

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18

In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream: 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. 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: "As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever."

Ephesians 1:15-20

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers, 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 him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. (271)

This past week, I tucked in a quick trip to Exeter, New Hampshire. Where my mom now lives, where I went to high school, one town over from where I grew up, it's as much my childhood home as any I could return to, though I stay in a hotel when I'm there, with my sister, a decommissioned dorm now dubbed the Exeter Inn. It covers the basics with an old-world elegance.

A morning stroll around town had me at the boathouse, where I learned to row back in the day.

I mean, not quite. There's a new boathouse near where the old one had sat, though the old one hardly seemed in need of replacement. There was there, too, an old-world elegance that covered the basics, if rowing can be thought of as "basic."

Whatever. I'm often drawn to it—to watch the young rowers do what I used to do, with such a sense of self-importance, to chat with the boathouse manager with whom I'd recall Pete, the boathouse manager when I was there. Empty that morning, the boathouse was quiet, looked after only by those whose images lined the walls, team photographs that date from the earliest days. 1864 is when rowing started at Exeter, but team pictures weren't really a thing until fifty years later at least.

My team picture is midway up the stairs to the second floor.

There I am, third row, next to Hallie.

So, I *was* here.

I thought I'd been, but it's nice to have external confirmation to the fact, an objective witness: I exist: I was here: I held a place. It's been filled in by other things now, as if by an incoming tide. But I was here, see?

Today is All Souls' Day. It's the third day of a [TRID-yoo-um] triduum, a three-day festival, the most still-celebrated of which is in the spring, Good Friday to Easter Sunday. The autumn counterbalance is All Hallows' Eve, which is October 31st, All Saints' Day, which is November 1st, and All Souls' Day, which is today, November 2nd. I imagine this is still honored as a holy rite in some parts of the world, under the liturgical care of some aspects of the Christian church. But around here it's vestigial, only hardly remembered, or for that one day made commonplace, Halloween, kids dressed up like zombies or Minions or Minnie Mouse, people of all ages these days roaming the streets for handouts of candy—

Which, though I don't tend to celebrate, I do truly appreciate. A day for fun and pretending: we could use more of that. A day where everyone can find a place, not anymore a religious holiday, nor political, nor ideological, just sort of ridiculous, where to describe it is to risk sounding like you're mocking it or critiquing it. Nope. Throw on a costume, one you've planned out for months, or one you bought at a store, or one you cobbled together just moments ago from the back of your mom's closet. Have at it. Have a Kit-Kat! Take a Snickers and have some fun.

Time was it was set to more serious purpose, which I also appreciate.

All Hallows' Eve was thought to be when the souls of those who'd died in the past year had their last chance at vengeance before settling down in the afterlife—and for this it was considered a dangerous night, and also a useful night for disguising yourself, dressing up like someone else in case some recent deceased had a bone to pick with you.

All Saints' Day commemorates those who, having died, achieved the beatific vision of heaven, those who've achieved perfect salvation in all its wholeness and entirety.

All Souls' Day is for everyone else, a crowded day to hold in mind, in prayer, everyone else, all those who, though deceased, haven't quite realized the fullness of God's ultimate aim and end, perfect glory, eternal peace, a sounding forth of angelic song, "Alleluia!" Whether this is God's action to bring all to such fullness, or whether it comes from our effort, to perfect ourselves or to be perfected by the faithful praying of those we'd rally to our cause: such things are a mystery. So, we'll come at it from all sides, take every imaginable tack, relying on God's good grace while resorting to prayer, each of us for our sake and all of us for the sake of all.

That's today: All Souls' Day, which lands us in apocalyptic literature, this year the Old Testament Book of Daniel.

It's a weird one, this book, and not only because it's apocalyptic, though it is, one of the earliest versions of which. It's weird also for its disguising itself, as it were.

It speaks as if Daniel were a prophet in the 6th century before Christ, when cataclysm was coming from the East, Babylon closing in on the people of God. Daniel was apparently receiving visions of disaster because of Babylon closing in on Judea where Israel had already fallen to Assyria. Beasts all around.

The text itself, though, and the tradition around it, all indicate otherwise, that Daniel was a character of the 2nd century when Babylon was a long-gone threat, when though the Greek Seleucid Empire was on the march, and the emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes was sharpening his knives against the Jews. Just so, the Book of Daniel might have been to speak of this impending threat though in coded language, as if from a far earlier time and in the voice of some long-gone prophet so not to draw the attention of the current threat, the currently reigning beast. Babylon couldn't punish someone speaking ill of that empire, but the Greeks could—which the writer of this book would have been wise not to want.

Apocalyptic literature functions thus, which is, by the way, a genre of literature.

"Apocalyptic," the word, is Greek for revelation, though it's entered common parlance to mean destruction, even the end of the world—the two of which however aren't *unrelated*. Often times, in order to come to an occasion of revelation, the given world has to be stripped away. In order to have revealed something of enduring truth, there needs to be falling away or destruction of what sustains illusion, what allows for unseeing.

Consider: much of the world as we know it are but structures for unseeing, structures for shielding us from ugly truths. Much of what comprises society and indeed civilization is but a scaffolding for untruth. Really, the more "civilized" we become, the more distanced we are from the ugly and unclean aspects of our lives. This might indeed be what civilization *is*—a structuring of things such that we are at an ever-greater distance from our essential violence and wastefulness.

