

## “The Enemy and the King”

A Sermon Preached  
by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones  
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral

Christ the King Sunday / November 25, 2018  
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 / Revelation 1:4b-8 /  
John 18:33-37

The Rev. Fleming Rutledge, who preached here last Sunday, mentions in her book of Advent sermons<sup>1</sup> a telling line she came across in a newspaper story.

It was not long after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Our military had begun the war feeling confident in their ability to go in and make quick work of the opposition.

But commanders on the battlefield realized that winning would take more than first expected. The generals realized the outcome wasn't just up to them. Coalition forces had to learn to adapt to unexpected setbacks.

A reporter said, Fleming remembers,

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<sup>1</sup> *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*

“In carrying out any military plan, commanders here [in Iraq] like to say [that] it is important to remember that the enemy has a vote.”

*The enemy has a vote.*

There is, in other words, more than one army on the field, there's also an opposing force to take into account.  
You have to contend with what the enemy will do.

Sometimes we Christians get so cozy when we picture what it means to live in Christ and follow his ways that we forget that.

We talk about life as this pleasant stroll.  
Scenes of our lives will be painted in the soft warm colors of a Norman Rockwell painting.  
Pain will be the exception.  
Doing good a piece of cake.

So here we are, one week from Advent, that season of waiting together for the birth of Jesus.

Advent's waiting and Christmas's joy will seem  
tinny to the ears and unrealistic if we don't take  
seriously that the enemy has a vote.

We won't grasp the setting for the biblical drama  
about to unfold if we don't factor in the opposing  
realities of sin and death.

By sin I don't mean little sins or bad deeds,  
but a a predisposition we all have that  
leads us away from God.

By sin I mean a magnitude of evil that sometimes  
stretches the imagination.

I mean humankind's ability to do horrific things.

There's suffering, too.

Medical diagnoses that make you blanch, like a  
good friend of mine got last week. Younger than I  
am, but he's just been told he has Parkinson's.

Or there's suffering in the wake of the California  
fires that destroyed 4,000 homes,

giving nightly newscast images of people driving  
through flames, the blaze on both sides of the  
roads, people abandoning their cars and running  
with a baby or basket of family photos and  
quickly grabbed possessions,  
trying to outrun the blaze as  
wind drove its spread.

Not all made it.

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/13/us/california-wildfires-woolsey-camp-hill-testimonies/index.html>

Not only is there suffering, there is this reality we  
don't like to think about called Death.

Life is beautiful and hard.

And then it ends.

Death may have its peaceful aspects.

We can be grateful when a loved one slips gently  
into eternal rest.

But let's be honest for a moment.

Death doesn't always feel like someone quietly  
drifting off in a boat into the sunset.

No, it's more like this force that rips our loved  
ones from us.

To think of the world with the image of the  
battlefield, to recognize the whole universe as the  
scene of a struggle between  
God and Evil, personified in the Bible as Satan,  
well, that isn't for sissies.

Some people say the Christian faith is boring.  
Then we've *made* it boring.

But if faith is about a cosmic battle,  
if it means wrestling with the Devil, if it's facing a  
powerful cosmic enemy,  
then life here turns out to be compelling, gritty.  
It demands a fortitude that is sometimes more  
than we think we have.

If there are powers that we cannot resist with an  
easy self-help slogan or simple pick-me-up to go  
on a bumper sticker, what do we do?

We could get discouraged.

But what earthly good will that do?

Or—better—we could find ourselves driven  
to our knees in prayer.

We could get in touch again with our need for  
dependence on a God of great power.

We could finally find our vision opened wide to a  
hope that no earthly circumstance can thwart.

That's what can happen.

These realities are not meant to discourage us,  
but rather ready us.

“Our story here is part of a gigantic drama in  
which all heaven, earth, and hell strive,”

Thomas Howard writes.

“A Christian is aware of living under titanic  
mysteries that arch and loom above his head.”

That's the promise of this Christ the King Sunday.

Pope Pius XI established it in the liturgical  
calendar in 1925.

Christians around the world were suffering at the hands of hostile and anti-Christian governments.

Secularism was on the march.

