***Good News To The Poor***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on September 15, 2024*

*based on Daniel 7:13-14*

All that most people know about the Book of Daniel is the part about the prophet Daniel being thrown into a den of lions. But you may also remember another story about three young men named, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who refuse to bow down to a golden statue representing a Babylonian god. King Nebuchadnezzar has them thrown into a fiery furnace heated seven times hotter than usual. But hours later when the king looks into the fire he sees not three but *four* men walking around in the furnace unharmed -  Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and a fourth resembling a “son of god.“ The story is a microcosm of the whole book. In fact, early Christians saw it pointing to Jesus.

The book of Daniel, read on its own terms, is about the Hebrew people living as exiles in Babylon, learning how to remain a proud, distinct people while under the rule of an unfriendly empire. They are tempted to bow the knee to the dominant empire because, of course, they don’t want the empire to kill them, but at the same time, they don’t want to compromise with that empire either when it comes to their religious identity.

How do you walk the tightrope between being a good citizen of an empire and remaining faithful to your God? It’s like the tension one finds in the New Testament book of Revelation, a similar book to Daniel. In Revelation, you see First Century Christians figuring out how to remain faithful while under Roman rule.

Now here’s the confusing part of this tension -- there have been empires through history -- rich, powerful nation states like Babylon and Rome and they are all experts at propaganda. They all proclaim that they have a divine right to rule over other sovereign nations. They even go so far as to proclaim that their violent attacks upon their neighbors isn’t aggression at all. It’s their manifest destiny. If you listen to Vladimir Putin’s long rationalization for invading Ukraine it’s all about Russia’s national identity.

Putin claims that Ukraine is really part of Russia. Ukraine strenuously denies this, of course, and has denied it for over a thousand years. Putin even claims that Jesus Christ is on Russia’s side.

But forgive me for pointing the finger of blame elsewhere. As the nation with the most powerful military in the world, we in the USA who call ourselves “one nation under God” -- face the same kind of culpability described in the Biblical books of Daniel and Revelation. Being so powerful, we are often tempted to co-opt other nations &/or their resources for our own national interest.

Let me illustrate the range of our power. The largest air force in the world is the U. S. Airforce. Right? No question about it. Which air force do you think is #2 in the world?

Answer: the U. S. *Naval* Airforce. We are one powerful nation state. Christians in the U.S. live with the tension of responsible citizenship and our Christian identity. At times those will conflict.

Now, let me give you some background to this morning‘s text. Daniel is dreaming at night and he sees the ocean. It’s a stormy night, the ocean waves are pounding the surf; he’s terrified. Well, in Oregon we love the ocean, right? For many of us, the coast is our second home, whether we own property there or just visit it. We love to see the waves get wild from time to time.

I moved here 3 years ago from desert Utah because I just had to get back to the coast, the surf, the damp air. But this would not be the way an ancient person would have conceived of the ocean.

They saw the sea as dark and menacing, filled with monsters. “You never know what might rise from the sea,” they’d say. If an ancient person were asked where evil dwells they’d likely say it’s lurking in ocean depths.

In Daniel’s dream, the sea is stirred up by the four winds, and then four malevolent beasts come out of the sea. They emerge one after another. First there is a lion, then a bear, then a leopard, and last, some kind of great sea creature. They stalk the land. In their wake they leave destruction and suffering.

Biblical interpreters identify these beasts as symbols of empire – Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome or … maybe Assyria, depending on when the specific interpreter believes the Book of Daniel was written.

To understand this, imagine how history might be told from the point of view of enslaved Africans or indigenous Americans. They might say, “Well the Portuguese under Columbus came first, They were like a lion, devouring everything. Then came the Spanish, like a bear. Then the Dutch came on us like a leopard. Then, worst of all, the English descended on us like a monster from the deep.”

Observing this parade of beasts devouring the poor over and over again, one is tempted to resign oneself to the onslaught and say, “This is the way of the world; it will always be this way. The strong and rich will always trample the weak and poor.” It’s like J.D. Vance saying school shootings are just “a fact of life” even if they are only a fact of life in this country.

But Daniel sees something else: Daniel draws us a picture of a court up in the heavens. There he sees a large gathering of people along with one who sits upon a throne who is known as the Ancient of Days. His clothing is white as light; his hair, white as wool. His throne is made of fire. This is an image of God. Daniel turns from prose to poetry to describe this part of his dream:

As I watched in the night

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 everlasting

and shall not pass away,

and his kingship is one

that shall never be destroyed. (7:13-14)

Unlike the beastly empires that come, ravage the land and go, this human will come and stay. This one is not a beast of prey but a human being who acts humanely. This one comes in order to champion the poor and oppressed.

Now, this is exactly what Jesus spent so much time talking about when he talked about God’s benevolent reign coming down from heaven.

You know, Jesus never talked about himself as Messiah. He spoke of himself as Son of Man. This was language the oppressed of his day could understand and welcome because it was in the book of Daniel.

Early in his ministry Jesus stood up in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth to describe similar news that came from the prophet, Isaiah.

