

"Night Vision"

Daniel 7:9-14; Mark 13:24-27, 32-37

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September 29, 2019

The readings from Daniel 7 and Mark 13 fall into a strange genre of writing known as apocalyptic literature. Apocalypse simply means "revelation" or "unveiling." All the more strange, the literature itself appears veiled, incomprehensible, shot through with impenetrable symbolism.

As we read through the first six chapters of Daniel, we have been flying along, through the derring-do deeds of young Jewish heroes. In the Gospel of Mark, we have been gliding through episodes of Jesus' earthly ministry. Suddenly we parachute into an apocalyptic world, dark with the foreboding threat of the end of an age or of history itself. Pessimistic predictions about present history are balanced with optimistic prognostications about the ultimate triumph of God over the dark powers of this age and the final vindication of the faithful.

Foreign to our ears are the apocalyptic words and images that assault our senses. Wild, exotic pictures presented here seem about as relevant as an 1895 newspaper. How do we see into and through this murky material?

It is hard to see into this literature. It is hard to see in the dark. God didn't make all creatures like us, though. He gave some of his creatures eyes with which to see better at night. Maybe in God's economy that's so that the earth can be used day and night. Think about the owls and the pussycats and the racoons and the opossums. What they can't see, they have whiskers to help them feel out. In the night, our vision is not so good. Some of us, in fact, suffer night blindness; we can't drive at night. Compared with the animal world, we are all night blind, so we have developed the technology to turn night into day. But there are some nights that we cannot see through—the night of the future, for example. We are not doing very much better in predicting the future now than those who came before us, modern technology notwithstanding. The future is dark. It may or may not be ominous, but it is at least

opaque. Who can see into it? Scripture makes a pass at doing so in this apocalyptic literature.

There are other apocalyptic voices around. As the millennium approached—the year 2000—there were dire doomsday predictions that started up. I well remember they increased in tempo and volume. The same thing happened a thousand years ago. It will happen again at the next millennium, because what passes at such times is not just a century; it's an age.

There is scarcely a day goes by that we don't read or hear about global warming. We worry about the greenhouse effect, the destruction of forestation in Brazil, the melting of glaciers. Other doomsday predictions crop up every time there is a flood or a hurricane or a pestilence. And viruses just keep cropping up. HIV. And now TB and measles are back. We thought those were diseases confined to the past. Not so. Where is it all going to end, and when?

Among not so dissimilar speculations long, long ago, the Book of Daniel is set. It was actually written about 165 years before the birth of

Christ, during the time of one of the last of the Greek kings, Antiochus Epiphanes IV. He was a rat and a rascal. The Jews were under tremendous persecution; and so the stories of Daniel, which had been circulating for a long time, got set down in writing. The Book of Daniel was set in a time of the exile of the Israelites. After 586 B.C. E. the Babylonians marched in and marched the Israelites out to captivity. Men, women, children, all. These stories are laid out as stories of faith and courage for the faithful in hard times.

I want you to notice who the heroes of the stories in Daniel are. They are four boys, maybe 14 or 15 years old when the story begins. Four of them. There is Daniel. There are three other Jewish friends of his: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. All were called to the court of Nebuchadnezzar. The king said, "I would like some nice Jewish boys around me. I want them to be perfect—flawless in appearance, very wise, and able."

So, Daniel and his three friends are brought to court. They are to be kept there three years in

training as pages, taught the Babylonian language, taught court manners. But it is immediately clear that they don't fit in. They refuse to eat the king's food. When you live near the king, you live like a king. You drink the king's wine. You eat the king's meat. The only trouble is that this food violates Jewish dietary laws.

You have heard of eating kosher? Some Jews still do that. I guess almost all of them did then. The laws are very strict, very particular, very peculiar—not at all a diet that would blend with what the king was serving. So, the boys said, “Just give us vegetables.” To me, this is the only part of the story that's funny. Here are four teenage boys, hundreds of miles from home, no moms around, and they say, “No, no meat for us, please. Just pass the vegetables.”

So they get vegetables, but they have to beg for them, because the steward is afraid that he will get into trouble. Daniel says, “Well, try us on the vegetable diet for ten days, and then see if we are as pink and pretty as the other guys here.” Sure enough, the vegetable diet turns

out to be even better than the king's rich food, and the boys come to the attention of the king, who keeps them around and grooms them for service.

The three years of training pass. Meanwhile, Nebuchadnezzar is on to bigger and better things, but he has a troubled mind. Daniel is one who has, in the night, visions. But the king has nightmares. This is sort of reminiscent of Joseph and Pharaoh. Nobody in court can tell Nebuchadnezzar what his dreams mean. Not only that, he doesn't just want the dream interpreted, he wants the dream told to him. “You tell me what I dreamed, and then you interpret, and then maybe I'll believe your interpretation. His courtiers said, “There is nobody who can do that.” So Nebby said, “Kill them all. In fact, kill all my wise men all over the kingdom.” This would include Daniel and his three amigos. Daniel says, “Wait a minute, king. I think I can help you.” To make a long story short, Daniel tells him the dream, interprets it for him, and Daniel is made prefect of the biggest province of Babylonia.