He thought the church then needed a Sunday every year to celebrate the kingship of Christ over every earthly power.

Well, so do we.

A Sunday to hear Christ say, Look up.

Stay on course. Keep at it.

The enemy has a vote, but not the last word.

Which brings us to Daniel.

Today's reading is one of several biblical examples of what is called apocalyptic literature.

Now that word, *apocalypse*, which we normally think of in terms of the destruction of the world.

It's come to mean devastation or damage on a catastrophic scale, like when we will hear "a stock market apocalypse."

Or we think of an old, bearded man like in cartoons, carrying a sign saying, “the end is near.”

Apocalypse is a richer word than that.

It’s a better word.

Apocalypse is a more *hopeful* word.

It means revelation, uncovering, “an unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known and which could not be known apart from the unveiling.”

Apocalyptic writings in both the Old Testament and New Testament come with elaborate imagery.

And there’s an expectation of divine action.

And there’s assurance of the victory of God over the forces of suffering and sin and death.

They have interest in the end times, to be sure, but more than anything apocalyptic writings say

that whatever the future holds,

God’s got it covered.

Such images are not about scaring us.

No, they are telling us to look up.

Look ahead. Not hang back.

The vision of the future given us is  
full of hope and victory.

I once heard someone trying to help a student understand Revelation, the last book of the Bible, filled with fantastic, sometimes obscure and always dramatic visions.

His one-sentence summary of Revelation:

“We’ve seen the end, and God wins.”

That view was vital, indispensable news to those early Christians who heard it.

Daniel wrote, too, to help his persecuted friends.

His fellow Hebrews had managed to live under occupation with some manner of ease.

At first the Greek rulers were tolerant.

But then a new king, Antiochus Epiphanes, a vicious and megalomaniacal tyrant took power.

Jews who would not worship him as a god were subjected to ferocious persecution.

Daniel comes on the scene to remind them of the  
power and sovereignty of God.

Daniel, well, we remember that book for that  
great story about Daniel in the lions' den.

The first six chapters contain stories about the  
heroic and gifted young prophet.

But the stories are only one part.

The next six chapters get more dramatic,  
filled with visions, like we heard today.

It's all a way of saying,  
The Ancient One, the God of the Ages,  
will not and cannot be flummoxed by any  
headlines. Or by any circumstance we face.

For while you have to look to see it sometimes,  
God has very much to do with the world; God has  
very much to do with our lives.

Whatever our discouragement, that picture  
fires our hope.

For apocalyptic writings in the Bible--Daniel,  
Revelation, parts of the Gospels--

tell us of an invasion from a sphere beyond and  
above this one.

The enemy may win some battles,  
but not for long.

The enemy may win some battles, but not the war.

C. S. Lewis, the Christian scholar, once wrote,  
“One of the things that surprised me when I first  
read the New Testament seriously was that it  
talked so much about a Dark Power in the  
universe—a mighty evil spirit who was held to be  
the Power behind death and disease and sin.”  
And, Lewis goes on, “Christianity agrees ... that  
this universe is at war. But it does not think this is  
a war between independent [and equal] powers....  
Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world  
is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful  
king has landed, you might say landed in disguise,  
and is calling us all to take part in a great  
campaign of sabotage.”

Lewis, C. S.. *Mere Christianity* (C.S. Lewis Signature Classics) (pp. 45-46).  
HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

A campaign of *sabotage and renewal*.

That vision helps us endure disappointment.

That vision helps us face suffering, even death.

That vision spurs us on to keep doing good.

That vision keeps us doing justice  
in the face of injustice.

That vision helps us stay faithful even when  
cultural pressures would drag us down or pull us  
away from the faithful way.

Yes, in a battle there's risk and self-sacrifice and  
danger. But for those who follow a sovereign  
leader, for those who remember  
that picture of a reigning Jesus,  
there's no reason for us fret and lose our nerve.  
The enemy gets outvoted by all the company of  
heaven, by all the mighty forces of God's realm.

So today, ponder this biblical vision of a strong  
presence working in the world.

Working here. Alive in me and you.

Look up. Take heart.

Even when it gets hard, no need to hang back.