

Sermon TUMC – May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018

## **Daniel's dreams: Conclusion to the series on the Book of Daniel**

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Psalm 1

Ephesians 1: 15-23

I will not be preaching a sermon about Mother's Day, today, rather I wish to help us conclude our book study on Daniel. If I were to preach a sermon about mother's day, I would of course remind us all that it was created in North America not to over-sentimentalize the role of mothering, as is currently the case, but to remember the grief of mothers for fallen soldiers and as a call for peace.<sup>1</sup> But like I said, that is for another sermon.

Today, despite an interruption by an ice storm, we conclude our short preaching series on the book of Daniel, which we began back on April 8<sup>th</sup>.

*Are you one of those people who remembers your dreams?* I know someone who suffers terrible nightmares on a regular basis and wishes they didn't remember. I know someone else who has fascinating dreams that all end up relating to things this person is living through, to their psychological inner-workings – their therapist LOVES them. Sadly, most of the time, I mostly don't remember my dreams – though it is not uncommon for me to wake up feeling the emotions of what I dreamt.

*Have you ever had a strange dream and wonder whether it means anything? Do you ever hope your strange dreams don't mean anything?* Some people keep dream journals – like Daniel did.

The book of Daniel is full of dreams that mean something. The first half, which we've looked at so far, are of the dreams and visions of kings about their kingdoms. The second half has several of Daniel's fantastical dreams about how those kingdoms – and earthly kingdoms in general – will all fall under God's superior power. In this book of the Bible, in this world view, in this type of writing – from an ancient time before the common era – dreams mean something. They are a way for the heavenly realm to reveal things to the earthly realm. That *may* still be true.

Since those times, we haven't given up on trying to figure out dreams. Many fields, such as psychology use dreams as a window into what's going on inside of us, or in the future, depending on what field you're dealing with. Many spiritualities also still turn to dreams for wisdom.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/05/140508-mothers-day-nation-gifts-facts-culture-moms/>

The Preaching Team's goal in taking on Daniel was to persist with an entire book of the Bible – one we don't often read– and see what, if anything, God might have to say to us through this book.

I am always grateful for TUMC's preaching team, but for this series I was even more so. The study of the Book of Daniel was greatly enriched by hearing excellent sermons from different voices and perspectives. (If you missed any of them, I'd encourage you to go back and listen, maybe more than once).

I would also like to note that as Anabaptists, we trust that one of the ways the Word of God comes to us is through reading and studying the Bible together. This is one of the reasons why we choose to have a preaching team here at TUMC.

In our series, Lori asked us at the outset "How might this collection of folk tales and wild visions in the book of Daniel speak to us today?" She took us on an overview of Daniel, with a pointed question about what faithfulness looks like in our time. She assured us that while "Kings never listen and Kings never learn", *there is hope in the people who choose to do the faithful things, who reach for wisdom and who choose a better way.* – hold on to that thought.

Jeff spoke to us about appropriate uses of power and the dangers of leadership that is not supported by peers who can offer corrective instruction and wisdom. He sees in Daniel a warning about what happens when we lose a proper sense of ourselves. He finished with a moving set of personal questions about who we are choosing to be as humans, and an invitation to humble ourselves. We might use that more as a personal check-up on whether we have a true sense of who we are and what is our power.

Leif, one of our youngest TUMC preachers ever, encouraged us to be inspired by Daniel and his friends' acts of passive resistance. He also invited us to learn the lessons that the kings had on offer: to be ready for the word of God, even if it comes from unexpected places, especially from people one considers one's inferiors. He concluded by saying: "When you hear the word of God, keep an open mind and listen. Once you know what you must do, do it. Change yourself, and change your actions."

So here I come now, trying to make sure we don't miss anything noteworthy from the book of Daniel. We all noted that this book was written about a time in the life of the Hebrew people when their earthly kingdoms had been mostly destroyed, the temple was defiled and folks were scattered, living in exile. This exile is a huge theological turning point, everything about how they – and we – understand God changed at that point.

