

**Sermon: Alpha & Ω**

New North Church, Hingham

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21 November 2021

Based on **Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Revelation 1:1-8; John 18:33-37**

Talking about apocalyptic visions and Jesus' meeting with Pontius Pilate seems an odd way to finish the church year. But our three readings today all have something to do with the promise of God's deliverance and the giving of the kingdom. That's not that surprising as we are celebrating the Reign of Christ, after all.

From a literary standpoint, Daniel is an interesting book. Most of the first half, up to and including today's chapter, is written in Aramaic; the rest is written in Hebrew. The setting is Babylon during the Exile after the destruction of the Temple and a time of persecution. But it was written during another persecution which began with the desecration of the since-rebuilt Temple almost two hundred years before Jesus was born.

So, the author is writing about the promise of a deliverance which *did* happen in a time when deliverance is promised and longed for, but which may or may not happen.

As Daniel watched, thrones – plural – were set in place and an Ancient One – meaning God – took a seat in one of them. There is at least one other throne left. The idea that there were two thrones in heaven was heretical in the rabbinic Judaism of the second century, but this is what Daniel saw.

A son of man – early Christians interpreted this to be Jesus – came with the clouds of heaven *to* the Ancient One to occupy his own throne. This son of man was given dominion and glory and kingship. For Christians, this is deep background to Jesus not being of the earthly kingdoms but sitting at God's right hand in heaven. This is what Jesus was trying to get Pilate to understand.

If I were to come to you to tell you about my vision, and then told you what Daniel saw, or what John wrote to the seven churches, what would you think? You might think, perhaps this guy is kinda loopy.

Most people would respond that way, and why not? The reason for that, I think, is because we, as a faith community, are not living in a time of existential persecution, as

Daniel and John were. Plus, believing in anyone's apocalyptic vision takes a great leap in imagination. We can barely believe the evening news or even the weather forecast, let alone a vision of a throne of fiery flames, no matter who it comes from.

In a way, that's a good thing. It means that life is somewhat stable and manageable. Things are under control. We can go to bed at night, safe in the knowledge that we will sleep peacefully and safe from harm. That's not true in many parts of the world, but for most of us it is.

The problem is that our thinking might become only two-dimensional. When we're comfortable, we sometimes forget to look up and thank God for what we have, and, as a community, we certainly have no need to cry out for God's divine deliverance.

John's letter to the seven churches reflects a time of persecution for early Christians when they did cry out. Roman persecution was highly localized though, mostly centered in and around Nero's Rome, and was never official state policy. The persecution in Revelation may represent something that actually happened somewhere, or it may only reflect what the author *expects* will happen, sometime soon.

Compare that with modern-day Christian persecution in places like India, North Korea, Nigeria. According to the Open Doors USA web site, over 340 million Christians around the world live in places with high levels of persecution and discrimination.<sup>1</sup>

If you're Jewish, it's not much better but it's more visible to Americans. According to the Anti-Defamation League, anti-Semitic incidents reached an historically high level across the United States last year, including incidents of assault, harassment, and vandalism.<sup>2</sup>

We're not at the end times but we certainly need to beware and to keep watch.

The Christians addressed in John's letter were waiting and hoping for Jesus' imminent return, and so they did keep their heads up, watching for the signs. Christians of every age live in trust and hope in the God of redemption who identifies with those who suffer, the God who identifies with the martyrs who protected Jews in World War II, with the Jesuit martyrs in 1980s El Salvador, and on and on.

It's hard to keep your head up in such circumstances.

But, through Jesus, God embraces human suffering. The kingdom is coming; this was the focus of Jesus' preaching. It will get here, even if the faithful must endure pain with only patience and perseverance.

In John's Gospel, Pilate seems to know nothing about Jesus. He even has to ask, "What have you done?" You must have done something because here you are. But it doesn't matter.

God isn't his concern. Pilate lives in an ambiguous world of shifting loyalties, patronage, war – a world sort of like ours. For him, it's about power – who has it and how to get it. In Pilate's world, might makes right. What Pilate and Caesar don't get is that their power is limited and finite where Jesus' authority is not.

Pilate is also caught in the middle between keeping his job with Caesar and appeasing the religious authorities. He has to find a way to keep the peace and his problem is, he can find no guilt in this rabbi with the large and enthusiastic following.

As soon as Jesus said, "My kingdom –," Pilate stopped listening. That's all he needed to hear. And when Jesus said that he came to testify to the truth, Pilate asked, "What is truth?" What's true for the Pilates in the world is not true for everyone else, especially those who hear and listen to Jesus' voice. The truth that Jesus represents is found in God's grace and mercy and love.

So, then, what does it mean to us to say that Jesus is Lord? If Jesus' kingdom had anything to do with this world, we might have to fight for it. But Jesus himself said his kingdom "is not *from* this world." His kingdom has nothing to do with Rome or any other earthly empire.

Maybe the best we can do is not *prove* the resurrection but *proclaim* it. Proclaim that Christ is King and then, by the Spirit, live accordingly.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution>, accessed 20 November 2021.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/us-antisemitic-incidents-remained-at-historic-high-in-2020>, accessed 20 November 2021.