

First Presbyterian Church
Daniel 12, “The Last Days at Last”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/19/2017

Welcome to the final instalment of our series on Daniel entitled,
“Living with Beastly Empires.”

The book of Daniel has been a favorite for both Jews and Christians
in almost any time and place you want to choose.

There are two discernable reasons for this:

- 1) There’s undeniably wonderful storytelling here.
- 2) The big themes address the empires that have historically
been the bully for both Jews and Christians,
causing them to wonder what God is doing.

We, however, do not live in a setting where Christians are the persecuted minority.
Rather Christians have a built-in societal advantage in the United States,
even if it’s not as pronounced as it has been in years past.

So as we have read Daniel, we’ve had to make some conscious decisions
not to always identify our own people with Daniel and his compatriots,
but to consider the possibility that we are actually living within
one of these mighty global empires that Daniel wrestles with,
and at times describes as bizarre, beastly, dehumanizing
creatures.

Over the course of the Bible, we find empires to be characterized in several ways:

- Egypt is an abuser and oppressor.
- Assyria is arrogant and seeks total independence.
- Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar is idolatrous and self-absorbed, but shows in
the end that it is possible for such a king to be reoriented toward the God of
Israel.
- But the Babylon of Belshazzar rejects such a movement and is further
hardened.
- Persia emerges as a positive partner for Yahweh, allowing Israel home from
exile.

But in the last days, all of this changes.

Listen to the vision of God's ultimate plan Isaiah in chapter 19:

“On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.’”

Did you hear that? Israel's arch enemies

considered on equal terms with God's chosen people.

Perhaps we have the beginning of a viewpoint

expressed in John 3:16 – “For God so loved...the world.”

Of course, Isaiah's vision was not of a world that has already come to pass,
but rather of a future one – a vision that will take hold in “the last days.”

And those are the days we come to in the final chapters of Daniel.

When you look out toward the horizon of the future, what do you see? [PAUSE]

I would suspect that in some circles,

the book of Daniel is highlighted precisely because of

its forward-looking emphasis;

the pull of history toward a future that God is bringing about;

the promise of both judgment and justice in the last days.

But I would also suspect that in other circles,

the book of Daniel is avoided for precisely the same reasons.

Main line protestant churches like our own

tend toward this second camp.

If I'm honest, I don't like talking about the last days and judgment much. You?

I wonder why not?

Is it that I secretly suspect it won't happen?

Is it that my soul is tired of waiting? Weary of hoping?

Is it that I've allowed myself to be captured by a 21st Century world view
that scoffs at the idea of God renewing everything at the end of time?
Is it because I identify with many of the things that will be judged?

Many decades ago, C.S. Lewis said,
“the doctrine of the Second Coming
is deeply uncongenial to modern thought.”

Not so, however, for the faithful Jews of Daniel's day and first century Christians.
They were alive with the expectation that God could act at any moment.
Not just because things were bad,
but because they understood that the biblical story
is incomplete without the Messiah's arrival.

Walter Brueggemann writes in his *Theology of the Old Testament*,
“In every season of its life, Israel lived with the uttered promise of Yahweh
in its ears. This promise, which defies every logic but which could not be
devised by those who reiterated the oath, assures Israel that **its life, and
eventually all of the historical process, is not a cold, hard enactment of
power and brutality. It is, rather, an arena in which a powerful
intention for well-being is resolutely at work.**” (p. 172)

A powerful intention for well-being. This is the hope that we have
as people of the book, even after thousands of years. God's promises remain.

Brueggemann continues:

“All of these promises of Yahweh, of every sort, on every subject, intend
that Israel should not surrender its life or its destiny to the present
circumstance, especially when that present circumstance is deathly and
appears insurmountable.” (p. 173)

What do you see when you look toward the horizon of history?

When God's people read Daniel and look out at the horizon of the future,
they see, among many things, the Messiah coming.

This longing for the future gave rise to the concept in the Hebrew imagination that we call the last days.

Daniel Chapter 11 sets us up for this anticipation.

It comes on the lips of the “one like a son of man”
that we first encountered in chapter 7.

The account this “one like a man” shares is, in its own way, just as bewildering as the earlier visions of beasts with many heads and wings and eyes and horns.

With very little space for explanation,
the story in chapter 11 describes an ongoing and highly detailed struggle
between the King of the North and the King of the South,
and why and where and how these things are to be understood
is very much beyond me.

But it’s not beyond ancient historians.

In fact, quite unlike the earlier visions we’ve encountered,
these details all line up with extraordinary accuracy
to events that happened in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt
in the years leading up to the rule
of Antiochus Epiphanes the 4th
and the Maccabean Revolt that took place.

The events are so accurate, and so unlike other examples of Biblical prophecy,
that it’s unclear if they were originally understood as prophecy themselves.

And yet, if it is merely a thinly guised historical account, then we would expect the
numbers we find in the book to match up precisely
with specific historical dates.

I went into some of this last week in Daniel 9 and the 70 weeks of years,
but the phenomenon continues in Daniel 12 with references to 1,290 days
and 1,335 days after the abomination is set up.

As I read it, chapter 11 uses the author's contemporary political unrest
as a kind of springboard to look toward the future.

(This fits with the New Testament authors who refer to Daniel.
They certainly see it as looking toward the future.)

So I think Daniel 11 is saying,

“Look – this is the way things seem to work right now.

I get it. I know how the King of the North

and the King of the South keep fighting and tossing you around.

That's how it is sometimes!

But this is not the way things will be in the future! God has more planned for you.”

And that leads us to Daniel 12.

And Daniel 12 says that when these kings have finished bashing each other around,
the people of God—everyone who is written in the book of life—
will be delivered.

But it will go beyond any deliverance that has ever happened before:

This will be a deliverance from death itself.

In 12:2 we find one of the only references

to resurrection and eternal life in the entire Old Testament.

“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life,
others to shame and everlasting contempt.”

Daniel is then told to seal up the words of the scroll until the time of the end,
which is to say that things will be fully revealed at a later time.

SO where do we end up with all of this?

Well, look, I get it.

We don't like to talk about God interacting with the nations in history,
and we don't like to talk about the last days.

And yet these are the very things that enable our faith
to actually matter in the world.

Brueggemann says that if we privatize faith and exclude it from these realms,
then we are led to Joseph Stalin's cynical question,

“How many divisions has the Pope?”

That is, if the theological dimension drops out of international purview,
and with it any credible, critical moral dimension,
then the world becomes one in which might makes right.

To some extent, that is what has happened among us,
because God-talk in this arena of life strikes
any modern person as mindless supernaturalism.”

So if it doesn't help to simply write off the last-days as meaningless gobbledygook,
and if it doesn't help to become overly fixated on them
and try to create a roadmap to the future,
then what are we supposed to do?

We can stand as residents and citizens of the United States and look at our world
with the kind of theological imagination that Daniel had.

We can see the patterns and ways of interacting that empires have had
in the past, and we can understand how God responds.

We can know that the political orders we stand within will not last,
but that God's plan and purpose will.

We can be people who identify more with the Kingdom of God that has
begun in Jesus Christ, than with the kingdoms of this world.