

Christ the King
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Sunday, November 22, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Psalm 93;
Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, we've got words from the Old Testament book of Daniel as our first lesson. I don't believe I have ever preached on these words. It's no wonder – Daniel's visions reported in this chapter, chapter 7, are thickly laden with images, and I never knew what to do with them.

Now we could ignore chapter 7. We could leave it for some Bible thumping revivalist preacher to abuse those images by linking them point for point to some current figure or some current event around us. Or we could look at Daniel's book. We could allow its words to reveal a truth that says something to us in our day, for our journey of faith.

Now the words that were actually designated for today, that you heard read, are not the problematic words. There's this image first of all, of a timeless God on the throne – the "Ancient One" is the way it reads in Daniel. And we also heard of the thousands upon thousands surrounding the Ancient One serving that Ancient One in the heavenly court. And those of us who come from a Judeo-Christian perspective are naturally going to think of our own Almighty and Everlasting God. That's simple.

And then a couple of verses later what we heard in Daniel's vision, is this "someone" who appeared, who was like a human being, and who was handed by the Ancient One kingship, a dominion that will last forever. And those of us who are Christians will naturally think, "Wow! Maybe Daniel wasn't thinking about Jesus Christ, but we certainly would!" The one like a human. Fully human. Fully God. Handed dominion that is eternal and the One who, on this day particularly, we praise as our King.

Well! Okay! I just preached on Daniel. That wasn't so bad, was it?

Except there were verses omitted. And there are all the verses that lead up to the verse that began our first lesson (chapter 7) – they're the problem! They're the stuff that's hard to preach about. What's missing from the verses that you heard is Daniel's vision of violent chaotic forces arising in the world. These forces are described by Daniel as "beasts;" beasts that are capable of and intent on devouring human beings. Daniel's descriptions are amazing and horrifying; at one point he says the fourth beast is "terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong." And then he describes how there are ten horns on this fourth beast, and then suddenly another horn erupts on the beast and out of that horn issues arrogant words.

This is the stuff that nightmares are made of, and probably why I never preached on it! But if you manage to get through the first part of chapter 7 and you get to the verses we began with today about the Ancient One on the throne, and then . . . don't stop and skip over verses 11 and 12, the omitted verses, you need to hear those, too, before you jump to the one who was handed

dominion. I'm going to read for you verses 11 and 12: "I watched then because of the noise of the arrogant words that the horn was speaking. As I watched, the beast was put to death, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time." So you see, the beasts are still violent and they're still frightening; they're still present in the humans' world, but they do not have dominion, their dominion is gone; that's why it's important to hear those two verses.

And then we go to verse 13, which we did hear, where we learn about the one who was like a human being, who was handed dominion that will last. So apparently, there is chaos in the world, but it will not hold sway, and it will not overwhelm, and it will not last.

And *that's* the truth revealed in this Old Testament lesson, a truth that says something to us in our day, on our journey of faith. Because you know, we do live in the midst of chaos sometimes. And I'm not talking about the big, huge, global chaotic events of war and economic spiraling downward and natural disaster, though you and I, with every reading of the morning paper, have our fill of those things.

I'm talking about the chaos that manages to erupt somehow in the lives of individuals, and those forces are oft-times terrifying and can make us feel powerless and alone; they're the kind of chaos that threatens to make us lose hope and heart. There's chaos out there, alright.

A member of our congregation told me a story recently; she asked that her real name not be used, so I have chosen to call her Celeste. Celeste works with children and adolescents who need to be placed outside their homes. Very often, these children have behavioral problems, significant behavioral problems, or mental health issues. A lot of the time they have already been in residential treatment centers or group homes; sometimes they have actually been hospitalized for their mental illness, and Celeste works with them and helps them maneuver through the foster care system.

Now because some of these children's problems are so deeply rooted, and because sometimes there is so much dysfunction existing in their real homes, it's not always possible for them to return home. Yet foster parents may find themselves overwhelmed and unable to provide the level of care that these kids need. So where are these children to go? And who's going to help them? What kind of help can they have? Celeste has to figure it out. It's a stressful job for her; there's a lot of chaos, and some days it takes its toll on her.

One boy, a ten year old, was part of her case load. She'd been working with him for about a year and a half. It was clear he really wasn't ready to go back home, but his foster care parents had said they could no longer take care of him. So Celeste and her staff were trying to figure out what to do; they were certain that if they sent him back to a group home or a residential treatment center, it would not be the right place for him and he would eventually end up hospitalized again. Yet they had misgivings about his own home; it wasn't as if his birth mother didn't have troubles of her own. Celeste had earned enough trust to visit this mother in her home and, as Celeste puts it, "I have seen firsthand the squalor and the infestation," so she was helping that mother access social services, helping her access mental health services. But the idea of

sending this boy back home preyed on her mind; she didn't know what was the right thing to do, and she began to wonder if maybe she was getting too old for this job, if maybe she was not cut out for this vocation any more.