*The Spirit is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*

*God has sent me to proclaim release of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)*

Jesus was saying, “This is my job description. Remember how Isaiah proclaimed that God was finally coming to champion the poor in exile, the oppressed, the forgotten? Well, I am the agent commissioned to herald that coming during Roman rule.

This is the Bible’s idea of good news. Good news is not about Jesus dying to buy us back from Satan. That’s the bogus message the church has been passing off as the heart of the gospel for a thousand years since the Catholic Bishop, Anselm came up with that idea in the 12th century.

Jesus dying for our sins doesn’t go back to Jesus at all. Not even close. However, the seeds of that bargain between God and the devil were planted early in the fourth century when early Christian bishops huddled in the town of Nicaea with Emperor Constantine and they worked out how they could undercut the true “good news” of economic equity and justice for the poor that prophets like Isaiah, along with Jesus himself, were always heralding.

Emperor Constantine was baptized a Christian on his death-bed but all his life he was a thorough-going beast of prey, a full-on master of empire, willing to do anything, even convert to Christianity, if it would help him keep the poor of his day enslaved and working for nothing.

Remember what I said in last week’s sermon? When Jesus was born the world already had a savior. That savior had a title – it was engraved on all the coins of the realm. The name of the one who was known as Savior of the world, Prince of Peace, Son of God -- was … Augustus Caesar. All the coins of the day bore his image. He claimed that he brought the world good news. This he called the *Pax Romana*. Roman peace. This was the propaganda of the day.

And look, empire *always* announces itself as good news. Empire always calls itself the best hope of earth. It claims that it is a lamb when in fact it is a beast of prey. Secretly, it intends to acquire all the world’s wealth. Not a portion of it—no, **all** of it. And it is more than happy to use violence to obtain it. To be fair, more often than not, though, the super-rich find a way to pull-one-over on the poor without resorting to violence.

Our “Southminster Reads” book, *Poverty By America,* is all about this. The author, Matthew Desmond, says of America, “This is who we are: the richest country on earth, with more poverty than any other advanced democracy.” What does that mean? It means that the rich have convinced legislatures and presidents to pass laws benefitting the 1% at the expense of the 99%.

Along the way, they have found ways to get the masses, even the poor themselves, to believe that the poor will never be anything but poor. In this way the vast majority of us become blind to some very creative efforts to alleviate poverty; programs that have been shown to work. Here is how Matthew Desmond says that plays out …

“When we [become blind to] what works, we risk swallowing the lie that nothing does. We risk imagining the future only as more of the same. We risk giving in to despair … and submitting to cynicism ... This can suffocate meaningful action, and it certainly doesn’t inspire others to join the cause.”

As Christians I believe we are called to expose the huge lie that the poor need always be poor. When we worship Jesus as Lord what is implicit in that attestation is that we choose *not* to worship empire and it’s lies that say, “God is fine with the *status quo*.”

No, we vow to never mistake God and empire. We will never advocate that church should align itself with the state, because we know that will always turn into an unholy union.

Think again of the alliance Putin in Russia has struck with the Archbishop of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Archbishop has blessed Putin’s attempt to take over Ukraine, but when he raises his hands to bless the people of Russia in church, those with eyes to see, see blood running down his arms. They see the blood of innocent Ukrainian children.

The wealth of church and state, symbolized by the vestments he wears in worship, is stolen from the poor.

Always remember this – when we say, “Jesus is Lord” it is not some religious formula. To say “Jesus is Lord” is to announce that Caesar is not. Which is deeply subversive.

Jesus was not hoisted on a cross by the will of God to buy us back from Satan. No, he was executed by an empire conspiring with the Jewish religious authorities of his day. Why? Because in every parable Jesus told and every sermon Jesus preached he chose to align himself with the poor and oppressed.

To say “Jesus is Lord” is to align oneself with the poor and marginalized just like Jesus did. The evangelical branch of Christianity has turned that subversive statement into a “Get Out of Hell Free Card.” They have trivialized it – taken all the original power out of it. Well, the Rev. James Forbes has said, “Nobody gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.” He found that in Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats.

Why were the early Christians persecuted? It wasn’t for telling people how to go to heaven when they die. No, in fact, the Roman Empire under Constantine would say, “We don’t care where you go when you die. Heaven? Hell? We don’t care in the least. If that’s what you think the gospel is about, how to get to heaven when you die -- great. Knock yourself out.”

The early Christians were persecuted for announcing that Jesus was Lord and Caesar was not.

Jesus brings the peace of God. The empire claims to, but does not. “By their fruits you shall know them,” Jesus said. The reign of God comes, not with violence and threats, but quietly, like a seed being sown, like crops as they grow in the field, like an estranged child walking a long way home to his father; it’s like bread rising, like a woman sweeping her kitchen floor, like a feast where absolutely everyone is welcome.

At the center of that kingdom is not a throne but a table. It’s not a bit beastly. It’s totally humane.

Where is the kingdom of God? Right here in our midst in this place where in the name of Jesus we announce radical equality, where we work for radical equity.

It’s here where there is neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, neither Jew nor Greek, neither Democrat nor Republican, neither rich nor poor. Here all division fades away forever.

Amen

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