

“Counter-Kingdom”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
John 18:33-37

Daniel had a night vision.

This may be what happens when the only light you have at night is what the stars and the moon offer you. No blue light from a smartphone spilling across your eyes and face. No streetlights glaring through your window. No chance to flip the switch and turn on the lights after too much tossing and turning. When you are alone, with nothing to stand in that distance between your hopes and your fears, sometimes God meets you and gives you a vision.

They say that before electricity, people went to sleep earlier, closer to the time of the sun setting, but did not sleep through the night. After 3-4 hours, they would do chores, talk, eat, pray, or have sex. And then, they would sleep again for another 3-4 hours. Maybe Daniel wasn't sleeping at all when the holy appeared to him in a vision.

The way you see things in the night is different from how you see things in the day. Sometimes, this works to my detriment, because in the middle of the night something that seems insurmountable in the worry it causes me, once day arises, becomes just a little crumb I can easily flick away with the resources the daylight offers me. It works the other way too, though. Sometimes, in the nighttime you find a deep peace and rest, a brief liberation, only to find with daylight that the stresses that the night so graciously hid still remained.

As for Daniel, whose name means “God is my judge,” he was a Hebrew youth, and the bible places him as taken captive during the time of King Nebudchadnezzar of Babylon, in the 6th century BCE. Scholars think the book was actually written centuries later, in the second century BCE, as an allegory against another oppressive ruler of *that* time, the Greek King Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Whatever it was, in the cloak of darkness, in the quiet of sleep– or

perhaps a nighttime sleep intermission— Daniel had a vision borne of both his fear, and his dream for liberation.

What Daniel's vision told him was this: it began with images this morning's reading left skipped beasts, that defy creaturely nature as we know it. A lion with wings like an eagle. A bear with three tusks. A leopard with four heads. The fourth, the most dreadful, with teeth like iron, and ten horns, and smaller horns that sprung from the larger horn, and one horn covered in eyes and a mouth that spoke arrogantly.

An arrogant-speaking, horny beast? Of course the bible speaks of things long, long ago...

But to confront this beast, a counter-image emerged: The Ancient One, sitting on a throne, with wooly hair, white clothing, and fire coming from his throne and its wheels, and 1,000,000 serving him, and 1,000,000,000 attending him. An assembled courtroom sat with books open, ready to judge.

What is the verdict? The arrogant beast is put to death and its body burned with fire. The other three beasts? Well, their lives were spared, but their *dominion* was taken away.

Then, Daniel's vision continued, someone like a human being appeared from heaven's clouds and was presented before the Ancient One. And to him, all dominion was given: the glory, the kingship, the devotion of all peoples, languages, nations.

There is the vision. In the midst of nightfall, under a blanket of stars, a hope revealed: the arrogant beast *cannot* dominate you. Only the Ancient One is in charge, and the one to whom he entrusted all dominion. Daniel's first readers wondered who that would be. We Christians know him as Jesus.

Many of us take issue with the language of kingship. It's not only that we do not have kings in this country. We trust that a God of liberation does not take on the toxic, patriarchal trappings of kingship. But Jesus envisioned kingship differently; he told Pilate himself, when Jesus was handed over for sedition: "My kingdom does not belong to this world."

In 1925, Pope Pius XI began Christ the King Sunday, as the waves of nationalism and fascism fanned in Europe, to recognize that “while governments come and go, Christ reigns as King forever.” 99 years later, nationalism and fascism still threaten to lure our devotion. And in the face of that, we must call out false leaders and proclaim that *only Christ* is sovereign. Political ideology comes and goes. Popes, pastors, and priests come and go. Presidents, Supreme Court justices, and kings come and go. Even nations come and go. But over and above all things, for Christians, **Jesus remains our Sovereign**. When we recognize Christ as sovereign, we don’t belong to any other kind of rule. We have no allegiance to it.

When Jesus said, “My kingdom does not belong to this world,” I don’t think he meant that he was not concerned for this world. He meant that he chose not to follow the rules of this world. He made a *counter-kingdom*— a way of existing and loving and healing and truth-telling that was not bound by what the kings of this world tell you you can and cannot do. A kingdom counter, or opposite— to those kingdoms that would speak arrogantly and sell you lies as if they are the truth. You see:

If Jesus’ kingdom were of this world, his followers would be fighting to keep Jesus from being handed over.

If Jesus’ kingdom were of this world, he would simply smite his enemies.

If Jesus’ kingdom were of this world, he would tax the loaves and fishes or use them to wine and dine those who would give him political favors— instead of sharing them abundantly.

If Jesus’ kingdom were of this world, he would take away women’s rights instead of counting women among his disciples and dearest friends; if Jesus were of this world, he would be hurling stones at women instead of shaming those who intend to do so and causing them to put the stones down.

If Jesus’ kingdom were of this world, he would be policing bathrooms and bodies instead of making sure that the outcast’s bodily needs are met with dignity, care, and compassion.

If Jesus' kingdom were of this world, he would have built a wall tall around it, and deported those who did not by birth belong. Instead, Jesus said "whoever welcomes the stranger, welcomes me."

If Jesus' kingdom were of this world, death would have stopped him. But glory, hallelujah, it did not! And so we can have the courage that no king, no fear, no tyranny, no chains, can keep us from rising with Christ, too.

Jesus' kingdom does not belong to this world. But we who proclaim his name belong to Jesus' kingdom.

So what do we do in the meantime, when we see ugly and fearful beasts speaking with authority all around us?

We have to tell a different story. It is the story of the counter-kingdom. And we have to create a culture that tells this story in a way that captures the imagination and the vision of the people. We have to tell the story— and if you're not good with words, use your body, use art, use music, use your love, use your action, use your advocacy and resources, propping up someone who needs to tell the story because the story that's been told *about* them is a bunch of lies. Tell the story, dream about it in the nighttime and tell it in the day. Tell it truthfully, and in a way that reaches through the cloak of nighttime and shakes people awake with a thrilling hope in what God can do in us, through us, and with us.

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