

JESUS THE SON OF MAN

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 93
Daniel 7:13-14

Our second lesson comes from the Old Testament book of the prophet Daniel. We believe Daniel to be the last book of the Old Testament to have been written, about 165 years before Christ, during the persecution of the Jewish people by the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes. To encourage his suffering fellow-believers Daniel tells six stories, set in earlier days in Babylon just before and just after the Persian conquest. These stories illustrate how faithful Jews, loyally practicing their religion, were enabled by divine aid to triumph over their enemies. Then in four visions Daniel ventures to interpret current history and to predict the coming consummation when the faithful Jews will have ultimate victory. This morning's lesson comes from the first of these visions, in the 7th chapter of Daniel.

The phrase "Son of Man" is used eighty-one times in the gospels, usually by Jesus. It was his favorite self-description. The phrase was introduced in the Old Testament where it can also be translated "human being" or "mortal." But not just any mortal. From at least the time people read Daniel's prophecy, they understood the Son of Man to be the human who comes from heaven.

The seventh chapter of Daniel depicts a vision that begins with terrifying symbols. Four dreadful beasts emerge out of the chaotic sea. The first is a lion, with the wings of an eagle. The second is a great bear with bones in his teeth that devoured many. The third is a winged leopard with four heads, and the fourth is a terrifying beast with iron teeth and ten horns that crushed what was left by the other beasts.

When Daniel interprets his vision, he tells us each beast represents a harsh kingdom of this world. He doesn't tell us exactly which beast symbolizes which kingdom, and that has led to no end of speculation. But clearly his concern is for his people, who were historically gobbled up by a succession of devouring armies like the Babylonians. As the vision continues to unfold, Daniel sees a hopeful day when God puts an end to the dreadful beasts. On that day, he says, "one like a human being"—the Son of Man—will descend from the heavens to establish a new kingdom that will be everlasting.

This vision of the Son of Man was meant to give hope to a people who had been brutalized by tyrants so long that they were getting used to it. So Daniel says, "Don't settle for how it is. Don't get used to being afraid. The Son of Man will come."

What does Daniel's vision have to say to us today? Our young people have not been carried away by the Babylonians. Our homes and families have not been devoured by conquering armies. We don't live in fear of the beasts.

Or do we?. Some of us are still very much afraid of the beasts who plant bombs to make their political points. Others fear their children could be victims of addiction or

gunned down at school or at a shopping mall or city streets. Still others are afraid of the diseases and deadly viruses that can invade our bodies and devour our health. Yes, there is all of that. But that is not what we fear the most.

These days, in this part of the world, what we really fear is not them or what they may do to us. Mostly, we fear ourselves. We have been given an enormous amount of protection from the beasts and more freedom and opportunity than any people have ever known in history, and yet we still cannot make life turn out the way we want it to be. What we fear is our limitations. It doesn't matter how hard we work, we cannot make all our dreams come true, and we cannot hold onto the things we cherish. Nor does it matter how devoted we are to our children, we cannot prevent them from hurting. We cannot create their lives or our own. We cannot even make ourselves to be as loving or disciplined as we want. Like the Apostle Paul we have to confess, "I keep doing the bad things I don't want to do. And I cannot seem to do the good that I do want to do."

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, when the pilgrim tried to climb the mountain to paradise he found that his path was blocked by terrifying beasts. To his dismay, he then discovered that this was his own bestiality that was standing in his way. No, the problem isn't them. It's us. We cannot even make our own lives right, and we certainly cannot fix others. Eventually, we just stop trying. When we read our newspapers and come to the pages that describe the dreadful beasts of war and poverty and disease and environmental degradation that are devouring human lives, we feel bad. We really do. But we're too exhausted trying to get our own lives right to do much about it. And that leaves us feeling guilty. Guilty and exhausted. So we need the Son of Man, even in order to recover our own humanity.

When the Son of Man finally arrived, it was not with all of the drama that the people had come to expect. All of the opening scenes of Jesus' ministry seemed so ordinary. He didn't appear to slay any beasts. He just walked into the lives of normal people whose visions of hope had been blinded by routines.

Peter and his brother Andrew are throwing nets into a sea because they are fishermen. James and his brother John are sitting in a boat with their father mending nets. How many days had these men gone to work and picked up those fishing nets? The smell of fish was permanently on their hands, and the smell of the sea was a part of every breath they had taken. This was the life they knew. It was exhausting work, and it used up all their life. But they had settled into it.

We know about that. A day comes when you realize your relationships aren't great, but they're familiar. You're moderately successful, but you now realize the Nobel Committee is never going to call and you're not going to be an internet billionaire. The last time you went to a doctor about that chronic ache, she gave you a little talk about the aging process. Your job isn't "all that you can be," but it pays the bills. Face it: you've got the smell of fish on your hands and, frankly, you're used to it. As for visions and dreams, well, you just don't have the energy. But that is only the opening scene of the gospel story.

One day the Son of Man walked by the fishermen and simply said, "Follow me." They immediately dropped everything and followed. Now this was not the first time these men had heard or seen Jesus. Mark tells us that Jesus had already begun a preaching

ministry in the area. Luke tells us he had already miraculously filled the men's boat with fish. John tells us that Andrew had already heard John the Baptist call Jesus the Messiah, and then went and told Peter, "I have found the man we've been looking for." That means that in the midst of their settled, ordinary, exhausting lives, these men have been searching for something extraordinary. So have we.

Like the first disciples, you, too, have heard about this Jesus. You have even seen what he did for others. And you believe that he can do something miraculous for the world. Maybe you even believe he's the only hope we've got for defeating those devouring beasts out there. But what if you looked up from your back-breaking work over the fishing nets to hear the Son of Man now calling to you?

What if he were saying, "Let me be the savior of your children's lives. Let me take care of their health, their marriages, their hearts." "Let me be the savior of your work. Let me worry about where your career is going." "Let me be the savior of your life. Let me defeat your own beast called fear and turn it into joy."? What if you heard the Son of Man telling you that you don't have to settle anymore because it really is possible to be fully alive as a human being? Well, I can tell you what you would do if you heard him saying these things. You would drop the anxiety that is using up your life, and you would follow that man anywhere.

He *is* calling you. Right out of the pages of the gospel, he is calling for you. The Son of Man, the human, has come down out of heaven, not just for them, but for you. And he is calling, but you have to respond.

Where will he lead if you follow? He may take you to the Sudan or Haiti or the Syrian border, but probably not. He will more likely lead you to volunteer somewhere in our community and to give some of your life to someone who just needs some help. He will certainly lead you back to the ordinary life you already have, to your family and workplace, but as a completely different person.

No longer is it your burden to make life right for any of those people, any more than it is your burden to make your own life right. That is exactly the beast Christ is most interested in slaying for us, because it has left us exhausted and devoured our passion. You don't have to be Jesus. He's good at his job, and he'll do the saving. That's the prophetic vision that keeps us going.

All he is asking you to do is follow him into the high adventure of caring again. You'll never be fully alive until you do.

To the Lord our God, alpha and omega, be all glory and honor for ever. Amen.