

Reign of Christ
Sermon 11.22.15

Scripture: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
John 18:33-37

This is the last Sunday of the church year. We've reached the end. So it's no surprise that one of the readings should be an apocalyptic reading. The book of Daniel is representative of that genre, apocalyptic, a word we hear a lot these days, which is funny. Few are the words, these days, that originated in church and have made their way out into the world. Usually it's the other way around—as when preachers, longing for relevance, take words from popular culture and adopt them for pulpit. But, whatever. That's not what I'm riffing on. I'm just saying.

What I am talking about is the reverse of that phenomenon—this, a seriously churchy word brought out to play in pop culture.

Apocalyptic.

It doesn't necessarily promise to be a *fun* game.

Here's how it all began: a Greek work, apocalyptic translates into English as revelation. In apocalyptic, there's a grand reveal, a stripping away, so something raw and pre-structural is laid bare. The Bible has several examples of apocalyptic, among them the book of Daniel, the book of Revelation, and one section of the gospel of Mark that's called the Little Apocalypse. (So cute!) Each of these, and most others, are born of crisis.

The book of Daniel is likely the latest-written book in the Old Testament, coming to us from the 2nd Temple period. At this time, Judea was enveloped into the Seleucid Empire and a new emperor had risen to power. His agenda was to crush Jewish law and custom. He would successfully carry that out.

The destruction of the Temple altar was the spur for Daniel's vision of an Ancient One on his throne and one like a human being coming on the clouds of heaven to be presented before the Ancient One. This would happen following the coming up out of the sea four great beasts—one a winged lion, one a bear, one a four-headed leopard, and the last a horned dragon of sorts that had eyes all along its great horn and its smaller one. Each of these beasts represented one of four successive empires, the last the Seleucid with its great emperor and its lesser one and all the spies and seers that made it a reign of terror. Spooky, right? But the representation of that empire, and all previous empires, was oblique enough that Daniel could

most likely get away with having envisioned it and then told it, perhaps even written it down. The cloaked way of the story makes it so the story-teller would likely survive its telling.

Apocalyptic in its classical form is subversive literature imagined and written by people who were powerless, dispossessed; and its motivation was to reveal that, even the mightiest, most forceful and fierce, social structures will meet their end. Actually, in some cases, nothing of them eventually will stand. Even the tightest grip of the most iron fist will break and crumble, will perhaps even cause itself to break. And then, after that falling away, all that will be left is...well, what *will* be left?

According to Daniel, what will be left is an Ancient One and a throne room, a court with open books representing wisdom and justice, and one like a human being on whom all dominion will rest. See, Daniel's vision didn't end with beasts "terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong." No, for among them a throne was wheeled in, and an Ancient One took to it, and one like a human being came in on a cloud and was given dominion and glory and kingship such that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him—should and could and, most importantly, would. They would gladly serve him. They'd be happy, all people, to be subjects of his dominion, for his dominion would be good and wise and just and everlasting. Not dealing in death, it would itself never die. Not fueled by fear or force, it would itself never have cause to fear that force would be used against it. Not establishing order through the use of scapegoats and victims, it would create no enemies for itself and therefore have no worry of payback or vengeance.

This coming realm would simply abide, will simply abide, *does* simply persist or perhaps *insist*—a call from somewhere just out of sight, somewhere in the future, that keeps humanity and the world we make and live amidst move toward it—this insistence—all the while making it real—more and more real—in our midst as we go.

It spoke to Daniel and he spoke it forth. It speaks to us still. It inspires us, encourages us, goads us, transforms us. It also casts in full relief what kingdoms and realms we live amidst now that we might know them better; what powers and principalities we thrive amidst or groan beneath that we might fully recognize what such established ways of living and being actually cost, truly cost.

Herein lies the great reveal, the apocalypse. Whether the laying bare is actual destruction—the wreck and ruin of fallen empires, or nations after war, or environs depleted

of life—or whether the laying bare is but insight, yet that pierces: herein lies the revelation. Herein lies the apocalyptic.

