

Waking from a Nightmare

A sermon expositing Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester

I wasn't quite sure how I'd gotten there, but I found myself in the middle of the flaming wreckage of a plane crash. The few survivors were injured and wailing in all directions and I started trying to help them. Without medical supplies or training I made the helpless decision to focus simply on moving those I thought could survive, but I knew that even if they did, they would never be the same. I knew I would never be the same. It all made me physically nauseous. I became very concerned about the fire igniting any remaining fuel. I was so afraid and, I began to get a sense that this had been no accident, that someone had maliciously brought this plane down. It made me angry in a way I have hardly experienced since, but pure adrenaline told me I couldn't stop moving. I latched on to another and started dragging them to safety.

Just then something rattled me. I whipped my head around to see what it was, but all I saw was the inside of my freshman dorm room in Martin Hall at Baylor. There were some guys getting home from a late night making a racket outside, they woke me from a nightmare. Then they disappeared into the lobby doors and I was left wide awake in the silence of the night afraid, angry, feeling nauseous. I knew that I was no longer at the scene of a plane crash, but I could still see the mangled bodies. My heart still pumped with fear. I was awake, but I couldn't convince myself the nightmare was over – because it wasn't.

The images that had disturbed me moments earlier were gone, I had never physically been at the scene of a plane crash. We know now that we can trace what happens in our mind's nocturnal state to some reality within us and that dream came only about 3 weeks after the coordinated attacks of September 11, 2001. I *was* afraid, I *was* angry, and I *did* feel utterly helpless. The world *was* entering a new dangerous era. Sometimes when you wake up from a nightmare, it isn't over.

Daniel tried to tell us as much a little over 2500 years ago. The Veggie Tales series of children's biblical cartoons has done its part to make the book of Daniel *cute* with Rack, Shack and Benny staying cool in the fiery furnace or Daniel hanging out in a den full of kitty cats. In truth though Daniel is a book full of nightmarish imagery. Much of that imagery is apocalyptic in genre, which is used to encapsulate frightening but intangible socio-political realities in stark and terrifying imagery. Apocalypse is often reported to us in the form of dreams remembered.

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

Daniel's dream, which we read moments ago, resonates deeply with me. It begins with a haunting image of the sea being stirred by the wind. Bodies of water have always been particularly emotional places for me. I remember at my grandparents lake house growing up how the water that had spelled so much fun during the day completely changed character at night or during storms when a hair raising mystery rose within – and that's despite my knowing what was down there. When Daniel was written, a time before scuba gear, sonar, and submarines, nobody knew exactly what was down there at all. That's why the seas stood representative of chaos and fear. From the chaos in Daniel's dream rose 4 terrifying beasts, the descriptions of which are cut from the lectionary text, but trust me, they're all horns and wings and teeth, the epitome of fear even in today's world. It's no surprise Daniel reports, "my spirit was troubled within me," he knows that sometimes when you wake from a nightmare it isn't over.

If we track the description of the four highly symbolic creatures and their rising from the frenzied waters we'd be reminded of the four nations who swept into Israel and Judah one after another deposing God's anointed, killing the people, destroying the Holy city and with it seemingly God's promise. Daniel's nightmare was real. Daniel's nightmare *is* real.

We wake together this morning from this eerie dream of Daniel's recognizing we are not threatened by horned and toothed sea monsters. We wake in recognition that the Babylonians and the Persians no longer pose imminent threat, the Hellenistic and Roman empires fell centuries ago. And yet, we wake recognizing the nightmare isn't over. What was ultimately conveyed in Daniel's nightmare was no more a nautical horror or political fright than my dream was about a crashed plane. My dream was about an emerging violent instability in the world around me, about a shattering of a false security we'd all lived with for far too long. Daniel's dream was about a threat to God's good ends. Daniel's nightmare, friends, is not over.

We have seen time and again the stirred waters produce peace shattering, life destroying monsters whose hearts have been filled with hatred and who wield death when they surface in places like Virginia Beach, Gilroy, El Paso, Dayton, and Odessa. We know the nightmare is not over.

We have seen the waters churn and from them rise up twin beasts – one chasing innocents from their homes by oppression and violence and a second ensuring they have nowhere to run and find sanctuary. The nightmare is not over.

We have fought the beasts that rise from the churning waters slaying the one called slavery only to see it rise again as Jim Crow. We have slain Jim Crow only to see it rise again as systemic oppression. We have learned that we cannot destroy it easily because it lives within us. The nightmare is not over.

We know it's true. As professed residents in a kingdom we hope to be marked by God we cannot help but notice the waters churning, we wonder what else lies beneath, what savage creature horned with injustice, disease, hatred, violence may make itself known. We profess hope in a loving and redemptive God, we've awoken, but we look around and even within and we know the nightmare remains.

But.

That's such a tiny little word, "but," – but, it changes everything.

“But [-] the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever – forever and ever.” says Daniel.

The holding of the Kingdom, for those who first heard the words of Daniel, had been a key indicator of the presence and Goodness of God. The Holy Ones of the Most High will, in the end, possess the kingdom. This is the quiet voice in the night saying to us, “Hey, it’s ok. It’s going to be alright.” If you’ve ever woken from a nightmare to find the dread lingering, you may know the most comforting thing is to hear the voice of a loved one assuring you that you are safe. They know your panic, they know your fear because they too have been through nightmares, but they also know you’re safe. “It’s alright, you’re ok,” and with those words the fear begins to subside, you begin to believe that the night will end and morning will come.

But who are these Holy Ones of the Most High who whisper to us in the darkness? Who is it who holds us in the night?

We may never know for certain who Daniel references as the “Holy Ones of the Most High.” It’s a strange term in the Hebrew that could suggest celestial beings or earthly beings. Some have suggested they are a little of both and see in the reference those who have lived a righteous life and been assumed to heavenly status upon death. It certainly isn’t Christian orthodoxy to assert that people become deified upon death, but for centuries the idea that God’s righteous dead have a special place in the kingdom has been a comfort to Christians. Said simply, we have called out the names of the Holy Ones of the Most High already today. In a moment we will light candles in gratitude for the lives of the Holy Ones of the Most High. They are our saints.

These are they who have lived through the nightmare and have truly woken to God. One among these is my friend who you’ve heard me talk about before, KC Ptomey. It is true that even pastors need pastors; he was one of mine. The reverend Tom Are, a student and protégé of KC’s preached a memorial service and said something of KC that is just as true of your saints. He referenced the day KC died as the day that cancer lost its battle with KC, “For it is cancer that has died,” he said, “and KC who lives on.” The same is true of all our other saints.

It is Marge Forth who lives on, and blood disease that has died.

It is Bill Herzog who lives on and Heart Disease that has died.

You and I still reside among these nightmarish beasts, but these in our great cloud of witnesses have awoken to new life. They know our fear and our anxiety first hand, they’ve been through the cold sweats of night, but have awoken to a bright new morning. They’ve been through the chaotic waters and turned them into baptismal waters. They are the ones who’ve taught us to stand against the dishonesty, the hatred, the pain of this world. It is they who whisper to us this day, “The night will come to an end, the morning will come.”

Amen.