That's one member of Trinity and the chaos that arises in her life. Now, multiply that by the number of members we have on our roll, and I think that we'll find that chapter 7 in Daniel is not as far-fetched as it seems at first.

But to omit verses 11 and 12. Or to ignore completely this Old Testament *crisis* literature (that's what some theologians call it; I think that's a really good name for it) *crisis literature* – to ignore that is to be deaf to the good news that can be found in it. Chaos is present with us, but it does not have dominion; its dominion has been taken away. Dominion belongs to the rightful one – the one who is “like a human being,” the one whose “kingship shall never be destroyed.” And on this day, we declared that Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, is the rightful claimant to the throne. Dominion belongs to him and he shall reign forever and ever.

Not that Pontius Pilate in our gospel lesson had any vague notions along that line. The truth of God's kingdom – his eternal saving power and purpose for all creation – stood right there in front of Pilate, and Pilate couldn't see it. Or didn't want to see it. He could only see the chaos arising around him and his position in the Roman Empire. The crowds were agitated and demanding crucifixion; anyone with any authority, including Pilate, was passing the buck regarding Jesus' fate; Pilate himself attempted vainly to appease all parties – it was one holy mess. That chaos held dominion in Pilate's world view. (Maybe Pilate felt powerless and alone – did you ever think of that?) If only Pilate could have seen in Jesus a glimpse of God's kingdom! If only Pilate had explored a bit with Jesus about what a non-earthly kingdom might be. But no, Pilate can only think of political kingdoms, geographical kingdoms, and his own precarious position betwixt angry crowds and power-hungry superiors.

Where can you and I go to glimpse God's kingdom? To allow our world view to be permeated with and shaped by Christ's rule? Certainly in our worship together, in our sharing word and meal, we glimpse Christ's kingship. But sometimes it actually takes our entering the chaos, all the while trusting Christ is our head, trusting dominion belongs to Him.

Our second lesson today, which contains the opening verses from the book of Revelation, reminds us that Jesus Christ has “made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father.” You see, having been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you and I now participate in his kingdom and in his rule, not simply watch it from the sidelines. It seems to me if we're his kingdom here on earth, priests in the King's service, then glimpses of his rule *will* be visible, and *should* be visible, in our lives no matter where into the chaos our journey takes us some days. So on Christ the King Sunday, we do not simply acknowledge Christ as king, we follow him into this chaotic world where he has gone before us, and there his presence and dominion can be glimpsed – sometimes only in small ways, but glimpsed nevertheless.

Celeste and her staff made the decision to return that ten year old boy to his home, and she lost much sleep worrying over this. The morning of the day he was to be returned to his birth mother, he was in Celeste's office playing with a set of wooden trains she keeps there for such

occasions. Celeste was handling paperwork at her desk while he played when she suddenly realized that the tune he was humming was familiar to her; it was the old Sunday school song, “Deep and wide, deep and wide, there’s a fountain flowing deep and wide...” Celeste said to him, “I know that song, too!” and they sang the words together. How did he know that song?

She discovered that when the young boy was on weekend home visits, his mother would take him and his two brothers and board the “church bus” that passed through their neighborhood. That bus would drive them to a local church for worship and Sunday school. Now, did he understand that the “fountain flowing deep and wide” was none other than the grace and love of God for him and his family? Maybe. Maybe not. But surely the “church bus” gave him the opportunity to glimpse the kingdom and the king. His own mother, dysfunctional as she was, saw to it that he had this glimpse. And Celeste herself, in giving to this boy, in her caring for and worrying over this boy, also was a glimpse of the kingdom for him, a priest in the king’s service at work for him. Do you suppose that all these small things could possibly change the world view of a little boy?

Celeste tells me that in her heart she feels he will be okay. She knows that the faith nurtured in that little child can go far to sustain him. And ironically, Celeste’s glimpse of the kingdom in her musical encounter with the young boy that morning sustains her. I trust she knows she is not powerless or alone in the world. I trust she knows Christ her king does not wish her to lose hope or heart, even when chaos arises. I trust she knows his fountain of love flows deep and wide for her, and for all God’s children. And we declare today that love will flow deep and wide forever.

Amen.