

## A Gift that Won't Break

[Daniel 7:13-14; Luke 1:26-33](#)

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This morning I'm concluding a series of Advent sermons that has been focused on the ways Jesus Christ fulfills the hopes of the Old Testament prophets. Three weeks ago we looked at the way Jesus came to bring justice, as Isaiah dreamed. Two weeks ago we saw how he came to bring peace, as Micah dreamed. Last week we were reminded that he came to bring us joy, as Zephaniah dreamed. There was so much joy that even God had to start singing. Today we turn our attention to Daniel, and the dream for a new kingdom that will have no end.

\*\*\* One of the disappointing things about life is that stuff keeps breaking. Appliances, furniture, office machines, copiers, and computers all break. Especially the copiers. Unfortunately, Christmas toys also break. So do the bones and systems within our bodies eventually break. But that is nothing compared to the pain of having a broken heart. For some reason we say that cars break down, but relationships break up, as if that is a more explosive thing. And dreams? Well, dreams just break apart. If you experience too much of that, we say that your spirit is also broken. People will easily break the law, especially on the highways, and they will also break their promises to you. Contracts can be broken. So can peace treaties and the trust between world powers. If you think about it long enough, it seems that there is nothing that isn't vulnerable to be broken in life.

It also seems that the more fragile something is, the more precious it is, precisely because it can be broken. My grandmother had some small glass menagerie that she cherished. When I was a little boy I knew that if I touched it, she would cut off my fingers. And she loved me. The last time I saw her before she died, I was in my thirties, but I still was terrified of those fragile pieces of glass. By contrast, the kingdoms of our world appear so sturdy and strong, buttressed by armies, and governments, and bureaucracies. But in fact, they are as fragile as glass menagerie. As history has proven, in time all empires break up (the explosive kind of breaking.)

When Daniel had his great dream, is recorded for us in the seventh chapter of his prophecy, Belshazzar had just begun his brief reign as the last king of Babylon, which was about to fall to the Persian empire. In his dream, Daniel saw four great beasts rising out of the sea. Each fell to the one after it. And each, of course, stood for the rise and fall of great empires.

Then at the end of his dream, Daniel saw one like a human being, coming not out of the sea, or the earth, but "coming with the clouds of heaven.... To him was given dominion, and glory, and kingship... and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed." Well, there it is. The great dream for something that will not break.

It is more than a little significant that the one who comes from heaven is not a beast, but is "one like a human." Some translations render this as "the Son of Man." It was Jesus' favorite description of his mission. All of this means that Jesus arrived on Christmas Eve, not only as the Son of God incarnate, but also as the one who could give us something that cannot break apart - the reign of God. When we participate in the reign of God, we discover that he restores his image in our lives, making us human again. As we were created to be from the beginning, when we had paradise. This human-making reign is the only thing that can never, ever, break.

So it is not mere coincidence that when Gabriel announces the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb, he concludes by saying, "of his kingdom there will be no end." I wonder what Mary thought of those words when she gave birth to her son and laid him in a manger, which was a feeding trough that had been drooled on by animals. Did she say, "So this is the one from the clouds of heaven who will begin a new kingdom that will not end?" Maybe she was disappointed or maybe she got it. We are told that she pondered all these things in her heart. Maybe in all of the pondering, Mary realized that this made sense.

I know I have the advantage of 2,000 years of hindsight, but I am delighted that the Savior King was born in a stable. That's because we all have souls that have become like stables, driven by animal-like cravings, fearful of the noises and things we do not understand, accustomed to the stench of a world gone bad. If the Son of Man were looking for a place to find us, he picked the right one. If he can be born in such a place, he can also be born in you and me, no matter how messy or broken life becomes.

