

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Daniel 7:1-14; Luke 9:28-36

Sermon Title: "Dreams and Visions of Glory and Might" (Transfiguration Sunday)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

March 6, 2011

Daniel has a dream. This is not unusual, because Daniel has lots of dreams in the book named after him. His dreams, however, are not like our silly dreams, in which we may have to take a test in college or high school that we never studied for, and we have never been to the class. No, Daniel has dreams that come from God. God has something to communicate to his people, so he uses the creative brain of Daniel to transmit his words through detailed images.

One of the first images that God gives to Daniel is that of the four winds of heaven blowing and stirring up "the Great Sea." This sea is most likely the Mediterranean Sea. The wind is churning up the waters in a sort of hurricane, and these four beasts emerge as though they have lived in the Sea for a long time.

Daniel sees a lion with eagle's wings. It would be neat to see a lion with wings on the African Plain, but this lion doesn't keep its avian appendages for long. They are pulled off as though they never existed. This

proud creature is lifted up and told to stand like a human being, which is unnatural. Lions walk on all fours – they do not stand on two hind legs. This creature is given a human heart, because the creature might not have had a heart with the ability to love and be loved. Like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*, if you don't have a heart, you don't have compassion. Now the lion has a proper heart.

Another beast emerges from the Sea, and this is a bear: an ordinary bear without wings, one we would see at the zoo. Unlike the lion, bears can stand on their hind legs, so this bear raises up and presents its sharp teeth with three ribs in between them. This beast is hungry, ready to rip into some fresh meat. Somebody tells it to “arise and devour much flesh.”

Before Daniel can witness the bloody carnage of this bear, a third creature arrives. A leopard, but not like one we would see in the zoo. This leopard, like the lion before it, has wings. Four wings instead of two. This creature also has four heads, which is highly unusual because no living animal has four heads. This one does, and it has power over all things.

The last creature Daniel sees in his nightly dream is a beast that doesn't look like anything we have seen before. It is dreadful, it is terrifying, it would make us scream and run away. It has huge iron teeth, and those teeth rip to shreds anything in its way. It has

powerful feet that trample anything into pulp.

The beast has ten horns, and another little horn grows among them, and three of the ten horns are uprooted from their places, and the one little horn produces human eyes and a human mouth that makes all sorts of boasts, talking all sorts of trash. This fourth creature is beyond imagination. Movie companies that work with CG (computer graphics) would love to create an image of this fourth monster.

Later, in Daniel 7, we are told who the four creatures are. They are four kings that arise upon the earth. The first one, the lion, is probably King Nebuchadnezzar, once a proud, powerful king who was knocked down so far that he ate grass like the cows. God restored him and gave him a humble, moldable heart. The second creature, the bear, is thought to be the Medes and Persian king that swept over the nations and gobbled up Babylon and Egypt.¹ The third, the leopard, is seen as Greece and Alexander the Great, who took over everything as far as India, and then after his death four leaders fought with each other as to see who was going to rule over what. The fourth, a huge monster, is seen as Rome that would take over every nation for a very long time, and produce Senators and Caesars that would abuse their

¹ As well as Lydia and other smaller nations.

power, including the mass persecution of both Jews and Christians alike.

These seem to be the most logical explanations of Daniel's dream. Some scholars have studied Daniel, and mixed his dreams with other biblical prophecies, and poured in a good portion of John's dream in Revelation, and have come up with a prediction of what will come in the End Times. Daniel's dream could have something to do with what is going to come. We haven't gotten there yet, so we don't fully know. However, one thing is certain about Daniel's dream: Kingdoms and governments come and go. Good and evil people arise and fall. The people of God are affected in such ways that normal life is uprooted and turned on its head, but even their tribulations will come and go eventually.

We know this by the last vision Daniel has in his dream. Thrones are set up in front of him, and the Ancient of Days comes forth. He is dressed in white that looks like snow to Daniel. His hair is pure, soft and spotless. The throne he sits on is a fiery blaze with wheels of fire spinning. Steam rises like billions of prayers offered to God in heaven. Servants beyond count come to serve the Ancient of Days, never burned up by the intense fire, never scorched by the hot steam.

Daniel then sees a figure, one like the Son of Man. He is a glorious figure who has a deep connection with God in all holiness and majesty. He comes from the clouds of heaven, and is carried to the Ancient of Days on his throne, and receives dominion over all kingdoms. Unending praise and adoration are heaped upon him by the worshipping servants. Since this spectacular figure has all dominion, he easily knocks out the little horn who speaks trash, and he easily relieves the other three beasts of their power. Daniel seems to be saying that all glory and power is God's from the beginning of time to the end. If any power is given to anybody they may have it for a time, and then that's it. It is taken away – maybe even yanked away – because power was abused, because those in power did not acknowledge the only true power in the world, the Ancient of Days.

