

Game of Thrones
Reign of Christ Sunday
November 22, 2015
Carol Bechtel

Text: Daniel 7:1-15
Psalm 72
Revelation 1:4b-8
John 18:33-37

If you listen to National Public Radio, you've certainly heard Diane Rhem's weekly news round-ups. Once, while reflecting with her panelists on the events of a particularly grim week, I heard her sigh and say, "Oh, our poor world."

"Our poor world," indeed. It's been that kind of week, hasn't it? And so we come to Scripture, longing for comfort, looking for courage. At the very least, we hope these ancient words can help us express what we're feeling. Maybe something from Jeremiah's laments:

O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears....
Death has come up into our windows, it has entered our palaces,
To cut off the children from the streets
and the young men from the squares.... (Jer. 9:1a, 21)

At least Jeremiah seems to *understand*. But we don't get Jeremiah, do we? Much less Psalm 23 or John 3:16. We get Daniel—and Daniel's close New Testament cousin, Revelation. Cold comfort there! So we scurry to the Gospel lesson, only to find Pilate interrogating an apparently defeated Jesus, asking, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

I tell my students that they are only allowed one sermon per year that begins by complaining about the lectionary. At first, I thought this might be mine! But in fact, I'm NOT going to complain about the lectionary. (I'll save my one "get out of jail free" card for some other time....) No, I'm not going to complain, but I'm going to suggest that the Holy Spirit has a way of knowing exactly what we need—whether we know we need it or not.

Take Daniel—a figure who, along with Noah and Job—is "known for belief in the face of danger, wisdom in the face of foolishness" (Oxford Annotated NRSV). I don't know about you, but I could use some of what he's got: belief in the face of danger, wisdom in the face of foolishness.

It's too bad that the mainline churches have largely abandoned Daniel—having little appetite for using the Bible's apocalyptic literature like a Ouija board. We've *chosen* to get “left behind,” as it were, and I can't say I'm sorry. But I *am* sorry if it means we leave Daniel behind—because I'd hate for us to miss that book's peculiar comfort.

Right about now you're probably thinking, “Gee—I guess I must have missed the comforting part in that bizarre passage about lions and leopards and bears (Oh, my!). And what about the fourth beast—the one with the iron teeth and the ten—no 11—horns?”

OK, so it may not be very good bedtime reading. But let's leave the question of comfort for a minute. We'll come back to it. It may be easier to “catch the comfort” if we try to figure out who or what these “beasts” are.

Now relax. I'm not going to identify the beasts with anyone you know. Though I have to say—it IS tempting. Admit it. Who were YOU thinking about when I read the part about the little horn with a mouth that speaks arrogantly? (Hmm????) You can see why people rush to recognize contemporary characters in these ancient words, can't you?! But I think it's less that the book of Daniel is predicting particular *characters* as it is that certain human *characteristics* never seem to go out of style. Like arrogance, narcissism, and megalomania—to name just a few.

Well, if not Donald Trump, then who? (Oh that's right, I wasn't going to mention him by name....) A professor of mine was fond of looking at passages like these and muttering, “It must have meant something to somebody sometime....” Yes, but what? And why did they have to couch it in such bizarre and terrifying imagery?

First, the “why.” Speaking plainly in Daniel's day could get you killed. Daniel lived in a time of terrible persecution. You couldn't go around writing just anything in your blog. You had to disguise what you said—especially if you were going to criticize the powers that be. Scholars agree that the most likely candidates for Daniel's beasts were the four predatory world powers of his day: Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece. The prophet Habakkuk's description of Babylon will serve to describe them all:

...a fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth
of the earth to seize dwellings not their own. Dread and fearsome are they;
their justice and dignity proceed from themselves. They all come for
violence, with faces pressing forward; they gather captives like sand.
Then they sweep by like the wind; they transgress and become guilty;
their own might is their god! (Hab. 1: 6, 7, 9, & 11).

Daniel's readers would not have had trouble recognizing the four beasts. But what about that arrogant little horn? That's easy, too. Meet Antiochus Epiphanes—remembered for the creativity

of his atrocities—one of which was sacrificing a pig in the Jerusalem Temple. But then, what would you expect of a ruler who called himself “Epiphanies”—god manifest?

A word to the wise: if you see the word “Epiphanies” next to a name on a ballot, vote for someone else—anyone else!

So, where’s the comfort. Let’s think about that. What would it take to comfort YOU if your nation had been conquered and your sanctuary defiled? What would it take to comfort YOU if you’d seen your family slaughtered? If you were being hauled off into exile? If all God’s promises seem to have been broken?

Did you notice what else Daniel wrote in his blog? It’s not *all* scary beasts and annoying little horns. Just when we’re wondering what this world is coming to, just when we’re asking “Who’s in charge here?”— Daniel points to something that’s going on in heaven. The beasts and the little horn can’t see it yet; it’s “way over their heads,” so to speak. But it’s happening all the same. An “Ancient One” is on the throne and the Ancient One is getting ready to pass judgment on these “beasts behaving badly.” And then Daniel sees “one like a human being” that the Ancient One appoints to rule in the beasts’ place. This one, who is “coming with the clouds of heaven,” will have “an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship shall never be destroyed.”

“Who’s in charge here?” we ask. Daniel answers: God is—God and God’s anointed. And whether the beasts and the little horns of this world know it or not, God is on the throne.

I am a fan of the HBO series, *Game of Thrones*. I’m a little embarrassed to admit it, but there it is. It’s my guilty pleasure. My daughter recommended it to me, though I remember she did warn me, “Don’t get too attached to anybody, Mom.”

“Don’t get too attached to anybody.” That’s good advice, isn’t it, regarding ALL human rulers. Sometimes we wish we could keep the good ones a little longer, don’t we? And the wicked ones—well, we can’t see the back of them soon enough.

But it’s a mixed bag. Even the best of the Old Testament’s kings are fraught with flaws—and to the Bible’s credit, we can still read all about them. Scripture can’t be accused of a cover-up, even where King David is concerned. Even David, arguably the best of the bunch, has “issues.”

But maybe that’s why the Bible’s “job description” for earthly rulers begins to sound increasingly “over the top” as the Old Testament moves toward the New. Psalm 72—which we sang just a few moments ago—is a prime example of this. It’s framed as a prayer that David prays for his son Solomon. It starts out ambitious, but not unreasonable:

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.
 May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.
 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people...for he delivers the
 needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.
 He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.
 From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
 And precious is their blood in his sight (Ps. 72: 1, 2, 12-14).

What a great prayer! I always enjoy praying it when it comes up in the daily lectionary—as it does every year—the day after election day. But I'm never quite sure what to think when I get to lines like these:

May he live while the sun endures and as long as the moon,
 throughout all generations. (So much for term limits!)
 May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun!
 May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.

OK—so maybe it's no more than poetic hyperbole. But I don't think so. I wonder it's the result of perpetual disappointment over humanity's botched attempts to rule wisely and well. I wonder if it's the Holy Spirit's way of nudging our expectations toward Jesus Christ—the anointed one of God—and the only one who has a prayer of living up to the Bible's increasingly extravagant job description for human rulers. Finally, Jesus Christ is only one who can not only comfort “our poor world” in the midst of its suffering, but do something to end that suffering once and for all.

“Look!” the book of Revelation says, “He is coming with the clouds.” Grace and peace” are ours “from him who is and who was and who is to come.” *He* is on the throne—“Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev. 1:7a, 4-5). Game of thrones—over. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel *shall come* to thee, O Israel!

And so we pray—in the midst of our pain and on behalf of our poor world:

O come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind.
 Bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease.
 Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit—Amen.