**Last Sunday of the Church Year**

**November 21, 2021**

**Text—Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14**

Today is the final Sunday of the church year, which means that, more than any other Sunday, today is especially focused on the end times and the imminent return of Jesus Christ in glory. If you recall, last week we began a sermon miniseries on the book of Daniel and the end times-related passages that are found therein. This week, we conclude our look at Daniel by reading this passage about the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man.

In this vision of Daniel, he sees somebody called the “Ancient of Days” who sits on a glorious throne in heaven. The Ancient of Days has clothing as white as snow and hair as white as pure wool, shining with the glory of the heavens. The throne on which he sits is composed of fiery flames, and the wheels on which the throne rests are also burning fire. Thousands upon thousands of people bow down and serve him, and he sits in judgment over the masses of people. Now who could this Ancient of Days fellow possibly be? Well, he’s obviously not any earthly king; no ruler of any nation commands that kind of power and authority. No, this is God the Father himself, sitting on his glorious throne and ruling over all of creation. All things happen at his command, and his judgment over the nations is absolute. What Daniel sees in this text is the all-powerful creator God who rightly exercises lordship and judgment over all of humanity, and has the names of his chosen people written in his book of life.

But then after Daniel sees the Ancient of Days sitting on his throne in heaven, he sees somebody else enter the picture. This person does not cut as impressive a figure as the Ancient of Days; he is not portrayed as displaying the same kind of glory, but is rather described as a “Son of Man.” Someone who looks just like any other human being, one who could not possibly hope to stand in the presence of the Ancient of Days. And yet, the Son of Man comes into the vision riding on the clouds of heaven, and when he arrives, he is presented before the Ancient of Days and stands tall before him. Even though the Son of Man is a human being, he is not consumed by the power emanating from the throne. Rather, he is given the same kind of authority as the Ancient of Days has. He is given dominion and glory and a kingdom so that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is everlasting, and his kingdom shall not be destroyed.

Once again, it would seem that this text is talking about God the Father. After all, who else has an everlasting dominion and kingdom other than God? Who else rules over all peoples, nations, and languages on earth? But the Son of Man is not the same as the Ancient of Days; he looks like a human being, and he is clearly not the same person in the vision. The Son of Man is someone who is different from God the Father, and yet possesses all the power and authority of God himself. This can be none other than God’s Son Jesus Christ. The Son of Man is also the Son of God, and he exercises lordship over the nations just as his Father does. And yet he himself is not just God; he is man too. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, and he lived the life of a human being for over thirty years. He was just like every other person on earth, except that he was without sin. So as a mortal man, he was able to suffer and die on the cross to atone for the sins of humanity, and rise again from the dead to conquer death and grant eternal life to all who would believe in him. And now this Son of Man is receiving all power and authority from God, and he will rule over the nations as his Father’s right hand man. Only the God-man Jesus Christ fits the description of the Son of Man we find in Daniel’s vision, and therefore this text is a clear prophecy of his lordship over all creation.

This is a side of Jesus that we American Christians in the twenty-first century are not used to considering. We think of Jesus as the kind, welcoming, and compassionate servant who loves little children, heals people’s sicknesses, and sacrifices himself on a cross to save us. And Jesus certainly is all of those things. But he is more than that: he is also the all-powerful Son of God who rules over all of creation and has promised to return in glory on the last day to judge all of humanity. Our text from Daniel for today shows us this side of Jesus: the coming king who is returning for judgment. This is not a Jesus who necessarily inspires warm, fuzzy, loving feelings. This is a Jesus who evokes awe, reverence, and perhaps even some fear.

That was how Christians in Martin Luther’s day primarily thought of Jesus: as the stern judge who would be coming back to punish sinners and send unbelievers to hell. Luther and the Reformation, of course, radically changed the way people thought of Jesus, to where they no longer feared him as their judge but rather loved him as their Savior. Unfortunately, though, in correcting one skewed picture of who Jesus is, the church today has largely adopted the opposite skewed picture. Instead of being a legitimate judge who punishes unfaithfulness and disobedience, Jesus is now a big old softy who accepts everything and everyone, regardless of what they believe or do. Instead of being the all-powerful ruler of creation who holds his people to godly standards, Jesus is now your best friend who helps you find yourself and approves of whatever choices you make. And instead of being the sole ultimate authority in the world, Jesus is now just a nice guy who gives good advice and makes you feel better about yourself.

