

## Visions of the Four Beasts

**7** In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream: <sup>[a]</sup> <sup>2</sup>I, <sup>[b]</sup> Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, <sup>3</sup>and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. <sup>4</sup>The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then, as I watched, its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a human being; and a human mind was given to it. <sup>5</sup>Another beast appeared, a second one, that looked like a bear. It was raised up on one side, had three tusks <sup>[c]</sup> in its mouth among its teeth and was told, "Arise, devour many bodies!" <sup>6</sup>After this, as I watched, another appeared, like a leopard. The beast had four wings of a bird on its back and four heads; and dominion was given to it. <sup>7</sup>After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns. <sup>8</sup>I was considering the horns, when another horn appeared, a little one coming up among them; to make room for it, three of the earlier horns were plucked up by the roots. There were eyes like human eyes in this horn, and a mouth speaking arrogantly.

## Judgment before the Ancient One

<sup>9</sup>As I watched,  
thrones were set in place,  
and an Ancient One <sup>[d]</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup>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.

<sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. <sup>13</sup>As I watched in the night visions,

I saw one like a human being<sup>[a]</sup>  
coming with the clouds of heaven.

And he came to the Ancient One<sup>[a]</sup>  
and was presented before him.

<sup>14</sup>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.

## Daniel's Visions Interpreted

<sup>15</sup>As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within me,<sup>[a]</sup> and the visions of my head terrified me. <sup>16</sup>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: <sup>17</sup>"As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. <sup>18</sup>But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever."

## Paul's Prayer

<sup>15</sup>I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love<sup>[a]</sup> toward all the saints, and for this reason <sup>16</sup>I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. <sup>17</sup>I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, <sup>18</sup>so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, <sup>19</sup>and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. <sup>20</sup>God<sup>[b]</sup> put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup>far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. <sup>22</sup>And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, <sup>23</sup>which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

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**Daniel 7:1-18; Ephesians 1:15-23**

**All that Is, Seen and Unseen**

**Kerra Becker English**

I've inherited a tradition here that the Nicene Creed comes up in the bulletin template as our Affirmation of Faith on Communion Sundays, though I must say I'm not good at always sticking to that tradition. It's one of the wordier creeds with language in it that enshrines old arguments that may not have a lot of connection to today's worshipper. But today, I've decided to keep it in its place – mostly because of one particular phrase in it that I can't recall shows up in any other affirmations of faith in my go-to memory. We believe in one God (that's not new news), maker of heaven and earth (that appears elsewhere), of all that is "Seen and Unseen" (that's an observation that comes out of this particular spiritual jam session). And the more contemporary and actually better translations render that statement such that God is the Maker of all things, both visible and invisible.

What does that mean that God has created all that we see and know, AND all that we cannot see or know completely? I don't think this is just about atomic structures and other galaxies, the things not easy to detect without the help of powerful vision-enhancing scientific equipment. Though I dare say that discoveries of the outer reaches and inner intricacies have been so astonishing that they can also be understood as mystical events in and of themselves.

What I think it means is that the understanding of God as "Maker" is immense. It's not only about how God might be involved in matter and energy, God is also the Maker of relationships and intimacy, God is the Maker of complexity and beauty, God is the Maker of soul and spirit, God is our past and God is our future, God is the Maker of all things earthly and all

things beyond our earthly explanation or comprehension. This information puts God absolutely in the category of “OTHER.”

Sure, we humans can make stuff out of the stuff available to us. We can know love, and beauty, and awe. We claim to know spiritual truths. We mark time in history and make future plans on our 2020 calendars. And we reluctantly assent to the understanding that there are things that human beings just don't know – if we add the clarifier – we just don't know them -YET.

But I am fascinated by this Nicean insight. God is the God of all that we see, AND God is the God of everything we can't see too. This concept doesn't get nearly the play time it deserves in theological explorations of all kinds – whether it's worship, or study, or just plain human pondering. These days we look endlessly at our technology and forget to look up at the stars. This makes me miss the days of spending long evenings in my treehouse as a kid – *but now I'm off and wandering.*

Look, major world religions pick their primary sources of insight and there are some not so subtle differences in what they each choose. Christianity in particular, has notably had two world-view like concepts that get the primary air-time, and these two are sometimes seen as viable competitors, though both are majorly ingrained within the tradition as a whole. First, there are those who practice Christianity because it teaches them a morality. That morality might be rules-based, like following the ten commandments, tithing, and showing up at church on Sunday or it could be relationship-based, trying to live as Jesus lived and taught, caring for the poor, healing the sick, and binding up the broken-hearted. One could easily say that Christianity offers its adherents a particular lifestyle. Depending on how one reads those life choices, they could be perceived as primarily legalistic or loving, but practicing a religion because it gives us an understanding of how to live in relationship with our neighbors is a pretty good reason to do so.

