

Saints And Monsters And Joyous Confidence – Judy Cox

Daniel 7:1-3, 9-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

Last week Rick named our reality, that we are sinners in desperate need of God's mercy. On this All Saints Sunday I'm called to remind us that (and how) we are saints! And I'm reminded of physicist and Nobel laureate Niels Bohr's famous observation, "The opposite of a great truth is another truth." Sitting together under Scripture today we are convicted of both great truths!

All Saints Day occurred Friday, but we observe it on this Sunday on the church calendar. At St. Paul's, and in Free Methodism generally, we don't observe each of the saints' days, which honor those who've been canonized throughout church history on the anniversary of their deaths. As Protestants we lean into the Pauline usage of the descriptor "saints," (or set apart ones) for all those who have made up, and now (and will) make up Christ's church, set apart by God's Spirit and participating through God's response-enabling grace in the work of Christ, as his Body. All believers are called saints, not just those singled out as extremely pious, ascetic or miracle-working. On All Saints Day we remember who we are because of Who God is! And we remember all our own dear ones who have died and joined that *great cloud of witnesses*, whom we affirm each Sunday in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the communion of the saints".

In our closing hymn last Sunday we sang, "I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasy ... no angel visitant ... but take the dimness of my soul away." So today we hear of *a dream and visions* from the book of Daniel! This passage helps define apocalyptic literature, a genre dealing with "end times" crises and judgment approaching; a heavenly being generally reveals secrets to a human listener, encouraging readers in their particular desperate situations to hang on, to persevere. Literal "en-visioning" makes the readers aware of a supernatural perspective, whose reality transcends theirs. Apocalyptic calls us to "Fear not!" and then it tells us why.

We're not reading the entire passage—we don't hear the bizarre descriptions of the four beasts, including the last, *terrifying and dreadful*, with its tenth horn taking on a weird identity of its own. We do hear repeated an important "code word" that helps us receive apocalyptic as a gift to us today, and to all its audiences, across time. Yes, scholars see this passage referring to a very specific time-bound situation, with the tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes and his desecration of the Jewish Temple. But in verses 2 and 3 we learn that the winds are *stirring up the great sea*, from which the four beasts arise. The sea across Scripture represents opposition to God, the waters of Chaos understood by surrounding pagans as divine. It is these Waters of Chaos over which God's Spirit broods in Genesis, and they give way without question to the powerful creative Word, "Let there be..." And in every time, in every age, in every generation we saints name our own Chaos Monsters rising up and bringing terror. We acknowledge our particular desperate situations. Our monsters may not be pagan rulers who desecrate our churches, nor the Evil Empires of Babylon or Assyria. But we can all name some that terrify us: Climate Change, Pandemic, Terrorism, Supremacist Violence, Market Crash. Or Fear, Distrust, Secrecy, Unemployment ... and Death--especially on this day when we remember those dear ones who have died.

These monsters which terrify Daniel threaten God the Ancient One not at all. God takes the governing position, seated on the throne. (And fire appears four times in three verses! With wildfires raging in California again, we might not intuitively hear "fire" as an image of God's sovereign order—but consider fire as over against the waters of Chaos!) Judgement is declared and executed on all four beasts.

Apocalyptic gives us space to name the forces that oppose and terrorize us. And it proclaims that ultimate power belongs to God; judgment will be handed down on those forces, and they will be destroyed. In the midst of our desperation, we are invited back to joyous confidence in God.

We Christians know that Jesus appropriated the phrase *one like a human being* (literally and in other versions, *one like a son of man*) to describe himself. Dr. Tim Meadowcroft names this self-ascription as “genius [for]...it captured both his messianic vocation and his essential humanity. In the Son of Man heaven and earth meet.” Here this One receives *dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.* Notice the resonance with our last few verses from Ephesians: Jesus is (now! not “someday”) seated *far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet.*

Our Daniel passage closes with similar phrasing to Ephesians’ too: *the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever--forever and ever.*

Together our lectionary texts affirm that God in Christ has ultimate power, dominion, glory, rule and authority, with *all things under his feet*, everlastingly, from *this age* (now, currently!) into *the age to come*. Yes, the saints encounter real and even terrifying opposition. We need to know in our fearful now, no less than the Jews enduring persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes, that the powers of this world will be undone, judgment will happen, and God’s fire will consume the waters of Chaos and every age’s manifestation of its monsters.

