

WHEN JUSTICE PREVAILS

SERIES: WHEN KINGDOMS COLLIDE



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Daniel 7:1-28

8th Message

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*Every Who
Down in Who-ville
Liked Christmas a lot. . .*

*But the Grinch,
who lived just north of Who-ville,
Did NOT.*

*The Grinch hated Christmas!
The whole Christmas season!
Now, please don't ask why.
No one quite knows the reason.
It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right.
It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.
But I think that the most likely reason of all
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.*

*But,
Whatever the reason,
His heart or his shoe,
He stood there on Christmas Eve, hating the Whos...¹*

Today is the first day of Advent. The Christmas season has begun. I grew up hearing *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* being read to me pretty much every day in December. If you aren't familiar with it, it's about a strange looking green guy who tries to steal Christmas from a group of happy-go-lucky creatures called *Whos*.

I like the story of the Grinch because it reflects a common experience of the world. Who-ville is a happy place. Even more so during the Christmas season. Everyone is happy. "Every *Who* down in *Who-ville* liked Christmas a lot." We want to live in *Who-ville*. Sometimes we convince ourselves that we do.

But we know that there is evil out there. There is something that threatens to bring things down. There are evil people. There is injustice. There are those who would deceive and manipulate and oppress. There are terrorists and mean bosses and unfaithful friends. As much as we want to live in *Who-ville*, we know that evil is out there. "The Grinch, who lived just north of *Who-ville*, did not."

This is the tension that we live with. During Christmas, we hope that tension might be resolved. Christmas is a season of believing that there can be peace. Hope in the midst of the darkness and injustice of our world. Love is possible.

But what if we are just being naïve? Is all of this Christmas cheer real? Or is it just warm fuzzies that don't amount to anything? If it's not real, then the hope of Christmas is empty. Hope that isn't based on anything is just empty optimism. Hope without reason is cruel. Do we really have the right to hope?

In September we began a series looking at the biblical book of Daniel. We called this series *When Kingdoms Collide* because this book highlights the two kingdoms that we live in. There is the kingdom of man: our jobs and homes and communities. And if you believe in Jesus, there is the kingdom of God: an alternate reality that honors the unseen God as creator and redeemer.

We spent seven weeks looking at the first part of the book of Daniel. Six stories that tell of times when those kingdoms come into conflict. Times when Daniel or his friends were caught in the middle. Those stories offered us helpful guidance for the times in our own lives when we feel torn between two kingdoms.

The second half of this book is very different. It contains four different visions. They are apocalyptic visions—having to do with what you might call "the end of the world." They describe a time when the collision of these two kingdoms will be resolved. These prophecies predict that eventually there will not be two kingdoms. Eventually the kingdom of man will be drawn up into the reality of the kingdom of God. Only God's kingdom will persist.

But kingdoms usually don't give up power peacefully. So these visions are graphic. They are violent. They are filled with chaos and confusion. Strange beasts and terrifying creatures. Goats with ten horns and something called the "*abomination of desolation*." You know—a perfect kind of story for Advent.

Actually, these visions *are* perfect for Advent. Advent means "coming." We usually think that refers to the coming of Jesus to earth. And that's part of what it means. But the Latin word is a translation of the Greek word *parousia*. This is the word that is used to refer to the Second Coming of Jesus.

As it turns out, the traditional church calendar considers Advent to be the time during the year when Christians particularly anticipate the second coming, or advent, of Jesus. This is when we reflect on the fact that Jesus really is coming back. What better way to anticipate the coming of Jesus than to remember that he already came once?

That's why Advent looks forward to Christmas. Not just to remember that Jesus came to earth a long, long time ago. But to remember that he's coming again. We remember his first coming as a way of anticipating his second coming. Advent is about waiting for and hoping for the return of Jesus.

These visions in the book of Daniel will help us to do that. They will remind us that Jesus will return. And they will offer us hope. Because even though they are violent and confusing, the violence always resolves. You know the phrase, "the calm before the storm"? This is the opposite. They describe the "storm before the calm." The point of the visions is the resolution. That calm gives us hope.