This new view of Jesus is just as much of a problem as was the old view of Luther’s day. Both of them overemphasize one aspect of Jesus’ character to the exclusion of the other. Both of them contradict what the Scriptures say about who Jesus is and what he has come to do. The old medieval view ignored Jesus’ love and mercy, while the new contemporary view ignores God’s wrath and punishment of sinners. In seeking to uphold one aspect of Jesus’ person and work, we dare not forget about the other. To do so would be to present an incomplete picture of who Jesus is, which would do violence to Scripture and will not bring us to greater knowledge and faith in the slightest.

So then how do we Christians today talk about Jesus? How do we uphold both his justice on the one hand and his mercy on the other? How do we portray him as the all-powerful ruler of creation on the one hand and the suffering servant on the other? And how do we talk about him as the wrathful judge against sin on the one hand and the loving, kind welcomer of the poor, outcasts, and children on the other? This is the paradox of being a Christian: that we worship the Son of God who fully displays both of these attributes at once. And the temptation with any paradox is to try to resolve it: to make Jesus purely angry and wrathful or to make him purely loving, kind, and accepting. The Scriptures portray him in both ways, and so we have to uphold both of these truths at once.

This means, first of all, that we do not hesitate to proclaim God’s wrath against sin and Jesus’ return for judgment. The fact of the matter is that God hates sin, and that he will punish those who proudly and unrepentantly defy his Law. Jesus is coming back on the last day, and he does have the book of life in his hand. If your name is not written in the book of life, you will not inherit eternal life. It’s that simple, and as much as we might try to get around it or downplay this aspect of Jesus’ work, in the end we just can’t. So as Christians, we will speak the truth and say that yes, Jesus is coming back, and yes, he will punish the sins of those who do not repent and believe in him. This is not being mean; this is being kind and loving! If we can help anybody to escape from the wrath of God that will be revealed on the last day, then we should absolutely take that opportunity. The world may not like to hear what we have to say about this, but that doesn’t make it any less true. Jesus is coming back, and we all need to be prepared to receive him rightly. The only way for that to happen is through faith in Jesus, and thus we will boldly call the world to repentance, trusting that God will work through his Word and save some of those who hear us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And that brings us back to the second truth that we need to uphold: that Jesus remains our loving Savior who has rescued us from sin, death, and the devil by his death and resurrection. When he returns for judgment, he will indeed judge sin harshly, but he will not judge us who believe in him according to the works that we ourselves have done. Rather, he will judge us according to the standards of his own perfect righteousness, which he exchanged with us at his death on the cross. He took the punishment our sins deserved, so that now we can receive the eternal life and glory that he deserves. Yes, God hates sin, but he loves his people even more than he hates sin, and so he did not give us the due penalty for what we had done. Rather, he saved us by sacrificing his very own Son, and now we can inherit the eternal life that he promised to those who trust in Christ. God is thus not a softy at all: he certainly condemns and punishes sin, but on behalf of his people, he has done this to his Son instead of us. Now when Jesus returns and judges us, he will not have harsh words of condemnation for us, but rather will welcome us into his kingdom and treat us as his own dear children. We are not his children by right, but he has adopted us into his family for the sake of his Son Jesus Christ.

And in the end, Jesus himself is the key to navigating between the two opposite aspects of his character: the powerful judge we see in our text from Daniel on the one hand and the suffering servant who loves and saves us on the other. Apart from repentance and faith in him, Jesus is a wrathful judge who punishes sin and condemns sinners. But for those who trust in him, Jesus is indeed that loving Savior who sacrificed everything to bring us into his Father’s kingdom. Who Jesus is to you depends on whether or not you believe in him, and so we dare not forsake him for any reason. We know that if we remain faithful to him for all of our days, he will keep every single promise he has made to us, and he will bring us into that everlasting, indestructible kingdom that Daniel describes in our text. God has given Jesus the authority to bring his people into this kingdom, and we know that he has chosen us to receive these blessings. We know this because we have been baptized in his name and had our sins washed away. We know this because we have had our sins absolved and received God’s grace in the Gospel every week. And we know this because Jesus gives us his very own body and blood as a pledge and guarantee that we are his people, and that he loves us dearly. We are under the dominion of Jesus, who though he will come back to judge the world and punish sin, he will instead grant us eternal life, not because of anything we have done, but because of what he has done on our behalf. This kingdom in which we will live eternally will never be destroyed, because the power of God in Christ will uphold it forever. Therefore, Jesus’ almighty power, far from being frightening to us, actually gives us great comfort and hope for the future. We know that he is powerful enough to grant us eternal life in his kingdom, so we eagerly wait for the day when he will return and make all of his promises come to pass. Amen.