

Monsters, Dreams, and Human Revolution

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 November 2024

Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0 : 00] My name is Tonetta and I'm one of the co-pastors here at the Table Church. And today marks the last sermon in a series that we've been doing entitled Shadow Boxing, Confronting the Monsters We Most Fear.

We spent the last few weeks asking basically three pretty big questions. What is it that haunts you? What are your deepest fears? And in what ways are those fears absorbed by your love relationship with Jesus?

Early on in the series, I encourage you to write down the answers to those three questions and to spend some time praying and journaling about those things. And I hope that you have done that. Over these past weeks, we've talked about the fear of being zombified. We've talked about the monster of the false self. Anthony and Daniel both preached about the devil so that we could think about our own theologies of evil.

[1 : 11] And then last week, we honored the lives of loved ones that we've lost, loved ones who have passed on in order to confront our fears of death.

Today, I was supposed to talk about the natural forces of chaos in our lives. The things that we can't control, the things that are random and unpredictable.

Think Hurricane Helene that comes through and brings destruction in unexpected pockets of the country, disrupting the production of IV fluids.

But today, many of us are facing a monster that seems like it's of a different kind.

It's a different kind of chaos. It's a kind that maybe we feel like we should have predicted. The kind that maybe we feel like our nation should have been able to control.

[2 : 17] Today, what haunts us is anything but abstract. And Antonio just named the litany of real fears that confront us in this moment.

I may feel like the authoritarian and white supremacist and heteropatriarchal flirtations of our country are finally, after long decades, coming home to roost.

I may feel like the monsters are in our own house in a new way. They're not anymore shadows that we see out of the corners of our eyes.

But rather, they are imminent attackers that have designs on our future and our well-being and our good. And the problem for me in being your preacher today is that I don't have a lot of words.

A lot of y'all know that I like literature and poetry and I like words in general. You know that if you send me a seven-word text, I'm going to respond to you in a paragraph.

[3 : 45] Or two or three. Or maybe I'll just be frozen because I have so much to say and I can't get it out. But this week as a black, queer, gender non-conforming woman, it has been a week to make sure that my own family has the right documents to keep our family legally intact.

It's been a week of taking stock of what privilege I have and weighing whether that will be enough to protect my family from what feels most monstrous.

Years ago, I was in *Busboys and Poets*. This was when I, you know, definitely didn't have money to buy books, so I would just touch them lovingly.

You know what I'm talking about. And I remember seeing this book. And it was a collection of poetry written by young activists.

And this one poet wrote about the moments when metaphor and language break down. He wrote about the moments when, or a moment in particular, when he had been stopped by a cop and dragged out of a car and slammed on the concrete.

[5 : 15] And he said that there is no metaphor that will ever capture what it is like to experience the concrete scraping against your face. And in so many ways, this moment that we're facing, while there have been many moments before us for our ancestors, there is still nothing like this.

So I am very aware of the limitations of words. One of the pastors that I find most nourishing, though, this week I was reminded of something that he often says, and I think that it fits pretty well today.

And that is that you can't give what you don't possess. And that is extremely true of the Christian life.

And it's true in this moment when so many of us are feeling tossed about, thrown about by internal and external chaos.

So today I don't have the right words of comfort. I don't have the exact right thing to say, so I can't give you that. I don't have a sense of certainty.

[6 : 36] So I can't give you that. I don't have a hot take or an astute analysis, so those aren't things I can give you either.

But I can give you a few of the simple reminders that I have been kind of meditating on this week and that have been keeping me afloat.

First, remember that the primary revolution is always internal.

And it always touches our imagination of the world. Remember that the goal is still to become more and more and more and more and more and more human.

And remember that most profound stories of new creation, they feature a monster that must be confronted and which ultimately will be confounded.

[7 : 42] So that's what I have to give you. That and a strange portion of scripture that has been really reminding me of all of these things this week.

So we're going to go to Daniel 7. We're going to start at the very beginning of that. In fact, it is going to be on the screen, but I will warn you, there are parts of it I'm going to summarize and allude to.

So if you want to see it on your phone, you can see what I'm alluding to. So this is Daniel 7. In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream.

In 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 beasts came up out of the sea different from one another. All right. So before we go on, let me say a little bit about Daniel.

[8 : 52] This is a fascinating piece of minority literature. It narrates the experience of an Israelite who has been exiled and is being held in Babylon, is being held captive.

The book is interested in exploring the question of whether or not captive Jews can survive in a context where they have been disempowered and oppressed.

It also tries to get at and explore questions about who is ultimately in control of the world. The Israelite God or the God of Gentile empires that are oppressive.

Some parts of the book, if you read it, they seem to privilege like a kind of accommodation of you that the faithful can thrive in their oppressive context if they kind of like go along to get along.

