

Pat Conover: Space Discovery

Sermon for Seekers Church

November 1, 1998

Pat Conover

Space Discovery

[Note: This sermon was delivered at a nearby hotel as part of a special service created by the New Home Task Force and Celebration Circle. The service was aimed at helping the community with the spiritual challenge of our search for new space for our congregation.]

The 7th Chapter of the Book of Daniel is one of the latest writings in the Canon of Hebrew Scripture we call the Old Testament, 170 years or less before the time of Jesus. There are a lot of other stories about Daniel that didn't make it into the Canon but are included in the Apocrypha.

- This time before the coming of Jesus was a time of rebellion with occasional successes by the Maccabees. It was a time of a lot of big time losses and massacres, including the massacre of the town nearest Nazareth in Galilee.
- It was a time of a lot of great stories into focus: Daniel, Esther, Job, Jonah, and Ruth.
- It was a time of learning to live under empire, which was a little different than living in exile. It was a time directed away from focusing on the great histories of liberation and kingship, unless you were a Zealot or a follower of the Maccabees. It was a time of confusion, of lost independence but increasing power. It was a time when religion was coming to have a meaning that was separated out from government.
- It was a time of mysticism, with the rise of the

Gnostics, of numerous cults based on God coming to earth; a time of many reported portents and dreams of the apocalyptic ending of time.

- It was a time of enormous poverty and exploitation, a time when things felt enormously wrong.
- It was a time when the Jewish traditionalists were coming back onto center stage with the rebuilding of the third temple in Jerusalem. One of the temple buildings, and not the most important one at that, became the largest building in the world.
- It was a time when empire was creating interaction between a great mix of cultures and religions. In addition to the temple crowd and the Zealots, there was a ferment of additional Jewish activity. The Essenes were withdrawing in purity to the wilderness; the Pharisees were creating congregational worship based on scripture rather than ritual sacrifice; Jews were spreading out into Gentile territories and evangelizing for Judaism by conversion. The Jewish scribes were figuring out how to make themselves useful in the courts of the powerful, and the empire was learning how to rule the eastern end of the Mediterranean through the puppet Herodian kings.

It was a time that has far more parallels to our time than do the stories of liberation and kingship in Hebrew scripture.

Our lectionary directs us to skip past the apocalyptic detail in verses 4-14. I guess they are sort of an embarrassment to those interested in the rational elements of scripture. The learned comments on verses 4-14 tell us about the historical context, help us understand the political commentary on Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the emperor in a line going back to Alexander the Great and preceding the Caesars. This emperor was definitely not a nice guy. He was intent on consolidating the empire that had been won by Alexander and that meant stamping out the rebellions of groups like the Maccabees.

In the earlier chapters of Daniel, it is the King who has the dreams and we can understand those dreams as part of the story of Daniel. Chapter 7 is different. It is a transitional chapter to the dreams and visions of Daniel and dreams are different than stories.

Dreams deserve a much different kind of response than a mere historical contextualizing. After all, dreams arise from the subconscious, from that part of the brain that is not analytic or pragmatic. These dreams speak of unsatisfied hopes, of abiding frustrations and disappointments. Daniel's dream speaks of a world gone wrong, of powers and principalities that can't be defeated by mere warfare.

Daniel's apocalyptic dream begins in chaos, of the great Mediterranean Sea stirred up by the four winds of heaven. Just as in the Genesis creation story, where God is the creator of the great sea monster Tiamat, so now God stirs the sea and releases not one, but four, monsters. These are world destroying monsters, but not monsters that exist apart from God's purposes. They are powerful monsters, but they are not the last creative word of God. In the midst of chaos, powerlessness and destruction, Daniel sings hope. It is not a pragmatic hope, a goal with a plan. But we are reminded in the midst of events beyond our understanding that God is with us. We are not abandoned.

We have walked out of our cozy home and have had to pass through the chaotic world around us. We have been reminded that we are only sojourners where we regularly meet and have not claimed a space that is truly our own. Perhaps some of us are like Daniel, finding ourselves in a moment of dismay and confusing dreams, when apparent control and order have been shown up again as the pride of creatures who want to have the control of the creator. Perhaps we are remembering that our individual lives, our relationships, our institutions are but fragile earthen vessels. Perhaps the word of Daniel that death ends all life but does not define any of life, is just the

word we need to live forward without seeing where everything is going.

Some of the most important lessons in Hebrew scripture could only have been learned by a people in exile. The long story that runs from liberation from Egypt to the triumph of David and Solomon tells of a chosen people who think they were chosen for power. The 149th Psalm that is part of our lectionary today is awash in such triumphalism. The story of Esther shows us what such triumphalism can look like in the context of exile. Daniel can certainly be read, in part, as triumphalism that has moved from the context of history to the apocalypticism of wishful thinking, and the magic of divine intervention. Even in exile, the dreams of power and control are hard to release.

Nonetheless, against their will, the people in exile learned a powerful lesson. They were not cut off from God. They couldn't offer sacrifices in the temple, and couldn't try to manipulate God with their traditional devotional practices. But they could weep, could feel their loss, and they could feel their sense of abandonment. That awful sense of loss made some room for a different engagement of God's presence, a God not captured by their plans and pretenses. They found when they sat down by the rivers of Babylon that God was just what they needed and that God was sufficient to their need. Their internal compasses that made Jerusalem the center of their world were all magnetized and unreliable. So they had to look around freshly for landmarks in their new setting. They had to put their memories of struggle and glory firmly behind them. They were Ebenezers that can create a sense of direction in the midst of wilderness, but direction that leads to fresh engagement rather than a road map.

So we begin at start, we begin in the middle of our personal and corporate life, we begin at the end and release of moments together that mean so much for what they were in themselves

and for helping us find each other in this moment.

What shall we engage? Let us start with the obvious. We are here. We are not dead. We know we need each other in fresh ways. We know we have to be careful what we pack up for our journey. We don't want to be overburdened and we don't want to leave anything critical behind.

Most importantly, we are not here alone. Daniel told us. I can feel it. We shall engage God!

Bill Webber says that salvation is one beggar telling another where the bread is. It is nice to have the bread location in one place so that it is easy to find. But it is essential that we can give each other directions to wherever the bread is to be found. I proclaim to you the Seekers time of the movable circle, the holy meal as a picnic, the out-of-control holy meal on a hillside near the chaotic sea. Come eat because you hunger, come eat because there is plenty of food, come eat because you are part of something that is greater than any of us can grasp or control and we need your energy that comes from sharing the communion meal set by God.