Given that Mr. Rogers leaned that way, I'm all in favor of learning from a religion that teaches us to be in "right-relationship" with our neighbors. But secondly, there are those who practice Christianity as a belief system. I BELIEVE in Jesus because I was taught to do so. I believe in his power to save us. I believe in his understanding of grace. I believe him to be the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who, being Divine and Human offers redemption to humanity in all its faults and toward all its glory. Belief grounds us so that we can trust in the promises made for our own lives, and it's the stuff good theology is made of. This approach is similarly valid. A strong belief can be what calms us in dying, knowing that Jesus promised eternal life, even dying for it on a cross. It's powerful stuff – belief. But again, it has been known to both spark bloody wars and heal the most traumatic emotional wounds. It can go either way, just like practice. Religion, no matter how you practice or understand it, is a dangerous power to wield because it constitutes such a huge part of who we are once we've taken it on.

And yet, there's one quirk about pretty much all religious seekers that has been seen as so powerful, so potentially able to divide, and so flimsy in holding people to a tradition and a practice that it's often dismissed, or denied, or just plain not talked about. And that thing is the wonder and awe that is available in having a real and transcendent experience of Divine majesty. Oh, I get it. You can teach practice. You can categorize belief. But mystery, visions, the realm of the unknown, unseen, invisible is precisely that ambiguous. You can't, or maybe I should say you don't get to take Mystery 101 at seminary. They don't teach it because it can't be taught. It can only be "caught" as the mystics might say. You can't hold on to it; it has to hold on to you. When you start talking about an encounter with the transcendent holy, words either sound ridiculous or just get in the way. One of my favorite understandings of spirituality comes from a Joseph Campbell quote, the guy who studied all kinds of religious paths and wrote, The Hero

With A Thousand Faces among other things. Campbell says, “People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.” (Campbell, The Power of Myth, page 1)

Religious seekers want to understand right action and right belief to be sure, it’s foundational to what Christianity has always cared about and will continue to hold as primary priorities. Jesus was consistently telling us to love our neighbor or to believe in him. Those ingrained truths are fundamentally a part of who we are as his 21<sup>st</sup> century followers. But highly curious religious seekers also want to know that the God who makes all, seen and unseen, visible and invisible, is real. God, the Maker of all that is, is experienced as real and as close as a father-figure for Jesus. Is God real for us too? Is the church capable of offering THAT kind of experience? Well, yes and no. Yes, we teach curious seekers the ancient truths from sacred texts in hopes that those texts will come alive in them. Yes, we go deep into prayer and soulful singing that can connect to holiness through sacred silence or the meditative arts. Yes, we practice love of the stranger, the alien, the OTHER, so that we might encounter the face of Christ in the most unlikely places. But the answer is also a resounding no. No, no matter how awesome a church happens to be, we can’t MAKE it feel real to you. It’s the Spirit’s work, the great unknown, the seeing that only happens with the “eyes of the heart enlightened.” Some Christians live their whole lives content to live in that context of love and belief. It is wonderful, and can easily be “enough.” And yet some Christians long for more and want that experience of being so alive that they tingle with the knowledge that God who is the Maker of all things seen and unseen is

somehow connected to them as well. Some will be fortunate enough to be touched by such an experience.

How do I know? Right. That's an important question. Do I speak from experience, or from speculation? For me, it's both. I have had just a few brief encounters with those kind of awakenings that have left me both completely full and absolutely exhausted from feeling God's presence so closely. I also speculate with the Bible in my hand. Daniel's visions, as absolutely crazy as they were, have been recorded in our sacred text. They weren't dismissed. In fact, Daniel was praised for his intuitions, and protected by what only seems like holy intervention. I think we are allowed a vibrant imagination when it comes to meeting God in God's fullness. It can be full of beasts and turmoil, or ancient ones and their holy attendants. In Ephesians, Paul's prayer acknowledges the saints, the saints who revere wisdom and have experienced revelation. Their eyes have been opened to the glorious inheritance we have in Christ. That's not just practice or belief talking – that's insight, that's a direct encounter with the God who is big enough to open your mind to the insight that God IS, and the God who IS, also made everything else that IS, seen and unseen.

On this celebration of all saints, I invite you to consider walking this path less taken and wonder, if only for today, about the transcendent holy. The saints always have. They were less concerned about their ticket to heaven, because they knew that had already been given heaven. They didn't try to stifle their visions because they knew that God was out ahead of them, simply inviting them to open their eyes. Sometimes I wonder if I knew this truth more clearly on starry nights in my childhood treehouse than I do sitting at my computer typing in words to preach in a sermon to you. That kind of wonder is at the very heart of what helps us be delighted by our faith and encouraged to go ever deeper into the dimensions of who God is. The saints are so

frequently described as the dead who have died in the Lord. I get it. We hold them up as our ideals. But Paul also prays for the saints among the living, the ones who practice and believe, with all love, with all wonder, and with all their being. They will KNOW God. They will see Christ for who he truly is. They will be moved by the Spirit, and perhaps feel her breeze gently touching their skin. The closer brushes we have with our own mortality and limits in this life, or the closer we can align ourselves with that childhood imagination we once knew – the closer maybe we are to being counted as the saints among the living. Practice and belief are there for us, and ought not be dismissed. They help us hold it all together. But Awe... and WONDER... give us an opportunity to see how it could all be so radically and completely different in the reality God only knows as Maker of it all, seen and unseen. Amen.