

“BIRTHPANGS AND HEAD GAMES”
SCRIPTURE: DANIEL 12:1-3; MARK 13:1-8
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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Daniel 12:1-3

12:1 "At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book.

12:2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

12:3 Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

Mark 13:1-8

13:1 As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"

13:2 Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

13:3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately,

13:4 "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

13:5 Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray.

13:6 Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray.

13:7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.

13:8 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be

earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Truth be told Sunday. What are you afraid of? (Get answers)

And what do you do when you are afraid? (Get answers)

Fear is not a pleasant feeling. And we can spend a lot of energy avoiding having to feel it.

But fear is an important messenger—it tells us something needs to change.

Fear is not the problem. Our relationship to fear is the problem. Do we avoid it? Do we face it? Do we deny it? Do we fight? Do we run? Do we freeze?

Facing fear is the only way it can really speak truth to us, and it's the only way to find freedom from it.

Anyone who says you shouldn't talk about politics at church hasn't read the Book of Daniel (or most of the Bible frankly).

If you're afraid of mixing politics and religion, let's unpack that fear a bit together—let's face it together. Will you fight? Will you flee? Or will you freeze? How about another option—will you find freedom--freedom from a fear that is causing anxiety or avoidance or anger that can become toxic?

I am praying all of us can opt for the quest for freedom—freedom from the oppression that fear can impose on us.

What are we afraid of when we say we shouldn't talk about politics at church? Are we afraid of conflict? Are we afraid of being uncomfortable? Are we afraid of experiencing someone's anger?

Consider that question for a moment and see what comes up for you. Maybe you don't think we should avoid talking about politics at church.

In that case, sit with what is at stake for you in that belief. What is important to you about that kind of conversation at church? How do you relate to the inevitable tension that emerges from any such difficult conversation?

So, back to the Book of Daniel. To understand what is going on in Daniel, we have to get straight on some terms. What is politics? This concept comes from ancient Greek philosophy—Plato so richly described the idea in his *Republic*.

The *polis* or human civilization, human community, is a place of collaboration and contestation. And so “politics” refer to matters of our life together as human beings seeking after the good, or the ways of living that cultivate the good life—justice and love and wisdom.

For Plato, these goods were best cultivated in an atmosphere of higher learning and with the leadership of the philosopher king, who stood in right relationship to the essential qualities of the good life.

So the deepest roots of this word, “politics,” goes to the very heart of what it means to be in human community. In this sense of the word, our faith is nothing if not an active engagement in matters of the *polis*, active questioning of how we can live most faithfully together in human community.

In the 19th century, this term came to be associated more with the rotten underbelly of political systems—the term “playing politics” was born. In this usage, politics became a dirty word—it became equated with manipulation, lies, ruthless competition, and people (e.g. politicians) who we can't trust.

Maybe it is in this usage that the term got confused with the word “partisan”—and it's meaning began to shape shift into something more about party affiliation, than the way we organize our life together in human community.

In the 20th century, feminist social theory reclaimed the word “politics” and brought it into our most intimate relationships. In feminist theory politics is not just the way we organize the state or the government, it is how we organize our households, our private spaces.

“The personal is the political” became the feminist rallying cry for difficult conversations about gender and power and the ways toxic masculinity impact every layer of our lives together—not just the state house but the kitchen, the cradle, the bedroom.

And so here we are today, in a social location that has taught us many things about how to orient to life in the *polis*.

We’ve been taught to prioritize “being nice” and having good manners. We’ve been taught to avoid conflict and to do what we need to do to “get along.”

And we live in a country that currently has an extremely inflammatory and even violent partisan political culture.

And we are a part of a Presbyterian denomination that has never shied away from speaking to the most difficult social issues, not by telling us what to think or how to vote, but by challenging us to bring our faith to bear on any question of how the state uses its power and how we, as people of faith, relate to the power the state has.

And we have been formed in a faith (Christianity) that has, since the very birth of our tradition, been tangled up in both partisan and philosophical conflict.

And it is in this context that the lectionary gives us Daniel and Mark’s “little apocalypse”—the lectionary gives us politics.

If you are feeling some fear and trembling about that—take a deep breath and welcome what the Spirit has to give today in our context. Daniel and Mark’s little apocalypse are what the Spirit is offering.

Daniel is a strange and important book in Hebrew scripture. It is a book about non-violent resistance. Written by and to a people under generations of oppressive rule by several different colonizing forces.

Who are we when we read Daniel? Are we the colonizers? Or are we the colonized? Or are we both?¹

Daniel’s book begins with stories—stories of Jewish resistance to oppression, peppered with symbols of dominance that tell the story of suppression and trauma and survival and even finding ways to thrive in captivity.

