

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
November 6, 2022

## **A Political Vision**

Daniel 7:1-18

About a month ago, an article in *The Washington Post* described how Democratic candidates in the upcoming midterm election have shifted the focus of their message. Instead of stressing their accomplishments and focusing on national unity, they're placing more emphasis on the grave dangers the country faces if Republicans take power. This is nothing new, and it's certainly not just a trend among Democratic candidates. Republicans vying for office also spend a lot of their time warning about the disaster and chaos that await us if Democrats win. According to the article, all this apocalyptic rhetoric "has created a midterm arena marked by dueling dystopias, as the parties vie to outdo each other in describing the hell scape that lies ahead if the other side wins."<sup>1</sup>

By Tuesday night, maybe some of this apocalyptic rhetoric will have died down, as votes will have been cast and news outlets will begin reporting the results. With many races too close to call, disagreements about who won and who lost will probably continue into the days and weeks ahead. We're now in an environment where we not only disagree fiercely on matters of policy but on the actual outcome at the ballot box.

One of the interesting features about our election process is how many of these ballots are actually cast at houses of worship. Your own polling place may be a town hall, a neighborhood center, a school gymnasium, or a fire department. But it may also be a church. According to one Christian magazine, "There are more than 60,000 polling places in America, and roughly one out of every five is located in a church."<sup>2</sup> Though our society has steady controversies and debates about the relationship between religious communities and the state, churches are still looked to as safe and trusted spaces where neighbors and members of the community can gather to participate in the political process. It was also good to see that Baptists are one of the top religious traditions that host polling places, along with Catholic, Wesleyan, and Lutheran congregations.

There were no ballot boxes in Babylon. Belshazzar didn't come into power by the will of the people but by the will of his father Nabonidus, who had entrusted the military and the kingship to him. About three decades earlier, Belshazzar's grandfather, King Nebuchadnezzar, had conquered Judah and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. Among the Jewish people carried captive to Babylon was a young man named Daniel, who trained for the king's service and rose to occupy leading posts in the government. Daniel also gained a reputation as an interpreter visions or dreams, first those of others, and then his own.

In today's text, Daniel has one of his visions. He takes what he sees in this night dream and writes it down. At first glance, it looks and sounds like the kind of material you might encounter in a graphic novel or a piece of science fiction writing. Today's experts in computer generated imagery would have a field day with Daniel's vision. Four great beasts rise from the churning sea. One is a lion with wings. Another is a bear with tusks. Another is a leopard with four heads. The fourth one is a monster with ten horns and iron teeth. At the end, a boastful and mouthy eleventh horn erupts. The whole dream is filled with

violence, terror, and destruction. It's one of those scenes in the Bible that deserves at least a PG-13 rating. No wonder Daniel says he "was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me" (v. 15).

Daniel is right. All these sights and sounds are meant to be troubling and disturbing. But not just to Daniel. They're most of all meant to be troubling and disturbing to the powers that be. In this case, the kingdoms represented by the four beasts: Babylon, Media, Persia, and the Greek empire of Alexander the Great. In Daniel's day, these were the superpowers. They had the largest economies and the biggest armies. They occupied the most territory and dominated international affairs. They projected the most power and exerted the greatest cultural influence. These were the kingdoms that set the agenda and determined the daily reality of millions.

But according to Daniel, their might is not as great as they think and their government not as enduring as they imagine. They've risen to power through force and coercion. Their empires have come at the expense of cultures and nations that have been trampled on, oppressed, and taken captive, including God's own called and covenant people. These kingdoms that promise peace and prosperity are actually voracious beasts, and Daniel's dreams expose them for who they are. That's why Daniel casts the vision using apocalyptic language. Apocalyptic speech uses symbol and metaphor, such as monsters rising from the sea, as a way of taking earthly political matters and putting them in a larger story where the reign of God, not the world's passing empires, has the last word. And from that apocalyptic vision, the marginalized and the mistreated draw hope, strength, and the power to resist.

Where the power to govern is at stake, you'll often hear apocalyptic language. This is certainly true in America, particularly during election season, when our politicians reach for apocalyptic rhetoric in order to shape our views and win our votes. Our country has a rich history of apocalypticism. A few years ago, one political scientist cited several examples. Many of the Puritans who came to America thinking they were escaping the wars of the last days in England, hoping that in this new land they could build the New Jerusalem promised in the book of Revelation. Or during the Civil War, President Lincoln summarizing the battle against slavery this way: "And now the cup of iniquity is full, and the vials of wrath will be poured out." Or the night before the 1912 Republican National Convention, when President Theodore Roosevelt energized the crowd by announcing, "We stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord." Or former President George W. Bush's characterization of 9/11 and the War on Terror using apocalyptic elements. Or former Vice President Al Gore contending that contemporary climate catastrophes are "like a nature hike through the book of Revelation."<sup>3</sup>