But then something else and something more radical is also happening in the book. You start to see that by the time you get to Daniel 7, these tales of exemplary Jews, these tales of respectability, they start to give way to something that is much darker in imagery.

[10 : 09] So in this chapter, Daniel has a dream as he sleeps. The dream is that these four winds stir up, or in the Hebrew, they attack the sea.

And out of that clash emerges these four beasts. I'm not going to read the descriptions of all of them. If you've read anything like Revelation, you know these kinds of beasts are really fantastical.

And Daniel can only describe what they kind of look like, what they resemble. So first, the first one looks something like a lion. And then there's something that looks like a bear that comes up.

And then after that, there's something that kind of looks like maybe a leopard. And then the fourth beast that arises maybe is like an elephant or a dragon, but something really powerful.

And it has ten horns. And then Daniel continues to look, and one of the horns starts to grow as three others are plucked up. And while all of that's really strange, this is really par for the course in ancient literature, in this genre called apocalypse.

[11 : 17] While apocalyptic writings usually feature what to us seems like really, really foreign, like something that should go in a sci-fi novel.

For the ancients, these writings offer ways to interpret present earthly circumstances, and particularly the circumstances of the marginalized in ways that give them hope.

So when Daniel talks about these four beasts that we get a sense, and we learn later that he's talking about conquering empires, they all symbolize conquering empires that his own people had experienced.

Babylon and Medea and Persia and Greece. And then most scholars think that the little horn is like a real person who is destroying and wreaking havoc among the Israelite people.

I think it's this guy called Antiochus IV, who basically was not allowing Jewish folks to practice their own traditions and who desecrated the Jewish temple.

[12:26] And the writings are there to give us a sense, and the people who are listening to them, a sense of how to endure.

So I'm going to read a little bit more of this vision, and then say a couple more things. Daniel, as I watched, he says, A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence.

A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. I watched then because of the noise of the arrogant words that the horn was speaking, and as I watched, the beast was put to death, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire.

As for the rest of the beast, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. As I watched 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.

[13:59] His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. 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, the 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 and ever.

Amen. In Daniel's dream, when the ancient one appears, the final beast is killed. The other beasts, which stand for empires of the world, are allowed to remain, but it is clear that they do not anymore have any true authority.

Then finally, one like a human being or a son of man appears, and the holy ones of the Most High triumph. Now, y'all, I have to admit that when this piece of scripture dropped into my spirit, and this one was a true drop it into the spirit, yeah, I didn't want to preach on this, okay?

It contains this complicated vision that seems, again, really just far from our world, and it has been used over and over and over by people throughout history to say that this person or that person or this person over there is the Antichrist.

[15:38] And yet, that's not my point here. For us, there isn't one simple monster. There's anything to learn about the history of America is that there is not one simple monster.

Maybe even the more honest truth that we must confront is that there is a system within which we live that creatures like the one that Daniel tries to depict are exceptionally hard to just pin down. hard to name. How do you describe all the faces of white supremacy, of transphobia, of ableism, of xenophobia in the country, in our country?

And then, by the time that we do get a handle on these things, their features, they seem to change, and they morph before our eyes, and they provide a new kind of evil.

But this strange piece of scripture, it reminded me of a few things that I hope that we can remember in the season that is ahead of us.

[16:53] As a pastor friend of mine said on IG, the first revolution is always internal. It's always internal. As followers of Jesus, we know this, but it can be hard to remember that a key part of that internal revolution is imaginative.

Chapter 7 is the center of this book, the center of the book of Daniel, and it's the pivot point. And among other things, in this chapter, Daniel stops, stops interpreting the dreams of kings.

He stops interpreting the dreams of the powerful. He stops operating on their own ground. He stops using his energy and his brilliance to make peace with their desires.

And Daniel, he starts to have his own dreams. We got to stop interpreting the dreams of kings.

And living on their ground and trying to war from their terrain. We have to stop living out their fantasies.

[18:07] And this is a word for me, too. All of us are inside of this society that teaches us that we need to become elites to be safe. To lean into power over instead of community.

To thrive. We have to stop interpreting the dreams of kings. In this historical moment, we need a revolution of dreams that come from in us and are raw and powerful and are unique.

It's also interesting that this is the point in the book where it switches over in chapter 8 to Hebrew, which is insider language. It's language that the elites couldn't read.

And so these dreams have to come in our own unique languages. From our own unique perspectives. We need fresh proposals. At this pivot point, we have to succumb to give in to the energy of our crazy imaginings.

And I know y'all have them. This book, at this point in the book, what Daniel has to say stops being palatable.

[19:19] It starts being something that outsiders can hear and understand. And we have to remember that in the season that is ahead of us. That the world that our God desires will move and be birthed from the audacity of our own dreams.