After the familiar stories in the first 6 chapters, suddenly there's a shift in the language (it goes from Aramaic – the language of commerce at the time, to Hebrew – which indicates that it was written at a different time and possibly for a specifically

Jewish readers). The chapters that follow have to do with apocalyptic dreams that Daniel had and they are meant to be encouraging words from God to people who are in exile.

One of the first things we need to do to do good Bible Study is to ask the question of genre. In other words, what kind of writing are we reading? Is it poetry, fiction or fable, history or story, text book, document, hero's tale, eyewitness account, or, in this case, apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic literature is meant for hope and encouragement.

The second question follows closely, when was it written. So we must remember that the book of Daniel is very ancient literature in a genre we don't fully comprehend because it is very far removed from how we understand the world today. We're not meant to just pluck out parts of it and apply them to our time – though that doesn't stop people from trying – nor does it mean the book doesn't have something to say to us. “The strength of scripture is its ongoing interpretability, we can keep on discovering a range of possible meanings.” (Marty Steussy, at Network of Biblical Storytelling 2016)

John Epp, loves the book of Daniel and has studied it in depth, creating his own schematics around how the book is structured – yes, we should have had him preach about it or it least tells us a portion.

He talked to me about how apocalypse means a revelation, an unveiling. The dreams are like pulling back a curtain to show what is going on in the heavenly realms. We often think that apocalyptic literature talks about how the world is going to end, but it is probably better understood as talking about things that are ultimate, things that are basic, fundamental, the way really things are (in the experience of the person writing).

Apocalyptic literature is also highly symbolic. Daniel's dreams are filled with wild, bizarre, troubling images, full of weird creatures, glowing “holy ones,” and heavenly councils. Many of the references to nature, Moon and Sun and Stars are thought to refer to specific kings and dynasties, for example.

Frankly, I don't have much use for the content of dreams themselves, other than to regard them with curiosity. They speak of epochs in history, and for that I prefer a history book – or should I say a short documentary? ☺ They also tend to assume that the world is only about kings and empires, and I know the world to be about a lot more than that.

But, as we noted already in this series, a lot of Daniel's experience of kings and their abuse of power, seems to fit with our own experiences, even though we live in 2018 in democratic politics. Kings never listen, kings never learn.

One of the reasons Daniel may have expressed his thoughts in dreams was to fly under the radar of those in power – we’ve already noted how the king’s wise people couldn’t interpret dreams. Or we might say that one of the reasons God gave Daniel dreams was so that he and his people could encourage each other without getting noticed by the kings who had already threatened them. A secret language, as it were.

When I was growing up in Brazil, under a military regime that made people “disappear” if they became too critical of the government, it was not uncommon for poets and musicians to write songs that had hidden meanings. I didn’t understand it fully at the time, but I learned much later that a lot of what I thought were love songs, break-up songs, were actually the poets calling out the government. One line goes “In spite of you, tomorrow will be another day.” If they were confronted for being revolutionary they could always claim it was just a love song.<sup>2</sup> Poetry was a secret – not so secret – way of opposing government power. That is true in other places of oppression as well, including the slaves in North America, who used hymns and biblical images in much the same way. It helps to speak in code, and much of Daniel’s dreams are in code.

I am not going to delve into the content of Daniel’s visions. If you took the time to read Daniel you’ll be familiar with them. Other preachers and writers are more obsessed with these things, so you can find a lot of info. “...The visions can be applied and reapplied across the centuries as situations of great evil arise, flourish, and then are doomed.”<sup>3</sup> People have done this a lot.

Paul M. Lederach who wrote a *Believer’s Church Commentary* on Daniel says the following:

“To receive a divine message is an overwhelming experience. Daniel’s vision is mysterious. There is both terror and serenity, cause for despair and encouragement. If Daniel scarcely understands its meaning it follows that his readers will also be perplexed and find it difficult to interpret and to identify with many facets of the vision. Yet throughout vision, in the midst of the troubled times, God is powerfully presents and at work on the behalf of God’s people. To grasp the significance of that insight is of greater value than attempting to explain each detail of the vision.”<sup>4</sup>

A couple of details stand out. It is of note that Daniel, by his own account, was devoted to a rich life of fasting and prayer. I also find it interesting to think about God having a divine council to assist in running the world.

