

*Sermon for Proper 28, Year B
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In 539 B.C., the great city of Babylon fell to the advancing eastern army of Cyrus the Great, thus transforming the Babylonian Empire into the Persian Empire. In the regime change, many policies were reversed. One of these was the Babylonian policy of exiling ethnic groups from their homelands. Cyrus encouraged various groups to return, one of them being the Judeans or Jews. And so, in 538 B.C., he issued an edict that allowed Jews to return to Judea, and he ordered those who did so to rebuild the temple with money from the Persian treasury, and he released the sacred vessels of the temple that had been confiscated by the Babylonians.

But not all the Jews return to Judea. One who doesn't is the prophet Daniel, who has faithfully served the empire as a professional government administrator his entire life. He has survived the transition to Persian rulers and perhaps even influenced Cyrus to issue his edict allowing the return from exile. He is now over 80 years old and has remained faithful in the midst of a pagan land (even under the threat of death) for that entire time.

And now, in 536 B.C., just two years after the return edict of Cyrus, when things are looking up for the Jews, when the temple is going to be restored and Jerusalem repopulated, Daniel has the vision of which our reading is the last part. It seems that the future of God's people is not all sunshine and roses. There will be further persecution and trouble. There will be a great conflict between good and evil, those who belong to God and those who don't.

In the midst of that conflict, God will save his people. And we will all be sorted out. Some may seem to have prospered in their wickedness. But they will get the reward of their folly. Others may have suffered unjustly. But they will receive the reward of their faithfulness. God is just, and he will see to it that justice is done.

So here is the prophecy. When will it be fulfilled? Well, unlike most other prophets, Daniel seems to get some sort of answer to that question. The problem is that he gets several different answers that don't seem to make any sense. "A time, two times, and half a time". 1,290 days. 1,335 days. What is it?! As it turns out, none of these answers seem to be truly numerical. God isn't giving us dates and times here. It is a symbolic vision.

Here's the deal. Prophecy isn't primarily about predicting specific future events. Prophecy is primarily about God's nature and character, even when it speaks of the future. So it looks at the future in the light of who God is and paints a picture of the pattern that God is calling forth into being. Prophecy is like a stone being dropped into a pond. It produces a wave of ripples that will be reproduced all the way across the surface of history. Most prophecies about the future will have multiple partial fulfillments before they have a final and complete fulfillment. They show a pattern that will be repeated, because this is what happens when the living God collides with fallen human will under a particular sort of circumstances.

So 360 some years later, in 167 B.C., the Greek king of Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes, sacked the temple that the returned exiles had built. He set up an altar to Zeus in the holy place, and sacrificed swine, defiling the entire temple. And the people who reported all this in the book of Maccabees called that a "desolating sacrilege". You see it reminded them of the book of Daniel, and they thought, "This must be it. The worship of the Lord is about to be stamped out." Antiochus had made it illegal to obey the Law. Babies that were circumcised were put to death, along with their entire families. As was anyone found in possession of Hebrew scripture. This was the "shattering of the power of the holy people" that Daniel heard about in his vision, the great time of trouble from which Michael would deliver the faithful people of God.

But then Jesus is still predicting another "desolating sacrilege" two hundred years later. And the Romans flatten Jerusalem again in 70 A.D., desecrating the temple and behaving in some of the same ways that the Greek Antiochus had before them. All of these are fulfillments of the prophecy. But none of them completely put it to rest. There will always be more ripples to come, until the end of history itself and the new creation that God has promised.

Make no mistake, there will be persecution in our time, as well. It doesn't matter whether that persecution is the one that comes at the end of history or just one more ripple on the surface of the pond. It might extend to the level the Jews experienced under Antiochus or Titus, or it might be very mild. But either way, it will be a test of our character and our devotion. And if we do not experience any persecution, then we have not done our jobs. We have not lived in such a way as to challenge the forces of idolatry and wickedness that exist in every age and in every place.

There is no secret or trick to enduring persecution. It is a matter of keeping faith with the God who has already redeemed us. Our mission is to endure suffering, to resist evil and lies, and to do the will of God. And if we die before seeing the consummation of all things, it is still not over for us. For those “who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” It seems that we endure the suffering now, willingly, in order to purify ourselves; or we will endure it in the end unwillingly. Daniel is told that “Many will purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand; but those who are wise shall understand.”

The message seems to be, strive to be wise now, while there is time. Allow Jesus Christ to deal with your wickedness now, while there is still time. Because “those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.” That sounds a whole lot better than shame and everlasting contempt. But don’t expect it to be easy. There will be many who refuse to be purified now. And they will be the agents of purification for the rest of us.

The author of Hebrews writes, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” But it will be better for us if we endure that fearful thing while there is time for it to change us. If we endure all until the end, then we shall rest, and God will never abandon his chosen ones who receive grace to stand.