

## Coming with the Clouds of Heaven

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### Daniel 7:1-18 (NRSV)

In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream: I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then, as I watched, its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a human being; and a human mind was given to it. Another beast appeared, a second one, that looked like a bear. It was raised up on one side, had three tusks in its mouth among its teeth and was told, "Arise, devour many bodies!" After this, as I watched, another appeared, like a leopard. The beast had four wings of a bird on its back and four heads; and dominion was given to it. After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns. I was considering the horns, when another horn appeared, a little one coming up among them; to make room for it, three of the earlier horns were plucked up by the roots. There were eyes like human eyes in this horn, and a mouth speaking arrogantly.

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. I watched then because of the noise of the arrogant words that the horn was speaking. And 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. As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me. I approached one of the attendants to ask him the truth concerning all this. So he said that he would disclose to me the interpretation of the matter: "As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever."

### Sermon

We call Jesus the Son of God, but he called himself the Son of Man. Did you ever wonder why? Did Jesus intend to hide himself behind that name? Or to reveal himself through that name? Or maybe both? To answer that question, we need to listen to Daniel 7.

**Christians take all sorts of angles on the book of Daniel, but the main burden of Daniel's vision in chapter 7 is clear enough.** Daniel sees a series of four beasts coming up out of the churning waters of the sea. These beasts are horrible, mixed-up combinations of different animals. It's a terrifying vision, more a nightmare than a dream. But who are these beasts?

In v. 17 Daniel is told that "the four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth." Which kingdoms? The history of the Ancient Near East provides an answer. The first beast is the Babylonian Empire. The second beast is the Median Kingdom. The third beast is the Persian Empire. And the fourth beast is the empire of Alexander the Great and his successors.

We should notice several things about these beasts and these beastly kingdoms. First, the kingdoms are represented by beasts because they fall far short of God's ideal for humanity. These are not kingdoms built

first upon love for God, then upon love for fellow human beings – the two most important commandments. No, these kingdoms seize dominion by ruthless and bloody conquest. And they retain it by force. They rule, not by the power of justice and truth, but by the edge of the sword. Their insatiable appetites for power and conquest devour people after people, including God’s people, who suffer along with everyone else.

Daniel’s terrifying vision pictures the experience of the ancient Jews. First they were carried off into exile by the Babylonians. Then they came under the thumb of the Medians and then of the Persians. And finally – whether in Babylon or in Jerusalem – they came into the grip of the Greek empire of Alexander. Like every other people, God’s people were tossed back and forth by these shifts of power and influence. Like every other people, they felt powerless. But unlike every other people, they received a word of hope and assurance from God. That’s what they found in Daniel 7.

A second characteristic of the beasts is that they rise out of the waters of the sea. Now the Israelites were not a sea-going people. For them the sea was a frightening place: a place of storms and monsters, a chaotic place of death and destruction. Beasts rising out of the sea are chaotic kingdoms that battle against the good order of God’s creation, destructive kingdoms that overreach the limits God has set, evil kingdoms that threaten to bring back the chaos of Genesis 1:2, when “the earth was formless and empty.”

A third characteristic of the beasts is that they break the creational norm where lions breed lions, eagles breed eagles, and so on, each according to its kind. Here we have mix-ups on a grand scale: beasts that are part lion, part bear, part leopard, part bird, with too many heads and too many horns. These are grotesque deformations of God’s creation order. Once again this is an evaluation of these kingdoms. Not only do they rise out of the wicked, chaotic sea, but they themselves are twisted and deformed. And they spread terror and destruction over the earth.

**But then the vision changes from a scene of terror to a scene of solemn majesty.** Daniel sees the heavenly throne room. And there he sees God, who is wise and pure, powerful and just. God is seated as the great judge over all the kingdoms of the earth. And as Daniel watches, God humbles the beastly kingdoms and strips them of authority. This is the hope of God’s people. This is the hope of all peoples. God almighty rules over all the kingdoms of the earth, and they all will stand before his judgment seat.

But the hope is bigger. Daniel also sees “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days,” Daniel says, “and was led into his presence.” This son of man is given authority, glory, and sovereign power. And he rules over all the peoples of the earth forever! (v. 14). This is the hope of God’s people. This is the hope of all peoples. This is no chaotic kingdom, rising from the churning waters of the sea. This is a holy kingdom that comes with clouds of victory and vindication for the people of God. And this is no beastly kingdom. This is a kingdom with a human face.

When the book of Daniel was written, people probably thought that the “son of man” was someone like the archangel Michael. Michael was the special protector of God’s people. And his triumph in heaven over the beasts would be mirrored on earth in the triumph of God’s people over their enemies. In a memorable way, this triumph was fulfilled under the Maccabees, who rebelled against the post-Alexander empire and set up a new Jewish kingdom.