Once was the time when I'd have had to explain all this to you. But not so now. Now, all you need to do in order to understand apocalyptic is tune in to pop culture. You don't even have to seek out fringe (and yet best selling) books like the *Left Behind* series. You can more comfortably read the more respectable Cormac McCarthy—or you don't even have to read it, since *The Road* has been made into a movie.

Or, if that's too somber, not nearly enough fun, you can catch the *Mad Max* reboot or the TV comedy *The Last Man on Earth*.

Or, if you do like fear and dread, and you want it weekly, rest assured *The Walking Dead* are coming to a neighborhood near you. They're shuffling through your living room, streaming into whatever device you've got handy.

Or, if you prefer dragons to zombies, consider *Game of Thrones*.

Or, if you prefer video games, try *Fallout IV*.

Shall I go on?

All of these (and more!) imagine reality without government or law. All imagine civilization as we know it as having all fallen away and time itself as having broken off—and due to any number of catastrophes (environmental, viral, geopolitical, technological breakdown or overthrow). And as to what is laid bare in these imaginings, it is the ever-pressing question of how to be human when to be brutal would be just so much easier.

A de-volution has taken place.

It's worth wondering what crisis is now being expressed in such abundant apocalyptic outpouring. What is the crisis—or what are the crises—that now unfold so to give rise to this new spate of apocalyptic imagining? Because it's no longer just the purview of the dispossessed. Hollywood is arguably the height of power and influence in today's world. So, why so glum, Christopher Nolan, J.J. Abrams? Why so depressed, if you're not *oppressed*?

It's worth wondering, and we have no small number of choices of things to pin it to. Really, it's probably the confluence of all these things—environmental degradation whose many, many dots we can now globally connect; geopolitical clashes that are between nations as of old but also involve terrorist cells that are both post-modern and pre-modern, a distressing combination; the dawning of the what might be an age of “superbugs,” bacteria

that are resistant to all our current antibiotics; the suspicion that our many ways of governance in the world aren't up to the task of global cooperation by which we might address what crises we face. All these things each, and taken together, have us realizing that what we've built as a human race might come apart, and then revealed would be ...well, what would be?

Pontius Pilate isn't generally thought to be an apocalyptic figure. He was just a governmental bureaucrat. I mean, he was the governor of Judea and so was ostensibly the most powerful man in the region. He's also someone whose name we all know, even these two thousand years later, even in this age of low biblical literacy—and because he happens to be mentioned in the two most commonly confessed creeds, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, that have Christians claim belief in Jesus Christ as “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, and crucified under Pontius Pilate.” Remembered among the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary: that's some vaulted company.

But the apparent fact is that Pilate had little real power, and still less authority. He's remembered to have been venal and cruel, a bully, but in all other ways not very impressive. Consider, he spent that notorious night-into-morning before Jesus' passion shuttling back and forth between the religious authorities who pressed for Jesus' to be crucified and Jesus himself who would offer no evidence that he was rightly to be crucified. Pilate spent those pivotal few hours trying to placate, trying to justify—the scurrying of someone who can't simply decide for himself and then act on his decision.

You know, even if justice is too much to hope for from political leaders, and even if wisdom is too far a reach, decisiveness seems like a necessary quality, and a pretty low bar to clear.

But the thought occurs, it might have been Pilate's lack of authority that made him crucial to a most crucial event in human history: the crucifixion of Jesus. Really, a stronger ruler might have put a halt to such a frivolous use of this most terrifying punishment. A stronger ruler might have said simply of Jesus and his alleged capital crimes: this would be a waste of nails.

He didn't say that, of course. What he said was, to Caiaphas and the other high priests, when they had brought Jesus to the outside of Pilate's headquarters, “What accusation do

you bring against this man?" Their answer was a non-answer, a dodge: "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you."

So Pilate pressed on: "Take him yourselves, and judge him according to your law," but the priests replied, "We aren't permitted to put anyone to death."

