three messages of comfort.

#### Message 1

We skipped over these verses as well. But after seeing the beasts, Daniel sees an image of a throne room. And on the throne is the Ancient One, the Ancient of Days.<sup>7</sup> This is an image of God.

And in succeeding verses, God sits in judgment over the beasts. The 4th beast is destroyed. The other beasts are stripped of their power. The first message is clear. God is sovereign. And God is in control. Tyrants and oppressors are temporary. But God is forever. God is in charge. And God will make things right.

#### Message 2

This is perhaps the most important image in Daniel 7 for Christians.

After seeing God on the throne, Daniel says,  
"As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being (more literally, one like a Son of Man) coming with the clouds of heaven."<sup>8</sup>

A Son of Man. This is a quasi-divine being. Not an earthly ruler in the usual sense, but God's heavenly agent.

For Christians, the image is clear. For we follow someone who claimed to be this Son of Man. Over and over again, Jesus used this title to refer to himself. Jesus didn't claim to be the Son of God. He claimed to be the Son of Man.

For 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, it's a bit confusing. It seems backwards to us.

But in Jesus' time, and in the Old Testament for that matter, "Son of God" referred to an ordinary human being, a very human king. Jewish kings gained the title, "Son of God" at their coronations.

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<sup>7</sup> Dan 7:9

<sup>8</sup> Dan 7:13

But "Son of Man" is much stronger. Son of Man usually referred to a quasi-divine agent of God's judgment.

Son of God was a human title. It referred to a King like King David. Son of God was a title for a human Messiah, or a human king.

Son of Man was usually an exalted title. As we see in Daniel 7, it refers to God agent who will come on the clouds and be given eternal dominion and kingship.

And this is the title Jesus claimed for himself. Son of Man. God's divine agent.

Over and over again, Jesus resisted the temptation of seizing earthly power. At his trial, he was asked, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?"<sup>9</sup>

In other words, 'Are you the Son of God, the earthly king who will free us from the Romans?'

And Jesus replied, "You have said so..."  
'Those are your words.'

"(But) you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."<sup>10</sup>

Jesus is not claiming to be the next earthly ruler. That would simply make Jesus the next one up in a long line of beasts. Jesus is playing for much bigger stakes, stakes that such earthly beasts know nothing about.

In Daniel's vision, this Son of Man is given "dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed."<sup>11</sup>

Message 1: God is in charge. The beasts will be judged and stripped of their authority. Message 2: God's divine agent, the Son of Man, will be given total authority, and he will rule forever.

And finally, Message 3.

It's the last verse of our reading today:

"The holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mt 26:63

<sup>10</sup> Mt 26:64

<sup>11</sup> Dan 7:14

<sup>12</sup> Dan 7:18

The other word for "holy ones" is saints. The people of God. Those who have gone before us in faith in the past. And God's faithful people in the present.

We are promised a glorious inheritance. God's kingdom. The eternal kingdom of the Son of Man. Forever and ever.

If your spirit is troubled, hold on to this. God is in charge. He has sent his Son. And he is preparing a place for all of his faithful people.

The beasts will not win. Terror and destruction and war and strife are not permanent. God will prevail. And we will share in his victory.

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.