Our passage today is apocalyptic—written to disclose, to weave together mystery, transcendence, and the travail of an anguished current reality.

Daniel is a book about non-violent resistance, not about passivity. Being spiritually brave, morally courageous, not resigned and docile, are the ways Daniel tells people of faith to be wise in the face of oppressive systems and rulers.

For Daniel, spiritual warfare is real and the trauma of living under an occupying force, under the thumb of a dominant military rule, is real. These verses here are about the connection of anguish and deliverance, the connection between resistance, righteousness, and redemption.

Jesus didn't mince words when it came to politics. Like it or not, he was pretty impolite sometimes. He didn't mind calling out the ones who played politics—no matter their affiliation or station.

And in our passage today, Mark's "little apocalypse," his conversation with Peter, James, John, and Andrew about the institutions and structures of their culture wasn't about being passive or avoiding political realities. It is a warning against naiveté.

The unveiling of the wisdom of faith that Jesus reveals here to his friends echoes the stories of resistance from Daniel.

All that you are most attached to—the temple, the institutions and structures and values of the world that you organize your life around—those are all going away, Jesus says. They are not gods, they are not permanent, and they are passing away.

Peter, James, John, and Andrew want details—they want dates and times and exact locations. They want a road map for what this all means and how they can know what is happening.

Jesus says, beware of people who say they can give you those answers—who claim to have all the answers. Jesus doesn't give them a crystal ball—he gives them a new relationship to the tumult of the world.

All of the awful stuff that happens, well it shouldn't alarm you (he doesn't say it shouldn't grieve you, or that it shouldn't move you to compassion or to action) he says don't be alarmed; don't be surprised. This is what happens in a world turned against itself.

But for God, this is the just the beginning of the birth pangs—just the beginning of the in breaking of a new way of being together.

How do we relate to these birth pangs? It's a head game more than it is an end game. As people of faith we are called to not be afraid, but to be wise and engaged.

To see things for what they are—an unveiling of consequences, a moment of truth about the stark difference between the nation-state and the kingdom of God.

Christians cannot get too cozy with the powers and principalities. They are not the carriers of God's kingdom. We also cannot sequester ourselves away and watch from a distance as the world crumbles under the weight of greed and dominance and foolish pride.

Jesus calls us to be present in the anguish, in the turmoil, in the grip of labor's most intense contractions, with the disposition of faith, not fear.

So, let's get back to the fear. What are you afraid of? What do you do when you are afraid?

This is not a faith community that will help you avoid your fears—this is a community that I pray helps give us all the strength and support we need to face our fears together.

There are institutions crumbling—the very ground is shifting under our feet, wars and rumors of wars, people in power who tell us lies and who use their power to oppress, cities on fire, communities under attack, relationships in turmoil, trust broken.

All of those big stones, those large structures that have defined us—they are not here forever. They are not our gods. And they are not the carriers of the kingdom of God. And they are passing away.

Do not be alarmed by these things, Jesus says. Be wise. Be aware. Be engaged. And understand what it is that is happening. This is not the end.

We are lying together in the anguish of the birthing bed, learning how to trust the birth pangs.

Fear stalls labor. Fear even creates danger in labor. It shuts down the process. It arrests the body's resources. Birth pangs are most productive in a supportive atmosphere—where the one birthing has what she needs to be brave and to believe.

Your thoughts can be your worst enemy on the birthing bed: thoughts of being inadequate, helpless, ashamed, thoughts of dying, thoughts of being afraid of death.

If we are going to support what God is birthing, Grace Covenant, we've got to get our minds right—the head games of our contentious political climate are doing a number on us:

- They are telling us to be afraid,
- They are telling us to normalize evil things,
- They are telling us to trust institutions and procedures that have proven themselves not to be trustworthy,
- They are telling us to just look out for ourselves and people like us,
- They are telling us to lash out,
- They are telling us that violence is the way we need to solve our problems,
- They are telling us to give up.

These head games being waged are spiritual warfare. And as people of faith our resistance must be vigilant, active, unrelenting, and shared.

This is where we rally the troops—we are people who believe in the power of God to breath new life into the ashes of human tragedy and pride.

We will not relent of our hope.

We will not relent of our love.

We will not relent of our resolve to push and provoke and persist for a better world.

Thanks be to God.

¹ Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “The Book of Daniel,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VII, 34. Smith-Christopher has a helpful discussion of reading Daniel from the perspective of the colonized and uses such resources for the entirety of his commentary.