

“Shine Like the Brightness of the Sky”

Daniel 12:1-3 • Psalm 16 • Hebrews 10:11-25 • Mark 13:1-8

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I want to begin by talking about some of the conversations I've been having with people since Sunday. In case you aren't aware, there was some drama here last week! That afternoon I sent a message to everyone on our email list, saying: "There were some strong reactions to my sermon this morning. As I said at the outset, I want to begin a conversation. I know what I said was upsetting to some of you. You are all valued members of this community of faith and I appreciate your gifts and your insights. I'd like to hear from you. I'd like to better understand your point of view. I think that one of the things that will most help us is if we can sit down and listen to one another. Please feel free to call or text me and let's find a time to talk. I promise I will listen." Since then I've spoken with about 75 different people. These conversations have ranged from brief text messages to lengthy emails to phone calls to face-to-face meetings. Some people have expressed deep gratitude for what I said, while others were very angry; some think I mis-used the pulpit, while others (including clergy colleagues) think I did nothing wrong. Some think I should apologize for the entire sermon; others think I just overstepped; still others had no concerns. We're probably not going to come to agreement. One person told me I created a division within the church; I would say that there was *already* division here, a division I experienced acutely when I was trying to shepherd this congregation through the pandemic. There was a reason why I requested a three-month leave of absence after that was all over! A couple people indicated they would have appreciated a very *hopeful* message last week. I get that; if I could have offered that, I would have. A few people told me that there's always disappointment after an election; that's true, but it's different now; I've never seen so much *despair* – on either side of the aisle – as there has been this time. Crisis hotlines have experienced a dramatic increase in calls in the past ten days, and there has been a spike in suicides. Two people in this church told me about several suicides they are personally aware of that happened here in the greater Lansing area last Wednesday or soon afterward. Let me remind all of you that you can reach the national Suicide & Crisis Lifeline by dialing 988 at any time, day or night, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Community Mental Health also has a 24-hour crisis hotline, at 517-346-8460. *Please, please call for help* if you or a loved one are ever having thoughts of harming yourself, or others.

Several people felt hurt by what I said. One felt "insulted;" someone else felt "scolded." Please understand, I was not trying to be hurtful. Did I want to raise moral and ethical concerns? Absolutely. Ask some hard questions? Definitely. Raise awareness? You bet. Hurt people? No. I apologize if I hurt you. Let's also distinguish between feeling *hurt* and feeling *offended*. Sometimes, people *will* be offended in church. Jesus *often* offended people. Paul talked about "the offense of the cross." The general wisdom among clergy is that if we never offend anybody, we're probably not doing our job. If you were *offended*, that doesn't necessarily mean I did something wrong. If you were *hurt*, I apologize.

Several people have said that politics should not be preached from the pulpit. This is a fairly common point of view, and when I was younger I used to think that myself, but when you really study the Bible you will discover that much of it address political issues very directly. There are books that talk about good government (like Deuteronomy), books with horrible situations that resulted from a *lack* of good government (like Judges), books in which people are suffering under oppressive regimes (like Exodus and Revelation), books that describe painful realities resulting from political events (like Lamentations, Esther, and the book of Acts), books that describe qualities of good and bad kings (like 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, and the book of Psalms), books in which faithful people defied or actively spoke out against their king (like Daniel, Jeremiah, and Amos). The list goes on. At least three of the four Gospels deal with politics; John the Baptist lost his head because he got political; Jesus even criticized some political rulers of his day (Luke 13:32). Politics are *all over* the Bible.

But even if politics are in the Bible, should pastors talk about *current* political issues? I want to invite you to consider three scenarios. Imagine, first, that it's the year 1850, and pastors in many pulpits are preaching that slavery based on race is ordained by God, is good for society, and helps to "civilize" Black people – which is, in fact, what was being said from the pulpit in *many* churches across our country. Would you want *your* pastor to be silent? Or: imagine that we are in Germany in 1935, and your pastor knows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that your government is rounding up Jews and shipping them off to concentration camps where they are being forced into slave labor, without any due process or judicial review. Would you want your pastor to be silent? Or: imagine that we're in Birmingham, Alabama, and it's Sunday, May 5, 1963. Two days ago, Bull Connor ordered police and firemen to attack hundreds of children – who were protesting peacefully – with high-pressure fire hoses, batons, and police dogs, and images of those assaults have now appeared in newspapers on television all across the country. Would you want your pastor to be silent? At what point does *silence* become complicit with *evil*? There's a line, somewhere, between what doesn't need to be talked about in church, and what really *ought* to be discussed. We might not all agree where that line is. But I would hope we could all agree that, sooner or later, there comes a point when churches and church leaders *need* to speak up.