But I also want you to notice who the heroes in Daniel's dream are. First, their God, who's here described as the Ancient of Days, the Ancient One.

And then another figure comes on the scene. Daniel described seeing one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. Now, Christian interpretation has attempted to see this human being or son of man as a foreshadowing of Jesus.

And that is definitely a fair interpretation and one we need to lead into. But the first readers of this text probably would have understood this one like a human being as actually a supernatural being like an angel.

Probably Michael, who was thought to protect the Israelites. But what matters to me this morning is not the exact identification of this being.

[20:42] What matters to me is that the hero, so to speak, chooses to appear like a human being and to collaborate with God.

Did you notice that the predatory beasts that Daniel describes are all nothing more than groups of people who have given themselves over to violence and insatiable hunger for power and arrogance.

But the supernatural figure of salvation chooses to appear, chooses to become like a human being. So in this moment, don't forget that your superpower is remaining human and becoming only more and more and more human.

It is grieving openly. It is saying, I don't know. It's admitting fear and vulnerability.

[21:49] It is in feeling fully whatever you do feel. I know there are a lot of emotions in this room that I'm not even getting close to capturing. But feeling whatever you do feel so that you do not become numb.

In all of my scrolling this week, I saw a poem that a friend posted called, Not Okay. And it goes like this. I am not okay today.

So in the absence of okay, what else can I be? I can be gentle. I can be unashamed. I can turn my pain into connection.

I can be a student of stillness. I can awake to nature. I can sharpen my empathy against the stone of my discomfort.

I am not okay. But I am many worthy things. Your humanity.

[23:00] Your fragility. Your limitedness. Your glory. Your glory. Your glory. Your glory. And they are exactly what any new world to come will need if it is to be a world that is just and joyous.

So simply remember that the glory of who you are, of who humans have been called to be as co-conspirators and co-collaborators with God herself.

Remember that glory. You are called to be as co-conspirators. Remember that glory of God.

Remember that glory of God. Because the glory of God. Because empire always wants you to forget who you are.

You are called to love your enemies, but to creatively resist them. and while you do that you are made to cry you are made to dance you are made to worry you are made to need the only alternative and I know this is hard to even imagine in this moment but the the only alternative is the

temptation to cynicism and apathy and those temptations will come for us y'all they absolutely will in this season the beasts are gonna roam but we commit to becoming more human after all if our Lord Jesus chose humanness as the form best suited to overthrow the powers of darkness then why shouldn't we too and then finally I've been reminding myself that most of the stories a profound new creation have a monster that has to be confronted that has to be confounded and overthrown in the Old Testament the monster is over and over again primordial chaos and it's basically depicted by using large bodies of water so think about the story of the flood or think about the story of the Hebrew slaves crossing and being delivered through the Red Sea primordial chaos and the first place that you see this is in the book of Genesis Genesis 1 God's spirit is portrayed as hovering over the waters just before God speaks creation into being if you weren't paying attention you might have missed this this is an easy thing to miss in Daniel's vision the beasts emerge from a great sea they emerge from what would have been considered the most monstrous thing in the ancient mind but in this scene instead of God's spirit hovering you see that God that that there's this kind of battle from heaven and the heavenly forces are attacking the sea it's not just about these beasts that keep popping up over and over again this battle is against what gives rise to those beasts it's a battle against the conditions that create the beast whatever beasts we see on our horizon we have to keep our focus on the conditions that create them and we have to remember that in every story sorry where there are these chaotic waters in the New Testament every time you see it it means that new creation is coming when we see these chaotic waters and the monsters that they feed we know we know we have to know that God is on the move as Valerie Korb has famously said the darkness of the tomb is usually exactly the same darkness as the darkness of the womb it is not too much to say that new creation is what we need and new creation is what we have to be after and that God's spirit is at work hovering to create waiting for us

I don't know how to wrap this up that neatly y'all I don't but I do know that today as again a black and queer and gender non-conforming woman that what I have to give you is an invitation to reflect on apocalypse not as the end of the story though as the beginning of the story I know that in some churches I hang out in sometimes it's not particularly acceptable to talk about victory and winning but in these moments we need language that is about victory and winning that says God will win love will win peace will come and that is the end of the story the word apocalypse just means uncovering it just means unveiling and it asks us to consider what is being unveiled about God and our world even in the darkest moments the apocalyptic writings in the Bible remind us that our allegiance is to God and I shout out to the worship team last night because they reminded us that our allegiance is to God it's not to unjust laws it's not to the dreams of the elite it's not to the forces that would make us into beasts instead of into human beings our allegiance is to God and this is the God who in Jesus Christ walks on the chaotic waters this is the God who exposes them for what they are and asks us to do the same in this moment y'all of holy darkness may we each take the hand of Jesus and accept that invitation and Ally shall it to of and by the the the the the