

DANIEL'S VISION

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on Christ the King Sunday, November 21, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

*As I watched,
thrones were set in place,
and an Ancient One took his throne;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames,
and its wheels were burning fire.
A stream of fire issued
and flowed out from his presence.
A thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him.
The court sat in judgement,
and the books were opened...*

*As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a human being
coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.
To him was 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.*

I.

On Sunday evening, October 3rd, I finished teaching the third lesson in my just-having-started New Testament class, and made my way down from the Haverkamp Room, recently re-opened and outfitted with cameras and screens for hybrid classes and meetings. It being only my third voyage with hybrid technology, I was relieved when the class was over, everyone had seemed able to see and hear, and no screen had erupted into a cloud of smoke because of a mistaken key I had punched.

I came downstairs to the Sanctuary because I knew we were having a service called Evensong. I didn't know what the service would entail, but I knew some of our youth and children would be singing and leading worship. As I approached the library doors to the Sanctuary, I heard a young person reading a powerful

passage that I recognized as one of several apocalyptic visions in the Book of Daniel, and I was struck by how well the youthful voice was reading the difficult passage.

As I slipped into the dimly lit Sanctuary, I became transfixed by the reading. I could tell it was a teenage girl, but given the low light in the Sanctuary I wasn't sure who she was. Within a few minutes I recognized her as one of the youth in the church whose birth I remember well. It was moving to see so many people in the Sanctuary I had not seen, particularly children, youth, and their families. It was a beautiful end to the weekend for me; and ironically, an apocalyptic passage from the Book of Daniel had transferred me outside myself and ushered in a moment of peace and hope.

II.

We have a similar reading from the same Book of Daniel today. But the chapter from which it comes is not immediately peaceful. Prior to the opening of our reading, the young man Daniel is like many Jewish youth of his generation: an exile in Babylon. He is not unlike people exiled today, fleeing autocrats in South and Central American, in Belarus, in Cuba, in Iran, in Burma, and in East Turkestan.¹ And Daniel's situation in exile leads him to have a terrible nightmare. He recounts his nightmare in detail in the part of the chapter immediately before our reading.²

In Daniel's nightmare, he sees "*the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts [coming] up out of the sea, different from one another.*

The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings...a second one...looked like a bear... another...like a leopard...[and] a fourth beast...[with great] iron teeth and...ten horns.

Then Daniel's nightmare continues as our passage opens.

*As I watched [he writes],
thrones were set in place,
and an Ancient One took his throne;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames,
and its wheels were burning fire.
A stream of fire issued
and flowed out from his presence.
A thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him...*

When most of us have nightmares, they are short, dramatic, frightening, but we don't remember the details like Daniel remembers. His nightmare is hard and heavy, frightening and foreboding. It is one of the most detailed visions in the Bible.

¹ Anne Applebaum, "The Bad Guys are Winning," *The Atlantic*, November 15, 2021.

² Daniel 7:1-6.

But then Daniel's nightmare morphs into a more pleasant ending.

*As I watched in the night visions [he writes],
I saw one like a human being
coming with the clouds of heaven.*

*And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.
To him was 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.*

III.

The translation from which we read calls the mysterious figure who appears before the Ancient Throne of God "one like a *human being*." Other translations with which we may be more acquainted call the figure "a Son of Man." The phrase "human being" or "Son of Man" both emphasize that this figure is a *mortal, a human being*, not a beast or an angel or a monster or a god. "One like a human being." "A Son of Man."

Yet despite being mere mortal, this figure in Daniel's vision is given everything the four beasts in the dream seek through violence and force: "dominion, glory, kingship." To this "one like a human being" all people, nations, and languages will be drawn. To this "one like a human being," this "Son of Man," dominion is "everlasting"; it "shall not pass away." His rule shall "never be destroyed."

After reading Daniel's nightmare of the first part of his vision, to end with this more positive and hopeful vision of the "Son of Man" brings a measure of peace, stirrings of hope.

IV.

Of all the titles used of Jesus in the New Testament by those following him – Rabbi, Teacher, Lord, Master, King, Messiah, Savior; the only name Jesus uses for himself is that of "Son of Man." Jesus claims this title – this name – eighty-one times in the four Gospels.

In Jesus' usage, as in Daniel's, "the Son of Man" is a figure who comes *from above*, establishes God's reign and rule on earth, limits or destroys every dominion which claims too much power and authority for itself, and calls "all peoples, languages, and nations" to God's reign and rule.

- After living through the horror of his own life in exile – including surviving the "Lion's Den"³ for which he is more famous and which for him was more than the proverbial expression it has become for us, Daniel's vision of the "Son of Man" is an enormously hopeful dream.

³ This occurs in Daniel 6, immediately before this vision.

- What Christ claims for himself in using this title is no less hopeful: that his reign and rule will *prevail* and *outlast* the reigns of all the lesser tyrannies and lesser tyrants who make news in every generation.

In the power of its promise, Daniel's vision provides peace.

V.

On this last Sunday in the Christian calendar, "Christ the King" or "Reign of Christ Sunday", it is worth focusing on what this transcendent vision of Christ as Son of Man can offer us in our deeply polarized time in our country and across the world.