So, having said all that, let's try to move on, as best we can. And let me reiterate that my invitation to conversation still stands. If you were upset, if you want or need to talk, please let me know.

The scripture passages for today and the next couple weeks take a turn towards the apocalyptic. It is that time of year when we start considering the coming reign of Christ. It begins when Jesus makes a passing comment to his disciples that all the grand stonework in the sacred temple will all "be thrown down." Four curious disciples ask him privately: "when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Jesus responds with a long speech – nearly a whole chapter long – in which he names a number of events that "must take place." These include false Messiahs who lead many people astray, "wars and rumors of wars," nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines, and much more that wasn't included in this morning's reading. This whole thing is called the "Olivet Discourse" – because it takes place on the Mount of Olives – and you can find it in three of the four Gospels, pretty close to the end, shortly before Christ's Last Supper.

The question, of course, is how to interpret passages like this. Invariably, someone always asks me, "are we living in the end times?" What I want you to know is that there are several different ways Christians have approached these passages over the centuries. Some Christians hold that most of the

specific predictions that Jesus made came to pass within the first four decades after his resurrection, climaxing with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in the year AD 70. These Christians believe that the Second Coming, the resurrection of the dead, and the last judgment are still to come. A second group of Christians hold that these prophecies have been and continue to be fulfilled over an extended period of time, beginning in the earliest days of the church and continuing all the way to the present, and well beyond. This is sort of a “gradual fulfillment” view of biblical prophecy. A third group of Christians, especially evangelicals, say that these prophecies indicate that we are heading – rather imminently! – towards a time of global catastrophe and war, which will include a seven-year period of tribulation, the coming of the Antichrist, and an epic battle of Armageddon, culminating in the Second Coming of Christ. The people who are saying things like “the end times are happening *now!*” generally fall into this third category. Some of them are actively trying to influence world events in ways they believe will hasten Christ’s return. There is also a fourth group of Christians who interpret passages like this more symbolically and do not try to attach them to specific events, but rather see them as pointing to existential truths about God and humanity. Generally speaking, theologians and biblical scholars in our Presbyterian tradition have fallen into the second or the fourth category, not the first or third, which is why you’ll almost never hear a Presbyterian pastor declaring that “the end times are at hand *now.*” The Bible, and hard-to-understand passages like this, can be interpreted in different ways.

Let’s turn to the brief passage from the book of Daniel. There are twelve chapters in Daniel; the first six contain the familiar stories of Daniel in the lion’s den, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, and others like that. The last six chapters get *weird*. They describe four visions; today’s reading is a small portion of the last vision, which describe a series of circumstances that very closely resemble events that took place between 167 and 164 BC. Appearing in this vision is the archangel Michael, who is called “one of the chief princes” and “the great prince, the protector of your people.” This vision is Michael’s first and only appearance in the Old Testament. He is mentioned in some non-Biblical books, and twice in the New Testament: once in the epistle of Jude (where he argues with the devil about the body of Moses), and once in the book of Revelation (where Michael and his angels defeat the great dragon, “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world”). In art, Michael is typically depicted as a warrior angel, standing triumphantly on Satan’s head. Many Jews in the time of Jesus believed that Michael was part of a small group of archangels – either four or seven – who have a prominent place in God’s heavenly host. To this day, some branches of Christianity venerate Michael every year on September 29 (in the West), or on November 8 (in the East).

The point of both passages – Mark 13 and Daniel 12 – is to give people *hope*. Both affirm that there will be a particularly dark time in human history – Daniel describes it as “a time of anguish such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence” – but for those who are righteous, there is really nothing to be worried about: “at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book.” The dead will arise, and there will be a judgment: “some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” For the righteous, this is *extraordinarily* good news. “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” Ultimately, it doesn’t matter when the apocalypse will come, or what will happen before then. What matters is how we live, and who we are called to be: people of *righteousness*, people of *wisdom*, people of *faith*, shining like the brightness of the sky, like the stars, forever and ever.

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