This morning we start with the first vision in Daniel chapter 7. It sets the stage for all the other visions. It tells the story of four terrible kingdoms that are eventually replaced by a heavenly king. The vision describes the peace and justice of God's kingdom replacing the chaos and confusion of man's kingdom. This vision shows us what it looks like when justice prevails.

It's very similar to a vision that we heard about several weeks ago. In Daniel chapter 2, the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, received a vision of a statue with four layers. Each layer represented an earthly kingdom. But eventually the entire statue gave way to an eternal heavenly kingdom.

The similar sequence of four earthly kingdoms reminds us that this whole process seems to take a long time. We have to wait through kingdom after kingdom. We almost wonder whether it is real at all. One kingdom comes and another one goes. Won't that just happen forever? Will there ever actually be a final resolution?

Isn't this what we feel? After all, it's been more than two thousand years since the event that we celebrate on December 25. Isn't it tempting to think that the whole "second coming of Jesus" thing is just a myth? It might make sense to live by Christian principles. After all it's good to have values. But do we really believe that Jesus will actually come back? Isn't that the kind of thing that weird religious people talk about?

Well, let's see. Let's look at this vision and see what it tells us about the way history might unfold. Let's see if we have a reason to have hope. Let's see if we think Jesus really is coming back and justice really will eventually prevail.

A World of Empires

The chapter begins by telling us about a vision that came to Daniel during the first year of the reign of King Belshazzar. A little historical update might help here. Daniel lived in the middle of the 6th century BC. The people of God are in exile in Babylon after Jerusalem was destroyed. Daniel is an Israelite who has been trained and put into the service of Babylon's government.

You might remember King Belshazzar from the first part of the book. We heard a story about when he threw a huge party. In the middle of this party, a hand appeared and wrote on the wall. The writing revealed that he would be judged. That same night he was killed and his kingdom invaded.

When we heard about him before, we didn't really like Belshazzar. There was nothing to like. The other kings we heard about eventually appreciated Daniel and his God. Nebuchadnezzar and Darius both seemed like decent guys. But not Belshazzar. He was all bad.

That sets the tone for this vision. We're in a season of a very bad king. In the midst of this season, the vision describes a sequence of beasts rising up from the sea.

Daniel 7:2-8:

Daniel declared, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it. And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, 'Arise, devour much flesh.' After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it. After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth;

it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things.

This scene is reminiscent of the creation story. Genesis begins describing the spirit of God hovering over the waters. This vision begins with the winds of heaven stirring up the sea. This vision begins at the beginning. It claims to tell the story of the world. In Genesis we see God creating order out of the chaos of the sea. But here we see terrifying beasts rising up. More and more chaos.

First, the lion with eagles wings which was given the mind of man. Isn't that a terrible combination? The strength of a lion, the swiftness of an eagle, and the intelligence of men. That beast is replaced by one that looks like a bear. This bear is described in a position of hunting. Even before finishing its last meal, with the ribs still in its mouth, it is given permission to devour even more. Then a third beast that looks like a flying leopard, but this one has four heads. Nothing escapes the notice of a beast with four heads.

The final beast is the worst, though. At least the others were recognizable. They looked like *something*. But this beast can't even be described. It was terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had ten horns—way more than any creature I've ever seen. One horn became dominant over the others and began to speak "great" or "boastful" things.

This is a scary vision. When Daniel asks an angel what this means later in the chapter, he is told this in verse 17, *These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth.*

This vision describes the way the world works. It's a bleak picture: a series of beastly empires that conquer and destroy and devour. They are violent. They seek power. Each one is worse than the last. On the top of every hill, there is a Grinch who doesn't like Christmas and brings fear and terror to the people around him.

When you read a prophecy like this, one of our first inclinations is to try and break the code. We want to figure out which beast refers to which kingdom. Babylon and Persia and Rome or maybe Nazi Germany. We might try to do the same thing with the horns. Ten horns and

then three horns and then one final horn. If you read commentaries on this prophecy, you'll find tons of different interpretations and theories about which beast or horn refers to which historical reality.

But here is where we have to be careful to read the Bible according to how it is meant to be read. In the text, Daniel asks an angel what all this means. He doesn't get a list of kingdoms. He gets a very general answer. "*Four kings who shall arise out of the earth.*" Perhaps we are meant to read this prophecy in a general way if that's what the angel says. Not necessarily four specific kingdoms, but a general pattern of beastly empires.