Daniel gets jobs for his three friends, and things go on all right for a while. And the king continues to get on with larger projects. He is known as a builder. One thing that he builds is a huge statue of himself, which he sets on a plain where it can be seen for miles. It is 90 feet high, 9 feet wide, and is made of the finest metals. His command is that everybody must bow down to the statue. But, of course, the Jewish boys aren't going to do that. First they won't eat the food, and now they are not going to bow to the statue either.

There is always somebody out in the provinces who is going to rat out the people who don't bend the knee properly. They tell on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who are hauled into the king's court. The king says, "Now, let's get this straight. You served me well in the past. If you will just please kneel to the statue you will do well and good. Otherwise, you're dead." They said, "Well, you do with us what you want, but you must know, Oh king, that our trust is in the one and only God, and we kneel only to him."

Nebuchadnezzar promptly throws them into a fiery furnace; but they come out the next day, miraculously untouched. Not only are they unhurt, their hair is not singed. They don't smell of smoke, and their clothes are not burned. This is some kind of God that they serve!

The stories go on and on. One king dies and another rises. Daniel continues his role in court. He continues to prophesy, to see visions and to interpret visions. This king dies, and another one comes on. Finally, Daniel, himself, ends up in a lions' den. Like the three men in the fiery furnace, Daniel comes out unhurt.

So much for a run through of the stories, but right into the middle of these stories, put out of place in the book, there is a flashback to chapter 7. Suddenly we have apocalyptic scripture. In the first year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar's son, this vision comes to Daniel. He has had trouble before; he has trouble ahead; he is in the midst of trouble. But in the midst of his trouble, Daniel does not have nightmares; he has visions.

These are not beatific visions. They are ones that would scare an ordinary person half to death; except Daniel knows how to read the visions. He dreams of beasts and monsters. Four beasts, which equate to the four kingdoms: a winged lion for Babylonia; a bear for the Medes; a four-headed winged leopard for the Persians; a dragon for the Greeks. This last beast, the dragon, is the most fearsome of all. It has ten horns, which stand for the ten rulers who have followed Alexander the Great. Then there is a little horn, which displaces three other horns, which stands for Antiochus Epiphanes, who is wreaking havoc on faithful Jews in 165 B.C.E.

The story, which is set 420 years earlier, is suddenly contemporary. What the book is saying is that the man you are terrified of is not the beast. He is not even one of the big horns. He's just a little horn tooting and tinkling, and you should know, faithful ones, that the beast is dead. We hear the little tinkling in the background as the prophecy is uttered.

God is on his throne. It is judgment day.

There are a hundred million people in front of him. The death sentence is pronounced over the government of oppression. A son of man, an angelic figure, never named in this passage, appears. The "church" is urged to live by faith, not by sight, in hard times. Notice who it is that is bringing the message. A boy.

We have been active here at Salem, trying to clarify our vision for the congregation for the next decade. We have been trying to see into the dark. You know, I am not aware of one single girl or boy who has been asked for her or his vision, or one who has volunteered it. Across the years of my ministry, when I talked to youngsters about heroes and heroines of the faith, their age and younger, they look at me blankly. But I would like to remind us that all of our biblical heroes and heroines are not hoary with age. Some of them are quite young. Some of these fresh young ones God uses to see and to articulate for the Church a vision, if the Church will open its eyes and ears.

So there is this vision articulated by Daniel. We might listen to him and decide for ourselves

that in hard times, or dark times, not to panic and rush into frantic activity or to freeze into inactivity, because we don't know what the future holds. We don't know what the future will be like or when the end is coming. Jesus says nobody knows. It is not our job to simply be nonchalant and let whatever happens happen, as if we had all the time in the world.

Jesus says watch, be vigilant, because you do not know when the end will come. But we remember that the vision of the future comes through unlikely sources, and that the vision is not first or finally our own, but God's vision for us. In Joel, another book of the Bible and another piece of apocalyptic literature, it stands written: "Your sons and daughters shall prophesy. Old men shall dream dreams, but your young men shall see visions."

He was a very religious man. He was on the road, but not on a mission of mercy, rather of persecution. On horseback outside Damascus, Syria a blinding light put his lights out. His name was Paul. For three days he lived in

darkness, and learned to see in darkness better than ever he had been able to see in the light. Paul developed night vision. When his vision was restored, he saw everything through new eyes. The vision was not his own, but Christ's vision for him.

Years and years later, standing in court, on trial for his life, before a new king who did not know him and whom he did not know, Paul made his defense, saying, "Wherefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." With Paul, I wish us to be obedient to the truth as God gives us light to see the truth. For in the darkness, as we peer into our future, there is one like a son of man, who stands with us, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Who will say that, if not the Church? In this present darkness there is One who stands with us! The Church has been called to be the town crier, not the town cricket. Let us not chirp our way into the future, alternately irritating and soothing. Let us stand in the light and for the light, against the dark powers, remembering who it is that stands with us.