What I find most fascinating and applicable to our experience today, is how **God honours Daniel’s prayerful quest for wisdom, and how God sends help and**

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<sup>2</sup> Chico Buarque “Apesar de Voce” <https://www.letras.com/chico-buarque/7582/>

<sup>3</sup> Paul M. Lederach, *Daniel, Believer’s Church Bible Commentary*, p. 161

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 168

**clarity to Daniel when he is confused.** There is a pattern of God sending wisdom and consolation.

Here are a few excerpts that will help me draw out a pattern:

7:2-8

*I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven 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 watched, its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a human being; and a human mind was given to it. Another beast appeared, a second one, that looked like a bear. It was raised up on one side, had three tusks in its mouth among its teeth and was told, 'Arise, devour many bodies!' After this, as I watched, another appeared, like a leopard. The beast had four wings of a bird on its back and four heads; and dominion was given to it. After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns. I was considering the horns, when another horn appeared, a little one coming up among them; to make room for it, three of the earlier horns were plucked up by the roots. There were eyes like human eyes in this horn, and a mouth speaking arrogantly."*

And so on and so forth...

At some point Daniel says (7:15-18)

*As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me. I approached one of the attendants to ask him the truth concerning all this. So he said that he would disclose to me the interpretation of the matter:*

Further on in chapter 8, Daniel talks about getting help from the angel Gabriel:

*15 When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, I tried to understand it. Then someone appeared standing before me, having the appearance of a man, 16and I heard a human voice, calling, 'Gabriel, help this man understand the vision.' 17So he came near where I stood; and when he came, I became frightened and fell prostrate. But he said to me, 'Understand, O mortal, that the vision is for the time of the end.'*

Then he gets an explanation and tells us the following:

*27 So I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days; then I arose and went about the king's business. But I was dismayed by the vision and did not understand it.*

It was not all fun and games knowing what God was up to and what was going to happen next!

Then Daniel notices that there is a prophecy from the book of Jeremiah that seems like it's time to be fulfilled. He prays an extended confession to God and asks God about the prophecy. Here's what happened next:

(9:20-23)

*20 While I was speaking, and was praying and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God on behalf of the holy mountain of my God— <sup>21</sup>while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen before in a vision, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. <sup>22</sup>He came and said to me, 'Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding. <sup>23</sup>At the beginning of your supplications a word went out, and I have come to declare it, for you are greatly beloved. So consider the word and understand the vision:*

And the angel Gabriel goes on to explain to him about the prophecy.

In Chapter 10, after a period of 3 weeks mourning, extended fasting, and lack of bathing, as he was standing by the river, he looked up and saw a glowing human form and went towards it. This figure touched him, told him he was beloved and asked him to pay attention.

(10.10-12)

*10 But then a hand touched me and roused me to my hands and knees. <sup>11</sup>He said to me, 'Daniel, greatly beloved, pay attention to the words that I am going to speak to you. Stand on your feet, for I have now been sent to you.' So while he was speaking this word to me, I stood up trembling. <sup>12</sup>He said to me, 'Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words.*

**God honours Daniel's prayerful quest for wisdom. God sends help and clarity to Daniel when he is confused.**

As we conclude for now this book study, I pray that we hear the Word of God for us in our time. Just as Daniel was not left alone in exile, he was offered visions, safety, hope, so too God offers

To help us stay faithful to the values of God's kingdom in times of darkness and exile, when it might feel we have been thrown to the lions.

God helps us not to be crushed by hopelessness or by the world's powers. The Creator of Life and Death has ultimate power and we are in the Creator's care.

God surrounds us with wise counsel to help us make wise decisions and find God's Word.

In Daniel, we find that God offers to be present to us in our struggles and in our quest for wisdom.

God's help will show up in answer to our prayers. We are not alone.

Ephesians:

<sup>17</sup>I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know God, <sup>18</sup>so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which we have been called. And that we might know the immeasurable greatness of this power.