As most of you know, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who was imprisoned for two years before being executed during the waning years of the empire of the Third Reich. In Advent, of 1943, he wrote a Christmas letter to his parents from the Tegel prison in Berlin. In this letter he recalls a strange painting of the Nativity done by the Bavarian Renaissance painter Albrecht Altdorfer. The landscape in the painting doesn't look anything like the Middle East, but remarkably like the terrain of Bavaria. And instead of a cute warm stable, Altdorfer placed the holy family in a dilapidated house that was breaking apart. The eye doesn't even see any people at first, but just the huge house that is in shambles. Then in a hidden corner, behind a broken wall, you see a small beam of light emanating from an infant child nestled between his parents. As he wrote to his parents, Bonhoeffer said he had always wondered why the artist placed the baby in such ruins, until he found himself in prison. Now he understands. "God turns toward the places from which humans turn away."

That is why Herod and all those who were heavily invested in hanging on to the beastly kingdoms couldn't find the new king when he arrived. When wise men from the East got lost in their search for this new king they went to Herod, the Jewish King, and asked, "Where is this one who was born King of the Jews?" For the life of him, literally, Herod didn't know. It never occurred to him to look in the broken places.

It doesn't occur to us either. When our dreams break apart, we go in search of better dreams. When our relationships break up, we look for another one too quickly, as if it were a car that had broken down. But the place to find the Savior is in the small light of hope that emanates from the corner of the brokenness. What we are ready to abandon in our disposable society, God is determined to

restore. His kingdom, remember, has no end. It doesn't dispose. It may even look beaten and broken itself at times in places like Chechnya, or in homes that know more hurt and grief than joy and love this Christmas. But those are never more than dark chapters in a story that is not yet done being written. The great story of God's kingdom begun in Jesus Christ will endure.

If you are going to see that, though, you'll have to make a choice. You'll have to choose hope. In the face of the overwhelming brokenness all around in our world today, and in the face of so many reasons to despair in our own lives, we in the church of Jesus Christ dare to choose hope. Because the reign of Jesus Christ is not over!

While we wait for this kingdom to reach more glorious chapters, the question that remains is what do we do with Herod in the meantime. King Herod was called Herod the Great, because he conducted an enormous building campaign during his forty-year reign. He also kept peace with the occupying Roman armies, because he was good at helping people cope with oppression. He taxed the people so heavily that he kept them from starving in hard times by retaining some reserves of their grain. Herod had a knack for stealing from the people and then making them grateful when he returned a morsel of food. All the building, the tribute to Rome, and the great supply reserves cost the people so much. Everybody loved what he could do, but they hated the cost.

Herod was so fearful of hanging on to power that he killed his wife, mother, and three of his four sons. So we are not too surprised that he killed all the children in Bethlehem trying to find this child who was born as the new king. And great was the wailing that came out of that city. Herod the Great. They loved him. And they hated him.

In every one of our lives, there is a Herod that has gained some power. We are seduced into calling it great, because it does so much for us. It makes us feel secure and helps us cope with how it is. It has been around for maybe forty years now. Herod is the name of whatever it is that offers you something you crave at a price you cannot afford. You love what it does, but you hate what it costs. Still as taxing as it is, you just keep paying.

For some Herod, is the name of our workaholic drive to succeed in spite of it sucking away our lives and all of our most cherished relationships. For others, Herod is the name of the cynicism and the anger that have driven us for so long, it has become our most trusted companion. For still others, it is the alcohol or the money we abuse. It does so much for us, and it has been with us so long, we can't imagine life without it. But at Christmas when a new king is born we have to confront the great question - Don't you see what Herod is costing?

Herod doesn't have to be your king! Not any more. This Christmas look hard into your old broken hopes. Find the new born king there in the corner of them. And realize that you are free. Free to be a human being again. Free to make changes in your life, and free to make changes in our world.

After the wise men bowed before King Jesus, we are told that they went home a different way. They walked away from Herod. You cannot, dare not, continue on your journey the same way you entered Christmas. Because if you really make it to the manger this year, you will have discovered the enduring reign of Christ in you and in this world. That gives you hope. And hope gives you life.

But hope is something you have to choose. Especially at Christmas.

Free us, O God, from racing about in our slavery to Herod, that we may stop by the holy manger long enough to worship and serve this new king who makes us holy and human by his presence. Amen.