Daniel wasn't running for office, but he was certainly casting a verbal vote for the kingdom of God. And he did so using language and imagery that, though it may sound extreme, is an effective vehicle for telling the truth. And the truth, says Daniel, is that God reigns, no matter how much it may look like evil, death, and destruction have triumphed, inflicting suffering on the weak, the helpless, and the marginalized. As one commentator has put it, "The final point is that in the midst of this highly troubled and dangerous world, God is present, a God more powerful than all the beasts—a God who loves and nourishes rather than hates and devours. It is in this God we are given hope and meaning, life and salvation forever and ever."<sup>4</sup>

Remember that monsters aren't the last ones to arrive on the scene in Daniel's dream. After the beasts appear, Daniel says, "I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven" (v. 13a). Interpreters disagree about whether this figure is an angel, Israel, the Messiah, or someone else. But the key seems to be the

human form of this one who comes bringing deliverance. In the New Testament, this passage gets picked up and used to describe Jesus as the "Son of Man coming in clouds" at the end of time (Mark 13:26;14:62).

The end of time. Things don't get more apocalyptic than that. And we really are an apocalyptic people. We believe and confess that God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead and established him as Lord, ruler of all things, and is working to bring all things under his sovereignty. That apocalyptic act of God is the most important political fact in the world. It means that we live our lives under the authority of a ruler whose will is going to be accomplished on earth as it is in heaven. And as we await the coming of our Lord to complete his program of redeeming the world, we work in the present, in the here and now, in Christ's name, for such a future. That includes our participation in our nation's political processes, which includes casting our votes.

Our current political climate makes it easy to grow cynical, indifferent, and disengaged from the work of democracy. By now you may have tuned out the endless cycle of campaign commercials and tossed aside the candidate flyers that show up in your mailbox. Maybe you've decided that you're not even going to bother showing up at the polls. Considering the tone and content of our political discussions, it's no wonder that millions of people, including many professing Christians, are weary, disillusioned, and wondering if it's all worth it.

But remember that there are places throughout God's world where people have no voice in determining the future of their countries. Many of them live under self-appointed tyrants, political beasts, who forbid dissent and silence debate. Earlier this week, I heard one prominent figure remind us that at present, in Ukraine, people are dodging bombs and bullets in order to preserve some of the political rights and opportunities that we take for granted. True, no particular candidate is a messiah, no matter how much he or she promises to fix things and solve our problems. And viewed from the perspective of eternity, no single election can be labeled as the one that decides the fate and future of our country. But still, the freedom to vote shouldn't be taken for granted. Things will be different, to one degree or another, in one direction or another, because of who gets elected on Tuesday, and you can have a say in that.

A few years ago, two candidates for a Vermont state House seat concluded their debate by asking the moderator for a few extra minutes. Instead of making one last pitch for votes, they wanted to make a little music. Lucy Rogers, the Democrat, grabbed her cello, and Zac Mayo, the Republican, picked up his guitar. Together they started performing a song called "Society" by Eddie Vedder. Mayo told one reporter, "It strikes a chord, to say to the world that this is a better way."<sup>5</sup> It was powerful example of how to disagree without being disagreeable.

Maybe such small scenes of mutual respect can be a sign of hope for what's possible. After all, in our day and time we have our own beasts to contend with. They rise up out of a churning sea of political hostility. Some of these beasts have names like extremism, hatred, political violence, demonization of opponents, and conspiracy theories. Other beasts go by names like rage, anger, and disrespect. Others bear names like corruption, greed, and the lust for power. Note that these monsters are bipartisan. They devour and destroy on both sides of the political aisle. And their appetites work their way out beyond the halls of government and into the lives of ordinary citizens like you and me.

To combat these beasts, we need a vision, a kingdom vision. And it goes like this: "God reigns. Jesus Christ is Lord." That's our political vision. Now as to how each of us

interprets that vision and applies it to the specific issues of the day, including our preferred candidates, opinions within our congregation may vary. But there should be no disagreement about the responsibility that each of us has to go to the polls and engage with political power, both earthly authority and heavenly sovereignty. Doing so can be a way of bearing witness to Christ's Lordship, a way of loving God and loving others, so that his dream, his vision, for his world, becomes reality.

---

<sup>1</sup> Yasmine Abutaleb, "Apocalypse now: Democrats embrace a dark midterm message." *The Washington Post*. October 2, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/10/02/democrats-dark-apocalyptic-message-midterms/> (November 2, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> "Where Churches Serve Democracy." *Christianity Today* (October 2022) 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> Kate Chesley, "Stanford political scientist studies apocalyptic political rhetoric." *Stanford News*. December 29, 2017. <https://news.stanford.edu/2017/12/29/political-scientist-studies-apocalyptic-political-rhetoric/> (November 2, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Fred Gaiser, Commentary on Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18. *Working Preacher*. November 6, 2016. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/all-saints-day-2/commentary-on-daniel-71-3-15-18-2> (November 3, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Steve Hartman, "Political rivals stun voters with unexpected duet." *CBS News: The Uplift* (October 19, 2018).