We'll see next week that the second vision is different. When Daniel asks for an interpretation, he gets a much more specific one. We'll talk more about the difference between these two visions next week. For now, it seems like this vision is meant to talk in broad, general terms. It sets up a pattern. A template of how history unfolds.

This vision suggests that we live among beastly empires. We live among beastly empires. Is that true today?

I think so. Look at recent history in the Middle East. Our country tried to intervene to take out a dangerous dictator. And what happened? Even more dangerous forces spring up in his place. The same story plays out in all sorts of ways around us. Evil seems uncontrollable. If it isn't a lion, it's a bear. If it's not a leopard, it's something indescribable. What are we to do?

You may have heard the story of Matt and Grace Huang. Matt actually used to attend PBC when he was in grad school at Stanford. I was in a Bible Study with him. They are an Asian American family who adopted three African children before moving to Qatar to work there. While they were there, their oldest daughter died unexpectedly from what was likely an eating disorder. Almost immediately, they were arrested for murder. The Qatari culture doesn't understand adoption, much less interracial adoption. Their only category for explaining it is that Matt and Grace bought the children to sell their organs on the black market.

They were convicted several months ago and sentenced to three years in prison. After they appealed the decision, they were allowed out of prison, but couldn't leave the country. Their story has been featured in the New York Times and by Katie Couric. There's been a recent update to their situation that I'll share in a few minutes. The situation they have faced is unthinkable.

But don't think that this kind of stuff doesn't happen here. There is real darkness even here in Silicon Valley. Children who can't find a reason to keep living. Working poor who are getting priced out of their homes even while working three jobs. Families broken by violence and infidelity and distrust. Everywhere we look, people with power seem to use it to hurt other people.

The empires around us might look nicer, but they are just as power-hungry as the ones described by Daniel's vision. We really do live among beastly empires.

Endure Beastly Empires

Right about now, you're thinking that I've picked a terrible series for Advent. Any Christmas spirit that you had when you walked in the room this morning has been replaced by the thought of an endless stream of beastly empires. If this is the way the world is, what are we to do? Let's see what happens next in the vision.

Daniel 7:9–10:

⁹ **“As I looked,
thrones were placed,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames;
its wheels were burning fire.
¹⁰ A stream of fire issued
and came out from before him;
a thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand
stood before him;
the court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened.**

It's a picture of a courtroom. Preparations are being made for someone important. And then he shows up! The Ancient of Days. This is the only place in the Bible where we find this name. The phrase might literally be translated, “*the one advanced in years*.” It's a really old guy. Even though we haven't heard this title before, we know exactly who is being referred to. This is God, the creator of the universe. He has shown up.

This is a dramatic moment in the vision. We get a bunch of details. The court sits down. The books are opened. Something is about to happen. We don't know exactly what is going to happen, but we are hopeful.

This is how we handle beastly empires. We want someone to come along to make it right. This is what

happened in Ferguson, Missouri. After a white police officer shot an unarmed young black man, the whole country waited to hear what the courts would have to say about it. People wanted our justice system to set things right.

This is what we want when we hear the story of Matt and Grace Huang. We wait for news of the appeal hoping that it fixes everything.

The truth is that we spend a lot of time in this place: living under beastly empires, knowing that God is up there, waiting for him to act. This moment where we don't know how things will turn out describes a lot of our life. We are always waiting to see if things will get better.

This is what tempts us to lose hope. Waiting is hard. We get tired of it.

Later on in this chapter, Daniel asks for more information about what he has seen. He is told some more detail about the little horn from the fourth beast.

Daniel 7:25—

**He shall speak words against the Most High,
and shall wear out the saints of the Most High,
and shall think to change the times and the law;
and they shall be given into his hand for a time,
times, and half a time.**

Notice that this little horn, the worst of the beastly empires, takes particular issue with the saints of the Most High. He comes into conflict with them and he wears them out. This is what happens. We are told in advance so that we can expect it. We will get worn out. God has predicted it. This season of waiting could last a long time. As Christians, we are called to endure. We endure beastly empires.

