

2 Samuel 23:1-7. Context. This week's reading is a poetic, prophetic oracle that mirrors the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2: as Hannah had sung of the coming king who would bring down the mighty and exalt the lowly, so too God (through David near the end of his life) now speaks of the "One who rules over people justly" as the ideal king. David seems to interject: Is not my house like this?... But the reader knows that the story of David has its share of death, cruelty, hatred and injustice. Still, the ideal described here sets out the goal of a kingdom for God's people, however imperfectly realized.

Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite of the Strong One of Israel: The spirit of the LORD speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel has said to me: One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land. Is not my house like this with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire? But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away; for they cannot be picked up with the hand; to touch them one uses an iron bar or the shaft of a spear. And they are entirely consumed in fire on the spot.

Reflection. Bruce Birch writes in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (2.1372): "To read David's final song should not lead us to sneer at its unrealistic idealism. We should instead hear in its images the call to declare anew for our time that God's justice and faithfulness define the vision that leads to life. This is the truth of the world's reality, no matter how often we fall short of fully actualizing that vision. David's song calls us to reimagine our future as God's future". As we marvel at the greed, corruption, suffering and death that swirls around every issue we try to tackle, whether the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Syrian war, the economy, the banking industry (during the Great Recession, even Goldman Sachs stockholders resented the obscene bonuses their company passed out!), mass incarceration, or the medical industrial complex, we are reminded again and again that this isn't the way God's kingdom works. But our response should never be to withdraw into a pietistic, quietistic bubble. Have you participated in any public rallies or demonstrations lately? Written your Senator? Called your Representative? Their phone numbers should be on your speed dial!

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Psalm 132. Context. This psalm is found in the midst of a collection of psalms that were likely sung by pilgrims as they traveled "up" to Jerusalem ("songs of Ascents"). It recalls David's great but unfulfilled desire to build a "house" for God, a project that was only undertaken by David's son, Solomon.

O LORD, remember in David's favor all the hardships he endured; how he swore to the LORD and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob, "I will not enter my house or get into my bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for the LORD, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob." We heard of it in Ephrathah; we found it in the fields of Jaar. "Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool." Rise up, O LORD, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might. Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your faithful shout for joy. For your servant David's sake do not turn away the face of your anointed one. The LORD swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: "One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne. If your sons keep my covenant and my decrees that I shall teach them, their sons also, forevermore, shall sit on your throne."

Reflection. God had made a covenant with David, in spite of David's shortcomings. And it was through that covenant that the people of God began to get a glimpse of the peace and justice that God intended for David's kingdom. God has always used concrete, flesh and blood individuals to reveal to us all what God's kingdom is all about. Of the people you know, who reveals – however imperfectly – in their words and deeds a sense of God's kingdom?

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Revelation 1:4b-8. Context. The Revelation (in Greek, "Apocalypse") was given to a seer named John exiled on the island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) towards the end of the first century, probably during the persecution that took place in the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian.

This week's reading is John's general greeting to the seven churches of Asia Minor, each of which then receives a message from God through the seer. In his greeting he sums up the focus of the revelation: that Jesus Christ, the ruler of the kings of the earth, is about to return in glory and judgment. This demands that his hearers prepare themselves by holding fast to their faith which will carry them through the worst imaginable chaos, even death, and bring them to new life beyond all the limitations of time and space. God is truly the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet); and apart from God there will be no salvation.

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Reflection. For all of the complex and obscure imagery and symbolism that will be employed in this "revelation," the message of John's text is straightforward: hold to your faith in God, do not give up hope no matter what happens; God will always be with the faithful. Christ is King, even in the most threatening, death-dealing chaos that we might encounter in our lives. It's hard for us to imagine being persecuted for our faith in Jesus. It may even be harder to imagine that God can be with us when our world begins to disintegrate around us even without the threat of persecution. But that is the audacious claim, not only of the Revelation, but of the entire Bible.