But we know a greater fulfillment than that. We know the one who called himself the Son of Man. We know that he has gone with the clouds into the very presence of almighty God. We know he has begun to reign over the whole earth. And we know that one day he will restore humanity to its proper dominion. We were made to be rulers on the earth. And that’s what we will be once again. The ascension and reign of Jesus Christ guarantee it. When that proper dominion is restored, we will rule with a human face: not a corrupt, sinful human face, but a pure human face, like the face of Jesus. And the earth will be a place of justice and righteousness, a place of peace and compassion, to the glory and praise of God.

**Of course, we haven’t received the kingdom yet.** Beastly kingdoms live on. Daniel may have had Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece in mind, but beast after beast continues to rise as history unfolds. The Maccabean kingdom was gone in an instant. In its place came Rome.

In the time of Christ and his apostles, the Roman Empire, despite all of its contrary claims, despite all of the praise that it heaped upon itself – the Roman Empire was surely a ravaging beast that ruled the earth by

spear and sword, a beast that oppressed people after people, including the followers of Jesus. In our own day, the beasts are everywhere, spanning the globe, terrorizing neighborhoods.

The beasts are everywhere. Just ask the Christians of Iraq, the few that are left. Or ask people in Eastern Europe in the face of an emerging Russian military policy of preemptive nuclear strikes. Ask our neighbors in Latin America, caught between drug lords on the one hand and on the other a new generation of *caudillos*, “El Presidentes” who rewrite the rules in order to be re-elected again and again. Or ask Palestinians, who for decades have been pawns of competing powers.

The beasts are everywhere. Ask the family of a young woman gunned down in the street in Teheran. Ask the mother and neighbors of a Chicago teenager who was beaten to death on his way home from school. The beasts are everywhere.

The beasts are always everywhere, not just far away in time or in distance. We like to think better things of our own country, especially in days like these, with threats abounding, whether in Iran or on the Korean peninsula or at a Texas army base. We like to think better things of our own country, especially when only a few days ago we remembered the sacrifices of military veterans and their families, sacrifices they made for all of us.

We like to think better things of our own country. But surely it’s a beast that takes captives and tortures them – or outsources the torture to allies of convenience. It’s a beast, isn’t it, that wages war by remote control? Have you heard about how these drone aircraft work? How our military personnel can kill for us in the mountains of Pakistan but do it from the safety of military installations here in the U.S. and go home a few hours later to watch their kids play soccer? Targeting the enemy and killing the enemy without ever facing the enemy – what are those drones, our drones, but fire-breathing dragons? What are they but beasts?

And what are we when we watch “war porn” on YouTube? Have you heard about this? You can watch drone attacks on YouTube. You can watch the target, watch the strike, watch the explosion, watch body parts flying into the air – all of it accompanied by the music of the band Sugar Ray, singing “I Just Want to Fly.” What are we?

What are we when we take steel from the World Trade Center and, as a memorial, form it into the hull of a warship? What are we when we beat our plowshares into swords like that? And what are we when we violate our own best traditions and our own moral principles in the name of national interest or national security? When we do these things, how are we different from Rome? How are we different from Persia?

Maybe the worst of it, though, is how powerless we feel in the face of the beastliness of this world and of our own country. Powerless and compromised. Compromised because we go along with so much that is so wrong, with so much that is contrary to God’s kingdom vision, to God’s intention for the flourishing of life and culture under a kingdom that has a truly human face.

We hate the powerlessness. And we hate the compromise. When we look long and hard, we especially hate the compromise. It sickens us. And we want it all to be over. Because we know that God has something better in mind.

To people on the edge of hopelessness, Daniel 7 says, “It won’t last forever. For a while these kingdoms, these powers, will do what they can. They will oppress people after people, including those who put loyalty to God first. But don’t be afraid. God is sovereign!”

And to us, to a compromised people, a people whose loyalty to God is incomplete, a people who don’t know how to remake the face of the world or even the face of our own country into a truly human face, a face that reflects the truest human face of all, the face of Jesus – to us in our time, Daniel 7 says, “Jesus is Lord. He has ascended to God’s throne room. There he received the authority of the everlasting kingdom. And he shall reign forever and ever. And you, too, shall reign with him. And the world will be one kingdom with a human face, a kingdom of justice and peace, of faith and righteousness.”

Our task, our goal, is to live for that kingdom and to live in the way of that kingdom even now, all the while looking toward the throne room and waiting for the Son of Man to come and bring the kingdom with him. So we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly.”