

Daniel is a hopeful book. It doesn't feel like it at times, though. In fact, a great deal of Daniel is downright terrifying at first glance. But it's actually a book meant to give hope to hopeless people.

In this regard, it's a lot like the Book of Revelation. In fact, the two books have a lot in common. I've often told people who ask me about the Book of Revelation that if you want to truly understand John's message, you need to read and understand Daniel first. Because John writes his Revelation as almost a continuation of Daniel, with all the same symbolism and themes.

John's Revelation is a hopeful book, even though it doesn't always seem like it. Daniel is a hopeful book, even though it doesn't always seem like it. That's probably why so many people find these two books of the Bible in particular to be confusing and troubling.

I can't fully unpack all of Daniel's prophecies this morning. But I can unpack this specific passage in our Old Testament Lesson today. Because it is a very hopeful passage. A hopeful passage that immediately follows a rather disturbing one.

You see, in the verses prior to this, we hear about four great beasts who rise up out of the sea in succession, one after the other, to conquer the earth. And they are terrifying looking. But, if you're a fan of military history, like I am, and you know something about the world at the time of Daniel, you might just recognize what each of these beasts symbolize.

The first is a lion with eagle wings, whose feathers are eventually plucked. This beast represents Babylon and King Nebuchadnezzar, who is frequently referred to as being like a lion, both in Daniel and elsewhere. The Second Babylonian Empire expanded swiftly under his rule, but with his death it immediately collapsed, like an eagle who soared and then crashed back to earth, its feathers plucked.

The second is a bear with three ribs in its mouth and a constant hunger for flesh. This beast represents the Persian Empire, who rose to prominence after it consumed the kingdoms of Lydia, Babylon, and Egypt.

The third is a leopard with four wings and four heads. This beast represents the Greek Empire begun by Alexander the Great, whose conquest took him to the four corners of the known world. With his death, his one empire split into four kingdoms, each ruled by one of his military commanders.

The fourth, final, and strongest of the beasts isn't even named as a real animal. Instead it's simply described as having iron teeth that devoured everything it saw and ten horns on its head. This is the Roman Empire. Whose strength and conquest would dwarf everything that came before it. If the horn is the symbol of an animal's power, then this beast would be ten times greater than any beast that had come before it.

Like I said, this is a terrifying prophecy. All the more so because it represents Israel's past, present, and future. You see, at the time that Daniel is writing this, the Israelites are in Babylonian captivity. The first beast has already devoured them. And they are hoping for a message of encouragement. "Come on, Daniel. Tell us when this nightmare will end and we'll get our kingdom back."

And in response, Daniel tells them, "Um... sorry, but this is only the beginning. After this, you'll be conquered by the Persians and then the Greeks and then Romans. One beast after another. Each somehow worse than the one that came before it." From this time forward, the Israelites will forever be a conquered people. Living under the rule of a king not their own.

And in this, we can sympathize. Because we, as God's New Testament people, are doing the same thing. We live in exile. In a land that is not our own. Under the rule of a king not our own.

Oh, of course, we're Americans. We don't have kings. But that's just semantics, honestly. America is as much a kingdom as Babylon or Persia or Greece or Rome. We may elect our rulers and call them "president" or "congressman" or "governor," but they are still kings in a Biblical sense. They are sinful human beings seeking power and glory by ruling over others.

But the kingdom of America is not the only kingdom we live in. We live in the kingdom of Walmart and Amazon and Apple and Samsung and all the other corporations ruling over us. Telling us to buy their products and live in their kingdom of material goods.

We live in the kingdom of JPMorgan Chase and Bank of America and Citibank. Telling us to be slaves to credit cards and slaves to mortgages and slaves to the whims of the stock market.

We live in the kingdom of Hollywood and professional sports and casinos and alcohol and porn. Telling us to be ruled by the pleasure they can give us. The entertainment they provide in exchange for filling our heads with whatever sinful nonsense they can inject while we blissfully escape life's problems.

Daniel wasn't the only one who saw God's people being ruled by dreadful beasts with great power. I see it happening all around us, every day.

But, Daniel also saw hope for the Israelites. He saw hope for God's people. And he reveals that hope in our lesson today. For as terrifying as the four beasts who ruled over the Israelites were, they were nothing in comparison to the final ruler that Daniel saw.

His name was the Ancient of Days. His clothing and hair was pure white, white as snow. White as the clothing that Jesus wore in the Transfiguration. His throne was made of flames with wheels of burning fire and streams of fire came out from before him. Fire like that which he will use to destroy the heavens and the earth on the last day. And he is served by a thousand thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand. Indeed, all of creation serves the Ancient of Days.

Daniel has seen God the Father, sitting on his throne. And he is nothing like the beasts of the earth. He is holy and righteous. He is unlimited in his power and terrifying in his wrath. And he is served not simply by one kingdom, but by all the kingdoms of the earth.

And before him comes one like a son of man. Who stands before the Ancient of Days and is given dominion and glory and a kingdom. And all peoples, nations and languages, all those who serve the Ancient of Days, now serve this son of man. And unlike the beasts that Daniel saw, who rose and fell and new beast took their place, He is given an everlasting dominion. A kingdom which shall not pass away. A kingdom that cannot be destroyed by any beast or human kingdom of this earth.

This son of man is Jesus Christ. Every time that Jesus called himself "the son of man" he was pointing back to Daniel. To this son of man who was handed authority over heaven and earth by God the Father.

He is the king. The king above all kings. But his kingdom is not of this world. Because this world is passing away. And that is why Daniel's prophecy is hopeful. Because those beasts that rule over God's people – those kings of government and business and vice who think they rule over us – they are kings of this world.

They are kings like Pontius Pilate and Herod and the Jewish Sanhedrin were kings. Kings who could kill the body, but cannot touch the soul. Kings who ruled with soldiers and money and influence. But ultimately, kings with no real power. Because the Ancient of Days will come with a throne of fire to destroy all of this. And so they are kings of ashes, nothing more.

I'm sure that when Pilate heard that Jesus was not a king of this world, he scoffed at the idea. If you're not a king of this world then you aren't king of much, are you? And yet, Jesus was king of so much more than Pilate. Because he is king of an eternal kingdom. A kingdom that will never pass away.

That was the truth that Pilate rejected. That is the truth that we embrace today. Your king is not a president, congressman, or governor. Your king is not a corporation or bank. Your king is not a form of entertainment or vice. Your king is not of this world.

For you are not of this world. You are a child of God. You are a servant of the Ancient of Days. You follow the voice of the Son of Man as he bears witness to the truth. Your kingdom is right here. For your kingdom is the Church of God in Jesus Christ.

You were reborn into this kingdom in the waters of Holy Baptism. You are nourished by this kingdom's holy food in the Lord's Supper. And every time you confess your sins and hear Christ's wonderful word of absolution, you reject the kingdom of this world and return to the kingdom of your Lord.

Christ is king. Christ is your king. Christ is the only real king. He has loved you and freed you from your sins by his blood and he has made you a kingdom, priests to his God and Father. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.