

Sermon: The Ancient of Days**Scripture: Daniel 7****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: November 25, 2018**

About 175 years before Jesus, Judea and its capital Jerusalem were ruled over by a Syrian king named Antiochus IV who was a piece of work and took to calling himself Epiphanes which means “God Manifest”. He had many regions and many peoples under his rule but there was one particular troublesome group who would not pay him proper respect and homage to him. They were the Jews of Judea. Upon his coming into power he resolved to stamp out their religion, becoming another ruler in a long historical line of rulers to persecute the Jews. But his persecution had a particular focus on the religion so Antiochus had pig’s blood poured over their altar in the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem and erected in that spot a shrine to Zeus. He forced Jews to eat pork in front of him or be killed and if a child was shown to be circumcised he would execute both mother and child.

It was at this time of great threat and violent persecution that the book of Daniel was penned. The author wrote stories, set four centuries earlier, about a legendary wise man named Daniel who faced similar pressures from the ruling authorities that the readers faced under Antiochus IV – Daniel and his friends were instructed to eat pork, to worship idols, to give allegiance to an earthly king. They got into serious trouble with the authorities – you might remember Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego being thrown into the fiery furnace or Daniel into the lion’s den – because they would not bow down in adoration of Nebuchadnezzar or later Belshazzar. But the stories celebrated God’s

faithfulness; the friends were untouched by the fiery furnace and Daniel was not eaten by the lions and as a result the rulers turned and acknowledged the greatness of Daniel's God, the God of the Jews. You can imagine Antiochus Epiphanes was none too happy with these stories being shared amidst the Jews but for the Jews it was a great encouragement and affirmation of God's presence and care for them in the midst of the persecutions.

The first half of the Book of Daniel has these dramatic stories and more and then the second half is filled with apocalyptic writings that set up dramatic scenes of the empires of this world, great and furious judged and condemned by God the Ancient of Days. The apocalyptic writings of Daniel traced the rising and falling of earthly kingdoms across 400 years right down to Antiochus Epiphanes, at which point the writer looking far into that future, promised that Antiochus too would fall like all the kings before him, and the God of Israel would be the only true and enduring king forever!

One of Daniel's apocalyptic visions is what you heard Rob read so dramatically this morning. The beasts envisioned with strange unnatural features are barely disguised images for Media, Persia, Greece and Syria, all foreign invading powers and then later in the book there's reference to a most hideous ruler to come which isn't named but scholars assume points in the direction of the Roman Empire which would eventually become the greatest super power of the known world, convinced they were that their great empire would be exempt from the long line of rising and falling empires. This is why, when Jesus stood before Pilate, the 5th prefect of the Roman province of Judea about 175 years after the book of Daniel was written, Pilate could not have

imagined in a thousand years that he, the powerful and majestic ruler, was the one in fact one on trial, being judged by the Ancient of Days embodied in this humble seemingly powerless peasant man who spoke grandiose words about testifying to the truth.

“Are you the King of the Jews?”

“My kingdom is not of this world, it’s of another place.”

“So you are a king, then?”

“You say that I am a king, in fact the reason I was born and came into this world is to testify to the truth.”

“What is truth?”

After his crucifixion and resurrection, when Jesus’ disciples were trying to articulate the great mystery of Jesus Christ one of their go-to texts was none other than the Book of Daniel. Even if you’ve never read the Book of Daniel, you might hear something familiar in the line that Rob read - “And as I watched the night visions, there was one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.” The New Testament references Jesus as the “Son of Man” over 80 times and often has it placed on the very lips of Jesus as a designation that He Himself chooses for himself.

“You will see the son of man coming on the clouds” - Luke 21

“The son of man is even lord of the Sabbath.” - Mark 2

“The Son of Man must suffer many things” - Mark 8:31

“The Son of Man will send out his angels” - Matthew 13

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” - Mark 10:35

“Jesus said to the Sanhedran, you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven.” - Matt 26:64

... to just name a few. In Daniel the passage continues “and the son of man approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom one that will never be destroyed.” The Book of Daniel was a key for the early Christians to unlock the mystery of who Jesus was and what his presence meant.

This is why Christianity and politics have always been uneasy bedfellows, because Jesus is depicted as King, understood as the ultimate authority of both the heart and the world. In the New Testament, he is depicted as Christ and King in contrast to the current King, his reign in opposition to the Caesars of the world, his Kingdom in contradiction to great empires.

In the church I served in Vermont, there was this older woman Vermonter who had lived in South Carolina for many years before moving back and she was a pretty conservative Christian for our church and would always say as she left a conversation in her heavy southern accent “Jesus is Lord!” having no idea how radically political her statement was. To say “Jesus is Lord” was to say that Caesar or the authorities of our day are not Lord. To say “Jesus is Lord” was to give the Kingdom of God allegiance over any other kingdom or country, be that Rome or the great empire of the US of A. It was to take a knee in homage to the Truth and to refuse to stand though the worldly powers demanded it. To say “Jesus is Lord” as an American is to refuse to be cowed by Washington or Wall Street or the lures of celebrity or advertising whenever those are in contradiction to the Gospel of Love which is probably more often than we are willing to admit or

acknowledge. My allegiance lies with no one but Jesus, the Son of Man. Jesus is Lord!

But if that is a political statement then what are the policies that should guide and direct us in being subjects of Jesus the King? Well, funny you should ask because one of the more prominent Son of Man passages in the New Testament lays it out pretty clearly. With these words from Jesus in Matthew 25 I will end:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

All the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats.

He will put the sheep on the right and the goats on the left and to those on his right the King will say “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’