

Sermon for Proper 29, Year B
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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This week we have another of Daniel's visions, this time an earlier one than last week's. This is a vision the prophet had while still under Babylonian rule, sometime about 550 B.C. He sees fantastic beasts come up out of the sea, representing kingdoms that are coming to replace Babylon. And the last one is brutal and terrible. And one of the kings of this last kingdom, represented by one of the beast's horns, is a blasphemer who sets himself against God.

In the midst of this bizarre and unnerving vision comes the passage we have read this morning. "As I looked, thrones were placed and one that was ancient of days took his seat". The kingdoms of the earth, particularly the blasphemous one, will now be judged in a heavenly courtroom come down to earth. The one who is "ancient of days" is the Lord God. His appearance is the white of purity and glory, and he sits upon a fiery throne of judgment. And he is attended by a hundred thousand legions of the heavenly armies.

Even as the horn of the blasphemous beast is screaming out his blasphemy and defiance of God, this kingdom is destroyed and consumed by the fire of judgment. The other beast kingdoms lose their power and authority, but are not utterly destroyed. And all of this can be more or less mapped out in the subsequent history. Aside from the whacked out imagery, this prophecy is not difficult to sort out. The various kingdoms can be identified. The ten horns or rulers of the fourth beast kingdom can be verified, down to Antiochus Epiphanes, the Greek king of Syria who desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem and was later defeated by the Maccabees.

But then the vision goes on: "behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him." This is all very interesting, but when Daniel gets the interpretation of the vision from the angel nearby, this part is not mentioned. Nowhere is the "one like a son of man" identified. Moreover, it seems that this son of man is to replace all the kingdoms. Dominion is taken *from* them, but given *to* him. "And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him". Not only that, "his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." This mysterious figure intrudes upon the symbolism of the passage. He doesn't clearly fit any of the understood categories of this kind of symbolic prophesy. He seems to be human, but to have a sort of divine origin, coming "with the clouds" like God does. And God gives him absolute and eternal kingship over

his creation. And then this son of man disappears from the prophecy, as if he were a dream within the dream. And we never hear about him again.

About five and a half centuries later, in the little settlement town of Nazareth, in the tetrarchy of Galilee, a sort of client kingdom under Roman rule, lives a Jewish contractor. This contractor's name is Joseph, and he has a son named Yeshua, who works with him on the great building projects around the Sea of Galilee. Like all sons of devout Jewish families, Yeshua has been to Hebrew school and knows his scriptures. In fact, he impressed the scribes with his understanding when he was only twelve. But he has also been told strange stories about the circumstances of his birth, and he has an unusually fruitful prayer life. And over the years, he has come to a few unusual conclusions about certain passages of scripture.

One of these passages is Daniel, chapter 7, verses 13-14: that shadowy figure that seems to flit in and then out of Daniel's vision. Yeshua has come to the conclusion that that figure is himself. He is the human of divine origin, who is destined to reign forever over his Father's creation. And so he goes about calling himself the Son of Man. It's an important phrase, because most people would have misunderstood him if he called himself Son of God. The Son of God is the king.

Even when he is being interrogated by Pilate, the Roman Governor, he does not directly claim to be a king. Throughout this interview, the two men are talking at cross-purposes. Pilate is examining a defendant. Is Jesus an immediate threat to Roman power and authority or not? In accordance with Roman legal tradition, he asks him direct questions, to which he expects cringing denial of the charges, or perhaps outright denunciation of Rome. But Jesus refuses to behave like a defendant. He *acts* like a king, but he refuses to *call* himself one. Because that would have let Pilate off the hook.

If Jesus had said, "Yep, I'm a king alright. You better do what I say." then he would have played right into Pilate's script for him as the defendant. Instead, he tries to give Pilate a chance to respond to his authority. He turns the questions around on the governor. "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" In other words, "You're not just the judge here, you're a man. The question is: What do you think of me?"

But Jesus does speak of his kingdom or kingship, that over which he rules, and he mentions his servants. It is clear that he speaks with authority. But it is unclear what kind of authority. He says that his kingdom is not of this world. And so Pilate says, "So you are a king, right?" He's still trying to get his question answered, rather than paying attention to what Jesus is really saying. "Every one who is of the truth hears my voice," Jesus says. But Pilate is not listening, so he must not be of the truth.

“You would call me a king,” Jesus says. In other words, “Yes, I am a king. But not a king the way you are thinking. I am really on a higher level than those whom you call kings. I was born for this purpose, but my authority is not based on my birth. My authority is based on my righteousness. I bear witness to the truth of God.” And though we haven’t read it this morning, in the next verse, Pilate asks his fateful question, “What is truth?”, dismissing the whole subject and condemning, not Jesus, but himself to ultimate death.

For this is the very test that every one must eventually take. No matter who you are, or where you’re from, or what your upbringing was or wasn’t; if you don’t take it here then you will take it hereafter. The test is this: Are you of the truth? Yeshua is indeed the king. Not a petty king, like Herod, or Antiochus, or even Caesar. Not merely the king of the Jews. He is the Christos, the anointed one, “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.” He is the one who has shown us the love of God and has shed his own blood to free us from our slavery to our own sin. He didn’t just inherit, or even conquer, a kingdom. He *made* us into a kingdom, a kingdom of priests, those who are free to enter the presence of God. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the one in whom all things hang together. And he is the Son of Man, the one who “is coming with the clouds” to receive all “glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”

The test is to submit ourselves to the truth. Not just the idea of the truth, but the *person* who is truth, the Son of Man, the king above all kings, who demonstrates his kingship by his sacrifice of himself. To respond to Jesus on his own terms is to change absolutely every aspect of your life: how you dress, who your friends are, how you spend your time, who you think you are. It will change you from A to Z, Alpha to Omega.

Or you can respond to Jesus as Pilate does. “Truth, shmuth. Whatever you say, buddy. I have more important business to attend to.” But if that is your response to Jesus, then you will not be happy with the outcome. You will indeed see him when he comes with the clouds. You will see him with all those who pierced him. And you will wail on account of him. Because you were not of the truth.