The danger of the Christmas season is that it can be terribly naïve. Full of empty optimism and Hallmark wishes. Do we really think that a Santa Claus in the mall can fix the world's problems? Do we really think that another Jimmy Stewart movie will bring everyone warm fuzzy feelings and bring world peace?

There is real evil in the world. It is in conflict with God. And it seems to be lasting forever. That's what this next phrase means: “*they shall be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time.*”

People have tried to figure out what this phrase means for a long time. It's a generic progression of periods of

time. It starts with 1 period of time. Then it moves to 2 periods of time. The last in the sequence is 1/2 of a period of time.

If you add this up, you get to three and a half. Some people think this refers to three and a half years. Some of the other periods of time in Daniel and other parts of the Bible are close to this value. There are some end times chronologies that use 3.5 years as a dominant part of how the world will end. That might be true, but I'm convinced that the original intention of this phrase is more general, but also more relevant and powerful. The angel seems to interpret the prophecy broadly, so we ought to as well.

It seems best to understand this as an interrupted sequence. 1, 2, then one half. We expect 1, 2, 3; or mathematicians might expect the powers of two: 1, 2, 4." Something difficult begins and lasts for a bit. Then it lasts twice as long. We are getting worn out. This experience is getting on forever. This is what we're familiar with.

But then all of a sudden, it is interrupted. 1, 2, and not 3 or 4, but one half. Just when we think it's going to last forever, everything changes. The sequence is interrupted. We had almost given up hope and then something unexpected happens. We are surprised and excited.

At the end of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, there is a dramatic scene where the Grinch has all of the presents and decorations and food that he stole from *Who-ville* on his sleigh which he has brought up to the "up the side of Mt. Crumpit . . . to the tiptop to dump it." It seems that the beast has finally won. His reign will be last forever and Christmas will be forever destroyed.

And we are left waiting to find out what the outcome will be. Will Christmas be destroyed or will something else happen. Will the sequence continue as it started or will it be interrupted? How will things turn out?

We endure beastly empires because even though it feels like it will last forever, we have hope that it won't. This season of Advent teaches us to endure. We are learning to wait well. Because life is full of waiting. Daniel's vision concludes with the answer that becomes the key to all of this.

Expect Jesus to Return

The vision resolves with good news. The angel says that the court shall sit in judgment and the dominion of the little horn be taken away. That part of the vision is in Daniel 7:11-14.

¹¹ "I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. ¹² As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

¹³ "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.

¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

As Daniel looks on, the terrifying fourth beast is killed. The bad guy gets punished. Then we meet the good guy. He is human. That's what "one like a son of man" means. But he comes from God. That's what coming with the clouds of heaven means. This new character arrives on the scene and saves the day.

Now we're getting to Advent. This is the event that we are moving toward as we remember the first coming of Jesus. That moment when deity and humanity co-existed in the person of Jesus Christ. That moment, when after four hundred years without prophecy, God showed up. Just when everyone thought it would never happen, Jesus comes on the scene.

Just before the Grinch dumps his load of toys, there is a surprise. The sequence *is* interrupted. Instead of mourning and wailing, the Grinch hears laughing and singing. It is the turning point of the whole story. In that moment, the Grinch goes through a transformation. Something that no one could have ever predicted happened out of nowhere. The story reads, "And what happened that day? / Well . . . in *Who-ville* they say / That the Grinch's small heart / grew three sizes that day."

We live among beastly empires. One of our calls is to endure these times. But we endure with hope. We remember that Jesus came to earth once. That gives us the confidence to expect that he will come back as the perfect king. He will inherit an eternal kingdom. He will bring justice. So as we endure, we also expect.

Christians aren't the only ones interested in the end of the world. Our culture loves end of the world stories. I preached on this passage several years ago in the young adult fellowship and immediately afterwards, we all went to the movie premiere of *2012*. We heard the biblical version of the apocalypse, so then we compared it with Hollywood's. Spoiler alert: they save the world.