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John 18:33-37. Context. After Jesus is arrested, he is brought before the authorities, first religious then secular. It is only the secular Roman authorities that can impose the death sentence of such a public figure. Pontius Pilate was the Roman Procurator in Judea at the time. One of his principal tasks was to crush even the slightest hint of insurrection or rebellion. Hence his interest in claims of Jesus' kingship. But, of course, he doesn't really understand Jesus.

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Reflection. Jesus wasn't a political or military leader, even though he was perceived as a threat to the political and religious status quo by the religious and political leaders of his day. Jesus' teaching stressed that the first would be last, that the status quo is turned upside down in God's kingdom. You can see how some might take that as a threat. When have you experienced being misunderstood, ridiculed, or worse when you have acted in keeping with that upside-down vision of reality?

ALTERNATE READINGS

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14. Context. The book of Daniel is composed of 2 parts. The first six chapters are a series of stories about the adventures of Daniel and his three friends, exiles at the court of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. Starting in chapter 7 we encounter a series of visions that Daniel experienced. These visions are the first biblical examples of "apocalyptic" writing and they exhibit four principal characteristics: they are cosmic, dramatic, symbolic, and intended to give hope to God's people in times of crisis and chaos. In the case of Daniel's visions, all seem to point to the time of the Maccabees in the second century BC, when the Jews threw off the yoke of foreign oppression after being subject to a series of empires. The imagery of Daniel and his visions was so vivid that it captured the imagination of generations throughout the ages, especially that of another visionary, John, who recorded his experience in the last book of the New Testament, Revelation. This week's reading gives the climax of the vision in chapter 7: after seeing four great and terrible monsters arise in succession that do battle with one

another, that symbolize four earthly empires in succession, Daniel sees God, the “Ancient of Days” enthroned in the heavens who hands over all authority on earth to “one like a human being” (literally, “one like a son of man,” most likely referring in the first place to Michael, the guardian angel of the Jewish people) whose kingdom will never end. The title “Son of Man” is Jesus’ favorite title to refer to himself.

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened....As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

Reflection. Speaking of apocalyptic literature, Daniel L. Smith-Christopher writes in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (7.106) that “It was a powerful medium of communication that encouraged the people by drawing on a reservoir of possibilities beyond current realities. It is the nature of faith to look beyond the powers of this world to ask not only about the meaning of these powers, but also about their ultimate reality. Dreams are the beginning of the release from oppression. Dreams are images of what could be, what may be, and, most dramatically, what will be!” And committing to the vision turns hope into reality. Are you ready for that?

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Psalm 93. Context. The unknown compilers of the Book of Psalms organized the collection into five “books” to parallel the five books of Moses. The first two are attributed to David, each ending with a series of “royal” psalms that extoll the virtues of the anointed king. The third book reflects the crisis of the Exile, when the Israelites had lost their Temple, their land and their king, The fourth and fifth books reflect the response to the theological and existential crisis of the Exile. Psalm 93 stands near the beginning of the fourth book, and is the first in a series of enthronement psalms (Psalms 93; 95–99) that proclaim that “the LORD” and no earthly ruler “is king!” This is a perspective that harkens back to days of Moses, when it was God who led and protected the people of the covenant, even before they had a temple, a monarchy and a land of their own. It is a perspective that stresses God’s “steadfast love,” as well as the sovereignty of God over all peoples and all creation.

The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength. He has established the world; it shall never be moved; your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting. The floods have lifted up, O LORD, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the LORD! Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O LORD, forevermore.

Reflection. J. Clinton McCann, Jr., writes of this Psalm in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (4.1054-1055) that it was placed in the Psalter, “to respond to events that called into question God’s faithfulness and love: ... exile, evil, alienation, sin, suffering, death.... God reigns.... It means that we belong fundamentally not to ourselves, but to God. And so does the world. The ecological implications alone are staggering, not to mention the social, economic, and political ones! ... But Christians profess that the place to start is by following the one who invites people to enter God’s reign by denying self and taking up a cross (Mark 8:34). Jesus’ disciples thought it was a strange way to acknowledge God’s sovereignty, and the world still thinks it strange!” Do you?