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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28)
November 14, 2021

Lectionary Year B: Daniel 12:1-3; Mark 13:1-8

The book of Daniel belongs to a genre known by biblical scholars as *apocalyptic literature*. The word *apocalyptic* is, of course, related to the word *apocalypse*, which refers to the end of time. The most familiar piece of apocalyptic literature in the Bible is the book of Revelation, which has been the subject of much decoding over the course of history, most notably to interpret current events in light of the portents and visions found therein.

Or, put more simply, people turn to Revelation when bad things happen and say, "See, everything's happening right now as Revelation predicted!"

Thus, it is safe to say that apocalyptic literature is the most misunderstood and goofily interpreted literature in the entire Bible. Many a mainline Protestant clergyperson has had to hold his or her breath whenever a Bible study series from a less-than-scholarly source rolls into town focusing on one or more of the Bible's apocalyptic books. These Bible studies have introduced unsuspecting mainline Christians to some rather sketchy theologies including dispensationalism, millennialism, and a whole bunch of other "-isms" that would take hours to unpack from the pulpit.

Often, there may be an extremist political ideology thrown in with the "Bible study," as well!

And that leads us to the book of Daniel, which, like any piece of apocalyptic literature, should come with a label that says, “Warning: To be interpreted only by trained technicians in a controlled environment. Failure to follow accordingly will result in zealotry, paranoia, and loss of faith in either God, humanity, or both.”

As our liturgical year draws to a close, our readings push us deliberately toward the end times, where our Lord’s final reign in the Kingdom of God is real for all. This will be the time in which we will feast in paradise with Jesus and be reunited with all the saints who went before us. But there is prophesy of great calamity before the feast begins; we need only listen once again to Jesus’ own words from our Gospel text: “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs” (Mark 13:8).

Being a bit of an idealist myself, I have long dreamt of a less violent, more peaceful world, but maybe that’s expecting too much from humanity. I wonder *who* is *really* inclined to put down weapons instead of pick them up. One side fights for *good*, another side fights for *evil*, but *both* are still fighting. Is this, then, the cycle that must repeat itself again and again until *finally* the life of the world to come is ushered in?

If that’s the case, there won’t be too many people left to save!

But again, it is not our job to decode Scripture as a means of prophesying history’s final chapter. Jesus reminds us that we cannot know the day or the hour (Mark 13:32, Matthew

24:36). The only thing we can do is proceed in faith, trusting that the God who is faithful to us will watch over us, provided we remain watchful for him.

It's a bit upsetting to note how much the news influences people negatively; whether it's the Covid-19 pandemic or a terrorist attack or a Supreme Court ruling, there always seems to be folks moving the Christian doomsday clock a few minutes closer to midnight, which will do little to serve the greater good of Christianity...and much to serve the forces of zealotry and paranoia. We need to remember that there are neither easy explanations nor easy answers for complicated scientific and geopolitical issues. Moreover, this is *not* the time to prophesy the end of the world; rather, we seek to do more constructive things, like finding ways to *prevent* pandemics, acts of terrorism, or injustices in the name of justice from happening. Our leaders in the government, military, and judiciary need our prayers in accomplishing this goal...

As for our friend Daniel, we look to him for a vision of what is to come – not in the immediate future, but *sometime*, and not to the exact jot and tittle as written, but *in some fashion*. Let us hope that – even amid the worst of disease, the most violent acts of terrorism, the most brutal acts of war, and the greatest of injustices – there may always remain a vision of a just and peaceful world...if not in this age, in the next. The promise remains as true today as it was for Daniel, as we read, “But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book” (Daniel 12:1c).

Indeed, our Lord has written *our* names in the book, as we have been joined to him in the covenant of Holy Baptism. But as Daniel's visions preceded the Christian faith, we glance

at his words with all the more awe and wonder; with the Jewish religion (ancient or modern) having little or no concept of an afterlife, we find a door opening in a most unlikely place. May we proceed through that door and on to eternal life with our Lord!

And as apocalyptic literature will show us, there is *always* a vision of something better *especially* when all the indicators point to things worse. In Daniel's case, persecution and unjust rule are met with God's final victory and the salvation of God's people. Now fast-forward to today. Who wouldn't want to hear of something better to come? Prophets, preachers, and evangelists proclaim *hope*, and proclaim it even more fervently in the toughest of times. This hope is found in the covenant of the Old Testament and in good news of Jesus Christ.

Your delegates from St. Anne's and I heard about living out our baptismal covenant at yesterday's Diocesan Convention, and, with this covenant in mind, I'd like us to think about the last two questions to the persons being baptized (or their sponsors): "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" and "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" Amid the various technical challenges of holding a "hybrid" in-person/online convention, it was clear to me that, despite the circumstances, our call to serve Christ and to strive for justice and peace shines through all the despair, gloom, and uncertainty that a big chunk of the last two years has thrown at us. Through this call, we offer hope when everything seems hopeless, and through this hope, God says, "I will be with you always."

We really don't need much more than that.

Last Thursday's commemoration of Veterans Day got me thinking about my Grandpa Carl, who was an ambulance driver in World War I; most of his job basically amounted to recovering casualties from the battlefield, many of whom were injured and/or maimed beyond recognition. I discovered that his time in France prior to the signing of the Armistice was only about three months, yet three months of such horror would be sufficient to traumatize virtually anyone. But, as the old saying goes – “There are no atheists in foxholes” – we know that the minimum requirement of hope, hope that we're called to proclaim, is sufficient amid even the most unthinkable horrors. God won't “fix” those situations, but God will endure with us. God says, “I will be with you always.”

The concluding verse of our reading from Daniel leaves us with the following thought:

“Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (12:3). This is, perhaps, better *poetry* than *doctrine*, but when we think of the witness of those who have gone before – the apostles, evangelists, martyrs, defenders of the faith, and indeed Christ himself – we know that the light of their wisdom is still shining, and that *no one* can take it away. Amid disease, terrorism, war, calamity, natural disaster, and environmental degradation, we have that which will allow us to both endure and find a better way.

And lest you find yourself disintegrating into zealotry and paranoia, and lest you lose your faith in either God, humanity, or both, look to the Bible's apocalyptic passages as visions of persons living in messed-up times...which is what they are. They are *not* pieces of a puzzle meant for people in 2021 to put together to lay out Earth's final days. Were we to interpret

them *that* way, we would undo the hope and assurance that our Lord intended for them to give us, *especially* in messed-up times!

Finally, when times of anguish have us grasping for answers, let us remember that there has *never* been a “fix-it” God who will make everything better on demand. In fact, we’re reminded both in Daniel and Mark that they’re inevitable. But we will *always* have a faithful God who will both *suffer with us* and *give us hope*. And yes, our deliverance from the sufferings of life on earth into the joy and peace of eternal life is even more sure than the most horrendous and tragic fate that this world could dish out.

Thus, as witnesses to the good news, may we *always*, in keeping with our baptismal covenant, share the vision of a world that is peaceful and just. Even if there will be times of anguish, there isn’t a child of God *anywhere* who deserves to suffer on this planet indefinitely.

Amen.