This—duh—makes it clear that the priests were but using Pilate. He was a tool. He was a tool for them, which you'd think he'd push back against, and hard. He was the governor, for goodness' sakes! And what they wanted him to do was pretty high stakes—kill off someone whom they wanted dead though while not wanting to get their own hands bloody. But Pilate didn't push back. Instead, he went inside, back into his headquarters where Jesus was waiting, occupying the office that was supposed to be Pilate's to occupy.

I wonder what Jesus did while waiting. Did he sit? Did he make himself comfortable? Did he stand—by the door, or in the center of the room? Did he examine the room and what furnished it, or did he keep his eyes and hands to himself?

Pilate, now returned, tried to get Jesus to admit that he'd done something worthy of crucifixion—something treasonous, something seditious. "Are you the king of Jews?"

But he'd get none of that; Pilate would get none of that, not from Jesus. Yes, Jesus would allow himself to be crucified; but, no, he wouldn't allow himself to be thought guilty of crimes he had no interest in committing.

So, "what have you done?" Pilate asked, getting desperate.

Jesus' reply, though, wasn't really an answer to this question: "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the religious authorities. But as it is my kingdom is not from here."

But Pilate tried to make it fit: "So you are a king?" a claim that would have been both treasonous (against the current imperial authority) and seditious (for his admittedly having gathered followers), and which therefore would have justified crucifixion.

Jesus, however, still wouldn't make it easy for him. "*You* say that I am king. But for this I was born and came into the world—to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

It's at this that Pilate wonders, I imagine wearily, "What is truth?"

I also imagine he meant it.

Poor guy.

The suspicion that there's no such thing as truth or as something that abides no matter what the time; the suspicion that there's no such thing as what deconstructionist Jacques Derrida considered that which cannot be deconstructed; the suspicion that there's no such thing that abides and transcends and breaks in: this is what makes apocalyptic so damn scary, when it is scary, I mean. (No *Game of Thrones* for me. No *Walking Dead*.)

The suspicion that, were we to have violently stripped away all social structure and order, all law whose aim is justice, all civilization as we have built it to be, then there would be but nothing, nothing: this is what makes apocalyptic scary when it is scary. (I can't even do *Mad Max* and that's supposed to be an action/adventure.)

Really, if the great reveal of apocalyptic is that there is nothing—no purpose, no higher order, no greater good, no charity that isn't self-interest turned manipulative, no thing that abides or justice that insists or redemption that persists so that nothing is lost—then it is downright scary, even despairing for, once this is accepted as the way things are, then our grandest hope could only be our own survival and maybe the survival of whosoever we manage to care about, and the highest good we could aim for is might such that makes right, this right being our own survival.

This is the space that Pilate steps into—expediency, survival.

This is the space that Jesus steps *through*—persistent hope, insistent creativity and imagination. Jesus steps through apocalyptic and comes to the eschaton—Jesus, and Daniel before him with the one like a human being leading the way.

Some apocalyptic is nihilistic—that there is *nothing* but survival. Some, I recognize, is humanistic—the reveal being that, as one character said in the vampire show *Angel*, “if nothing we do matters, then all that matters is what we do...If there's no bigger meaning, then the smallest act of kindness is the greatest thing in the world.” And this is okay: I can live with this. But some apocalyptic is eschatological—and this means you get two big Greek words today.

The eschaton is God's glorious and good end—the aim and end for all that is, the aim and end of the creation that is its consummation with God by which God will be the all in all. The eschaton is the perfection of the creation, the completion of the creation that God began when God began to create. And eschatological apocalyptic has this as its reveal: that when

empires fall and civilizations crumble or self-destruct, when what we've attached ourselves to and have come to rely on all come apart and fall away, then the free-fall that we fear might instead have us caught up in God and by God, held by grace. What has been promised to abide will be revealed to have endured and to catch us as we fall so to become new ground on which to build and from which to build up.

In short, eschatological apocalyptic has as its great reveal that the end of what is is also a radical beginning for what could be and what should be.

"What is truth?" Pilate asked.

"I am truth," Jesus said. "Follow me," into and on through, from life to life.

This is the end. Next comes a beginning. And in the week that intervenes, there is always this: thanks be to God.