Consider indeed: I eat chicken, but I have never once butchered a chicken; I eat meat nearly daily but have ever had an animal's blood on my clothes. I, likewise, have indoor plumbing that makes it so I can simply flush all my waste away, and have weekly garbage pick-up so I never have to account for my consuming and discarding. What's more, not to adhere to most of these things would have me face accusation of being uncivilized.

Which apocalyptic imagining would open the door for wondering more about:

What endures when all that builds up crumbles instead, falls away? On what ground do we stand when all that remains is the ground on which we might stand?

And what must there be in the structures of society that would make an apocalypse promising rather than terrifying? For those who imagined what became apocalyptic in the Bible were imagining things that gave them as much hope as dread. Daniel hoped for the falling away of the Seleucids. John, whose more famous apocalypse, the Book of Revelation, desperately yearned for the utter destruction of Rome. No doubt the victims of Nazi Germany would have preferred a world without trains, without bureaucracy, without showers (that may or may not be showers) even if such a world meant hungrily, desperately, if also freely pulling turnips from unfriendly soil. Some civilizations we're better off without.

Which is the implied promise of the apocalyptic literature, and the implied threat if you happen to be invested in said civilization, if you happen to be the emperor, say, or one of the imperial guard.

This civilization is going *down*.

"Hooray!" say the slaves with their hands in the dirt.

"Uh-oh," say the masters, on the penthouse floor.

For this, apocalyptic speaks in metaphor, speaks un-specifically, rather more evocatively, so not to draw too much attention. Beasts rising from the sea are to speak of empires who come to conquer by way of ships on the sea. Beasts with many eyes and many wings are to speak of imperial power that seems all-seeing, all-knowing, and capable of swooping in at any moment and to terrifying, deadly ends. And the lack of specifics in these regards allows for plausible deniability, the writer of the book able to say to Antiochus, for example, "Oh no, I wasn't talking about you."

That said, the lack of specifics has a creepy effect, and creeping. People read these texts in later times and suspect that they're meant to indicate some current threat or some future cataclysm. They search these wild, ungrounded texts for secret insight as to future happenings, clues as to what's gonna happen and who's gonna make it happen.

Like, the search for the beast who's marked "666."

This is an evergreen pastime: who did John mean might be this beast, this beast marked with 666? I remember as a kid reading *MAD Magazine*, which I will admit to you is what I mostly read as a kid, wherein one character in one graphic feature pointed out that Ronald Wilson Reagan did fit the "666" mold: R-O-N-A... This, when what's most likely is that 666 was to

designate numerologically NRO, or Nero, the emperor under whose reign of terror John found himself living, and suffering, and imprisoned on the penal island of Patmos. Here he would receive the revelation that would make him famous, which was perhaps but a desperate attempt to communicate warning to the churches also suffering under this reign, communicate in code so as not to be found out and then forced to endure more torture.

But so goes the fate of the Book of Revelation, the Revelation to John, ever a source for fear-based quackery, wherever apocalyptic comes to popular imagination. The Book of Daniel, from three centuries earlier, is less often put to current purpose, though in Daniel, as well, we have an empire bringing terror and threat, an emperor among emperors behaving as but a beast.

Meanwhile, a mere son of man shows real glory, faithful withstanding, non-violent resistance.

A mere son of man.

This designation, Son of Man, makes an interesting journey through the Bible. In its earliest uses, in the Book of Job and in the Psalms, it's a humiliating term, meant to underscore what is basic about a person, often even coupled with a clarifying phrase, son of man who is a maggot, son of man who is a worm. "In the Book of Daniel, however," so writes David Bentley Hart in the book we're reading in the churches book club, "Daniel describes the Ancient of Days upon his throne, and tells of 'one like a Son of Man' arriving amid clouds and being given everlasting dominion over all the nations of the earth."

This, it seems to me, amounts to a promotion for the human being, the mere mortal who is also somehow a participant in God's glory, a mere mortal who is also somehow in relation to God's eternity, the Ancient of Days and the future glory of all being.

The reconsideration of the goodness and glory of the human being continues in the New Testament, not least in the fact of God coming to God's creation as one created, Jesus of Nazareth, God taking on the flesh of a person and living bound by particularity. Jesus indeed refers to himself as Son of Man, joining humanity in out worminess that we might join him in his grace. Meanwhile, in the moment from which the Book of Daniel testified, there's a wondrous co-equation, the four kings on the rise and the holy ones of the Most High, the mere mortals whose significance is at least equal to that of the kings: "As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever."

Time was nothing of interest could be said of normal person. Gods and monsters, heroes and their wars.

Time was.

As for now?

All Souls' Day has us remember Mrs. Winch, Margaret Brown, Pete the boathouse guy, Mr. McConnell (these who are my souls to remember today). The final day of this triduum, this third and highest day, would have us remember those whose faces also line all the walls of all the places where they'd been and have now nearly been forgotten.

History is crowded with those whom we remember and those whom we forget yet have eternal remembrance in God. Today is the day to honor such souls, ordinary and unimpressive and therefore close to God's glory. We do it and we imagine time coming when it will do for us.

For all the saints, for all the souls:

Thanks be to God.