

Daniel 7:1-18
August 25, 2024
Ellen Crawford True

Ridiculous Hope

I made a point of reading and studying this text during daylight hours this week. I'm not a fan of horror movies or monsters, and Daniel's vision rivals anything crafted in a big Hollywood studio writers' room. I hesitate to call it a dream, because Cinderella taught me that, "A dream is a wish your heart makes, when you're fast asleep." I don't think anyone is currently wishing for four monsters to appear from the sea, especially if they resemble these four. Scholars tell us that the monsters Daniel names represent empires under which the children of ancient Israel lived during the exile and beyond: the lion with eagles' wings is Babylon, the bear with the terrible teeth is Media, the leopard with four heads is Persia, and the fourth and most horrific beast with all the horns is understood to be Greece. The one small horn arrogantly spouting hatred is thought to be Antiochus IV, nicknamed Epiphanes because he believed himself to be a human epiphany, a divine revelation, a gift to the world from Zeus.¹ Scholar John Gregory Drummond argues that Antiochus Epiphanes is "the bible's most notoriously forgotten villain."² Drummond writes:

In the time between the return of Jewish exiles and the rise of the Roman emperors, the land of Judea was caught between two ruling powers: the Seleucid Kingdom of Syria in the north and Ptolemaic Egypt in the south. These kingdoms, both successors of

¹ Amy Merrill Willis, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/christ-the-king-2/commentary-on-daniel-79-10-13-14>

² <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-israel/antiochus-epiphanes-the-bibles-most-notoriously-forgotten-villain/>

Alexander the Great's broken empire, warred with each other for more than a century while the Jewish nation sat at the crossroads.³

The Jewish community largely stayed under the radar, until Antiochus IV came to power in 170 BCE. His vision for the kingdom demanded uniformity in the name of prosperity and economic stability. Drummond continues:

Many of the pagan nations embraced and welcomed these policies, but in the land of Judea they caused a cultural civil war, notably among members of the high priestly families. In the midst of this turmoil, ... Antiochus plundered the Jerusalem Temple and carried off the sacred vessels—to help finance his campaigns.

Following stories of intrigue, bribery, and military coups among the Jewish ruling class that could rival any on television these days, Antiochus arrived in Jerusalem to find the people in an open state of revolt against him and each other. The chaos he found in Judea immediately followed a humiliating defeat in Egypt, and the ruler took out his frustrations on the Jewish people. Antiochus took control of the situation by slaying many innocents and brutally enforcing his cultural and religious policies on the population. A time of great tribulation occurred as traditional practices such as circumcision were outlawed, sacred scriptures were burned, and violators were brutally punished even unto death.⁴

And the role this horrific tyrant receives in Daniel's vision is that of a small horn with human eyes and a blaspheming mouth. For all of the brutality and all of the violence, Daniel's holy

³ Drummond

⁴ Drummond

vision makes it clear that this ruthless king plays only a bit part in the larger story, especially when the Ancient One, the main character comes on stage.

Apocalyptic texts like this one are not favorites for Presbyterians as a rule. They're too violent, too outlandish, too out-there, too scary. And yet, our forerunners in the faith wholeheartedly embraced them. The Roman empire was the next monster in line around the time Jesus was born, and in him the earliest Christians saw the fulfillment of the Human One or Son of Man figure. In the Son of Man, they saw God setting things right and ushering in a new kingdom, one that could not be toppled by any monster of any kind. They also found courage in naming the monster in their midst, pointing to the corrupt and cruel powers that insisted on being worshiped and obeyed. Visions like Daniel's gave them strength in the face of tyrannical powers that terrorized the faithful when they did not comply. The early church found hope in asserting out loud that tyranny would and could not win out in the end.

Texts like Daniel are crucial parts of our biblical tradition because they, too, offer good news. They do not necessarily offer words of easy comfort; they do, however, offer hope. The hope Daniel shares is not a flimsy hope that tentatively crosses her fingers but rather a hope that stubbornly trusts the promise of restoration and renewal. Daniel's community does this hoping work knowing full well that the future they imagine will very likely not occur on their watch. And they point to that hope anyway.