So I’d love to respond with the echo of Psalm 95, the “Venite” of Morning Prayer: *The LORD is a great God, and a great king above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it!* But the responsorial psalm given us by the lectionary today exposes an ugly vein of spiritualized hostility we’d rather not own, and the company we’d rather not admit that we keep. It begins with joy and singing, a call to praise the Lord. Verses 6-9 turn to calling the faithful to wield *two-edged swords*, instruments of violence and vengeance, against other nations and peoples while the high praises of God are still *in their throats!* If you think this sounds like a psalm the Crusaders might have loved, you’re exactly right. Medieval historians agree, documenting how the Church used THIS psalm to justify and advocate for crusades to the Holy Land and Baltic, as well as the German peasants’ revolt of the 16th century. Lord, have mercy!

Yes, we rightly condemn all such religious violence, as Rev. Dr. David Gambrell notes. We also must acknowledge, on the other hand, that being faithful to God does put us at odds with the Principalities and Powers of this world. With this perspective given us by history, Psalm 149 cautions me that the saints, called and set apart by God, can yet be so co-opted that we ourselves behave as manifestations of our age’s monsters.

We might think of the lectionary—a more recent “instrument” crafted by and for the Church—as a corrective here, correcting the Church historically, and correcting us in our painful nows. Because these are the words of Jesus that today’s assigned gospel reading gives us, these are the scriptures that chime in to interpret our other scriptures: *But I say to you that listen, **Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.***

Luke's telling of Jesus' beatitudes differs from Matthew's! It echoes Mary's Magnificat as it underscores the great reversal of the kingdom of God, which brings down the powerful and the Powers. After the blessings that we saints gladly appropriate come *woe[s] to you* (so presumably to some in the audience described as Jesus' disciples!). Woe to the rich, the full, the laughing, the well-spoken-of. Perhaps here we find a metaphorical two-edged sword, at least to us privileged American Christians? Maybe, after those woes sink in, we might not be so happy to be among the *you who listen!*

Jesus continues, commanding habitual behaviors of doing good, blessing, and praying for one's enemies. They embody the radical love of our merciful Father God, who (per verse 35, following today's passage) *is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked*. This radical love Jesus displayed to and even on the cross, refusing to respond to violence with violence.

Who are we the saints to be then, set apart by God and formed *in Christ* into the community of the church which is His body? How are we to respond as followers of this merciful God Who triumphs through the power of the cross, through radical non-violent love? How do we stand for justice, participating in God's cause to right the world, in this non-violent love?

Dallas Willard's take on the Beatitudes helps me find my way—not that it's an easy way!: “Truly loving our adversary ... does not mean to do [whatever] they demand. It means to be genuinely committed to what is good for them, to seek their well-being. This may even require that we NOT give in to them. But there are many ways of holding the line, some of God, some not. ... Do whatever you do without hostility, bitterness, and the merciless desire to win. ... And keep a joyous confidence in God no matter what happens.”

And so we are invited to come with joyous confidence to this Table of the Lord, our foretaste of the heavenly banquet. “Joyous confidence” does not preclude naming the monsters that frighten us, both external and internal. Our confidence is in God Who yet speaks decisively in Jesus Christ, the powerful creative Word, and overcomes all those monstrous powers, without and within. At this Table we all partake of the one Body, Bread broken for us, that unifies us all into the one Body which is Christ's church. With all the saints across time and space we proclaim Jesus Christ, the Lord Who has died, has risen, and will come again, in glory ... and in love.