Let us travel, now, about 650 years into the future. We leave Daniel with his wild and impressive dream, and we stand on a mountain with Jesus, Peter, James, and John. The mountain we stand on is Mount Hermon, situated in the north of Israel. That might not sound like much to us, but Mount Hermon is the largest mountain in the region, standing 9230 feet about sea level, almost two miles up. Most, if not all, the water the people drink comes from Hermon. The

Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, and the Dead Sea, do not exist without Mount Hermon.

People like to worship on the tops of mountains, because they feel closer to God in some way. They leave the hustle and bustle of life down below, and they connect with God in the serene air. So, why not go to the largest mountain in the region, and really get close to God?

The trip starts as normally as possible. Jesus invites three of his disciples to climb a mountain for prayer. They get to the top, and they are catch their breath for a moment, and then they get on with praying. Suddenly, like Daniel's dream, something beyond belief occurs. Jesus is praying quietly, and his face alters. The Greek word used here gives us this idea that Jesus' face is now something different: another nature, another form. His clothes are different, becoming as white and bright as the sun.

Peter, James, and John are stunned. As they try to take all this in, they see two other men standing with Jesus. They discover somehow that the men are Elijah and Moses. The greatest prophet to ever live and the greatest leader Israel has ever seen are now standing on the mountaintop with Jesus. This would be like Washington and Lincoln appearing before our eyes. The event is like Daniel lying on his pillow, and

seeing lions with wings and leopards with four heads, and a terrible monster emerging from a great sea like Godzilla. Is this a dream? Is this really happening? Why is this happening – we don't understand?

The three disciples definitely see two other men with Jesus. Moses represents the law of God, the one who enforces the law so everybody doesn't fall from it. Elijah represents the prophets, the one who communicates again God's law when people do fall from it. Because they stand with Jesus, they are in effect saying that Jesus is Elijah and Moses. He is the law-enforcer and the law-communicator. Earlier in his ministry, in the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus said that he didn't come to abolish the law and the prophets. He came to fulfill them. He came not to demolish them but to complete them.² For the people of God, the law and prophets are seen as the word of God. Jesus is the Word of God, through which all things were made and for which all things exist.³ The worship of God and the understanding of God start with Jesus as the Word, the Start of the law and prophets; and worship and understanding end with the Word, Jesus, just as God's law and prophets end with the Word.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, cf. 1435.

³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 1, The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*, cf. 166.

More is happening here, though. There is more to the situation than meets the eye, because there is Jesus still standing there as white and bright as the sun.

Consider what Daniel saw in his dream 650 years prior. The Ancient of Days and the One like the Son of Man, sitting on fiery thrones and receiving global adoration. On Mount Hermon, at this very moment, it all happens again. In the glory that Jesus is displaying, the men see Jesus not as a human leader who will overtake Israel, but as One like the Son of Man. Right now, they see the Ancient of Days in Jesus. They see fiery thrones and burning wheels and steam rising to heaven. They see dominion falling under Jesus. They see rulers coming and going. They see their own fears and troubles coming and going. All dominion of the world and universe is handed over to Jesus. Jesus is the Ancient of Days – Jesus is the Son of Man.

And just as all things come and go with Jesus, so will the lives of those disciples. They are able to see in Jesus' radiance their very lives being held by God. They can see that whatever befalls them in life – whatever tragedies they meet and whatever unwelcomed situations they have to deal with – they will begin it all with Jesus, they will move through it with Jesus, and they will stand at the end with Jesus.

No matter where their paths might lead them – whatever decisions they have to make, and plans they either have to complete or have to scrap – they will walk with Jesus and make it to wherever they need to go with Jesus.

Governments might rise and fall long the way. Economies might grow and plummet. There can be much poverty and then there could be many riches. Every event, event situation, all of life begins and ends with Jesus. And everything will be healed, and everything will be made whole, because Jesus is the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man are one. Daniel saw about 650 years ago – the disciples see it now.

In his confusion, in his joy, Peter asks the three men to stay. He wants to build separate booths or tents for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses to live in. This reflects his understanding of the Feast of Tabernacles, which God gave as a celebration to Moses and the Israelites. The Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of God, celebrates God's dominion and power over all things. We have nothing without God. We *are* nothing without God. The Feast of Tabernacles celebrates, and even solidifies, this important teaching in our minds. Peter wants to build tents, because he has seen the glory of God in Jesus. He knows who Jesus is. James and John see as well. God and his

glory are staring them in the face.

A voice from heaven tells the disciples to listen to Jesus. And then Elijah and Moses are gone. And then Jesus looks like the same Jesus he did before. And the three men and one Son of Man descend the mountain like nothing happened. Yet something was communicated. God spoke to the disciples quite clearly through a wild vision. God is in charge – God has always been in charge – and all things will return to him in glory and might one day. This is what we all are hoping for.