In "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban," the young wizards learn to confront monsters known as boggarts. Unlike the monsters in our text this morning, boggarts are shapeshifters taking the form of whatever a person fears the most. And a one-word charm brings down every last boggart, and that word is "riddikulus." The charm is not enough by itself,

Professor Lupin explains, “What really finishes a boggart is laughter. You need to force [the boggart] to assume a shape you find truly amusing,” or truly ridiculous. On screen over the next few minutes, we see the monsters these young people fear and how they undo their fears— Professor Snape wears a grandmother’s hat and fox stole, huge spiders wobble on roller skates, and a massive snake bobs back and forth like a toy clown. When the students are able to imagine that the monsters do not hold ultimate power, they are able to disarm their fears, stripping those fears of any real power.⁵

It can be a dangerous game to start equating the monsters with modern day figures. Daniel’s vision does not point to these four kingdoms or the arrogant squawking horn simply because they have a different campaign sign in their yard. No, Daniel’s vision names the kingdoms as monsters because of their carefully planned and tirelessly executed reign of terror that dehumanized the Jewish community and compelled everyone to think and worship in one way—their way, or else.

Throughout human history other people have held tight to the work and witness of naming monsters and embracing hope in the face of persecution. Early Christians clung to Daniel’s vision as Roman crosses lined the roads. Revolutionaries leaned into this vision in France and here in the United States. Courageous Germans and others leaned on this vision in the face of Nazism. And Civil Rights leaders leaned into this vision as they confronted the monster named Jim Crow and stared down fire hoses, burning crosses, and white hoods. Roman crosses, Nazism, and Jim Crow are not simply boggarts. They do not hold absolute power either,

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PWKFyhJ2h4>

however, and they are still being undone and undermined by stubborn and joyful hope born of the Ancient One.

I was reminded of an old proverb yesterday that says, “Blessed are those who plant trees under whose shade they will never sit.” Professor Lupin relishes the work of teaching his students not only to name the monsters but also to embrace joy and hope in the moment AND in the days ahead when dangers are real, and evil seems to have won. When the writer of Daniel paints the most brutal reign of the age as a little horn with a big mouth and declares that the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man would step in to set things right, he boldly disarms the monster and plants a tree of faith, a legacy of hope that provides shade and strength for generations to come.

Naming the monsters in our midst is tricky work, and I am not terribly good at it most days, let alone faithful. I am quick to see monsters where there is simply another child of God with whom I fiercely disagree. Not one of my neighbors—next door, on the other side of the aisle, on the other side of town, or on the other side of the world—is a monster. Each and every one of us is quite capable of behaving monstrously, however, dismissing, demeaning, or dehumanizing others—who also happen to be beloved children of God, by the way. I believe it is our calling, the church’s calling not to paint other children of God as monsters, but to help our children learn how to be kind as well as courageous and wise in naming the actual monsters and to give them more than a charm to fend off those monsters. It is time for the church to get back to the work of planting trees of love, justice, courage, integrity, and compassion, even if we will not live to see them fully grown or established. I also think it is time for the church to double down on hope, real and lasting hope paired with deep joy. The monsters of hatred, violence,

fear, greed, disdain, hatred, division, cynicism, and meanness are real, AND they are no match for the Ancient One or the one we have come to know as the Human One. This Human One, the Son of Man, Jesus Christ fears no one and dehumanizes no one. He laughs boisterously at the table with friends and strangers alike; he lavishes love on children; he calls out the hypocrisy of those who dismiss the lost and the least; he cries when his friend dies; and he embraces his friends and followers who fled and left him for dead on a monstrous Roman cross. And by the unmatched grace of God, it is Christ, the risen and reigning Son of Man who gives his life to save and transform all of us and all of them, monstrous and fearful and ridiculous as we and our world may be.

Thanks be to God. Amen.