This past week Maggie and I flew to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where I had been asked to preach the funeral of a longtime member at First Presbyterian Church in that mid-size city. I served that church for fourteen years prior to being called to Westminster in 2004. In the Presbyterian Church it is rare for a former pastor to return and conduct a funeral of a member, but the current pastor was supportive of the invitation, as I had married this man and his wife thirty years ago, when he was close to sixty and he was in her early thirties. When a long-awaited son was born to them four years later – his seventh son, her first – I conducted the baptism. When they had their son, the father said he hoped to live to see him graduate from high school. He almost lived to see his son complete his Ph.D., and nearly all his days as a parent were healthy and vigorous.

I happened to be there on the day that Coe College – which the church had founded nearly 175 years ago – was in the headlines locally and some nationally because of the resignation of a longtime black trustee and alum over the selection process that had led the Board to choose a white male as the next President of the College. There was a board member at the funeral whom I knew well; others at the service were involved in this controversy; and the person who had been selected as the new President, and who is already serving because he was interim President, is a longtime faculty member who is the husband of the Pastor of the church who had invited me to do the funeral and with whom I shared its leadership. So we talked a lot, both before the service, at the luncheon in the church's fellowship hall, and afterward as she was preparing to return home both to her husband and to one of their children, who is a student at the college in which many her fellow students were protesting her father's selection.

All this brought home to me not only how much we are divided as a nation – but how intense and personal our divisions are, how much they impact us and our families, and, whether or not this is the case with this particular conflict, how they are often rooted in a political *identity* and come with a political *intensity* which has taken over the lives of so many of us in ways far more than politics – except in the most oppressive and urgent of circumstances – should take over. It is, as you know, an intensity many will face this week over the Thanksgiving Dinner table. It is an intensity out of which it seems impossible to negotiate, to compromise, or to find semi-common ground. The divisions are over *who* reigns, *who* rules, *who* has dominion, and *what is the nature* of that reign and rule to be.

I asked the Pastor about several other congregations in the city that I had known well twenty years ago; a few had moved far to the right; gained some members and lost others; several like the church she and I served have tried to hold people together across their political differences and intensities and still have lost people on both ends of the political spectrum. It is a tough time for churches. It is a tough time for colleges and universities. It is a tough time for thousands of institutions and businesses in our country. And it is a tough time for the people involved in them.

VI.

Daniel's vision concerning the four beasts, the Ancient One on the throne, and the Son of Man comes in the midst of the Exile in Israel's history – that period after the 500-year monarchy established reluctantly by Samuel and peopled most famously by Saul, David, and Solomon. Daniel's vision comes after he has survived the lion's den. It comes to him as a young man who knows and experiences the most violent divisions in his generation.

And while it is a vision of a "Son of Man" who *comes down* from heaven, it is a vision of a savior whose kingdom *takes root* in the kingdom of the world, but his kingdom is neither beholden to it, defeated by it nor conformed to its divisions and hatreds, its violence and idolatrous intensity. The reign of the "one like a human being" is a reign of God that renders *secondary* if not *illegitimate* the reigns and rules we know on earth and are often involved in establishing, seeking to continue, or seeking to change.

Jesus Christ as "Son of Man," this "one like a human being," can lift us above the disease that has become endemic in our culture of looking to politics for our identity and *filling our identity with our politics*. Faith in a *transcendent* Son of Man – rather than one who simply *melds with* and *blesses* our political dreams and demonization can help us *renew our public life* without being *defined* by it.

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The novelist Marilynne Robinson – who is both a deeply-theological Christian and a leading spokesperson for the humanities – calls for college students – in addition to being trained for professions – to be exposed to "high thought and great art."

...all those arches and spires induce the belief [that we] have a dignified place in human history, something better than collaborating in the blind creep of a material culture that values only itself.⁴

The Christ who comes as Son of Man in glory is like arches and spires of ancient buildings, many of them ecclesial. The more transcendent is our vision of Jesus Christ the more we can accomplish on earth. The Christ who comes to reign as a mortal among us reminds us that we have a dignified place in human history and leads us to work toward a society that lives beyond "the blind creep of a material culture," or we might add, "the blind creep of a political culture." The Christ who comes as mortal reminds us that being mortal is our noble and worthwhile role, calling, and responsibility.

*God has shown you,
O mortal, what is good:
And what does the Lord require
But that you
Do justice,
Love kindness,
And walk humbly with our God?⁵*

⁴Quoted in Greg Jackson, "Sources of Life," *The Point*, March 24, 2021.

⁵ Micah 6:8.

VII.

As this cursed pandemic shows signs of letting up, even as our politics of intensity and division does not, I hope individual Christians and churches will lift our heads toward the vaulted Christ to whom Daniel's vision points.

- We need transcendence in our society.
- We need vaulted-ness.
- We need something larger than ourselves, more mysterious than our desires, more truthful than our differences, more conducive to the human spirit *and* the Holy Spirit than our hatreds.
- We need a faith, rather than a politics, which is transcendent.
- And we need our faith to serve as a corrective to any politics that claims a transcendence beyond its legitimate role in our lives.

We all benefit from walking into walk into a dimly lit sanctuary, and being surprised by a vision of a vaulted Christ, read from a book ancient and unfamiliar, that so lifts us above our “darkness and despair” that it transfers us into the “light and peace” of Christ's presence, and strengthens us for doing justice, loving kindness, as we walk with our God – humbly.

Amen.

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