Why are these kinds of stories so popular? I read an article interviewing several authors on why they wrote apocalyptic stories. Here's what M. R. Carey, author of *The Girl With All the Gifts* said,

We're drawn to the idea of civilisation coming crashing to the ground because it would make most of our day-to-day worries irrelevant at a stroke. You'd never have to fret about going into the office again, about traffic or money worries or noisy neighbours or political corruption or your kids getting on at school. It's like what Renton says about heroin addiction in Trainspotting—it just gives you the one BIG thing to worry about, so all the scary complexity of life fades away.²

There are so many small things that consume our lives. We know that they aren't really that important. And yet we have to deal with them. But we desperately want some way to clear away the clutter so that we can find the one thing that really is important.

That's my hope for this morning. I know that life is complex. I know that there is so much to worry about. Let me suggest that throughout this season of Advent you give some attention to the "one BIG thing" that is way bigger than anything else.

Jesus is coming back.

This is the only thing that gives us hope. Without Jesus, we live amidst beastly empires. I don't know what to think about events in Ferguson Missouri, but everything about it is terrible. I don't know what to do about my friends trapped in Qatar. I don't know it's fair that I eat like a king while others in the world starve. I don't know what to do about the beastly empires in this world.

But I do know that Jesus is coming back. The king will come. That gives me hope. Real hope. I know that justice is not easy. It will not happen without opposition. Jesus will not return and everybody throw him a parade. It will be chaotic and probably violent. But he will return. And in the end, there will be peace and justice.

The story in this vision ends with the son of man receiving his eternal kingdom. His kingdom is one that

will not be destroyed. It's a great ending. We need to know that things will ultimately work out because there is so much uncertainty in our lives. We don't know how things in our world or our lives will work out. God gives us stories with endings to help us with the stories that don't yet have endings.

As I worked on this sermon, I saw an update that Matt and Grace Huang were headed into court to hear the conclusion of their appeal. An hour later I learned that they were acquitted. They have been declared innocent of all charges. They are finally on their way home. But their story is not over. When they get home, they'll have to figure out what the rest of their lives look like after losing their daughter and spending almost two years fighting charges of murder.

But I was so grateful to learn that God gave a happy ending to this part of their story. Maybe it can help us with the stories that don't have an ending yet. As we endure the world that we live in, we expect Jesus to come back. We have real hope for the story of this world to end well. It's not empty. It's not simply optimism. It is real hope.

Conclusion

So what are we to do as we hope? We're kicking off the Advent season this morning by thinking about a vision that Daniel saw over 2500 years ago. What are we supposed to do with it? Let's see what he did with it. Here is how he responds in verse 28.

“Here is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly alarmed me, and my color changed, but I kept the matter in my heart.”

In short, Daniel didn't exactly know what to do. A prophecy like this doesn't exactly come with clear instructions on what to do next. He'd seen something incredible. It scared him. The color drained from his face. So he waited. He reflected on it. He “kept the matter in his heart.”

If you're familiar with the Christmas story, that phrase might remind you of a similar one. Years later, an angel came to a young virgin named Mary and told her that she would become pregnant with the Son of the Most High. He will sit on a throne. His kingdom will last forever. Sure enough, the young woman gave birth to a baby boy. Shepherds came to praise him. Kings brought gifts to him. And at the end of all this, we are told in Luke 2:19, *Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.*

It's a lot to take in—Beasts with ten horns, evil that seems to last forever, virgins getting pregnant, kings giving gifts to a baby, old men on thrones. Who can process all this? What does it all mean?

It doesn't have to all make sense. Daniel was confused and disturbed at first. But it starts something in our hearts. We consider these things and reflect. Keep all of this in your heart. That's the purpose of this Advent season. To anticipate the return of Jesus.

Please don't think I'm suggesting that all we do is wait. At some point, this expectation will move us to action. It did for Daniel. It will for us. Our endurance and expectation is not passive. We don't just wait for God to come back and fix everything. We are called to get involved.

But for now, just ask God what this means for you. Endure the beastly empires of this world. Expect Jesus to return. An expectation like that changes how you live your life. I can't tell you how it will work out for you, but it will make everything different.

We are surrounded by pain. But Jesus is coming back. That gives us real hope. Endure and expect.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Dr. Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (New York, NY: Random House, 1957).
- 2 <http://io9.com/how-did-post-apocalyptic-stories-become-the-hottest-boo-1649022270> (December 2, 2014).