

All Saints 2019
(Daniel 7; Luke 6:20-31)

These readings surprised me. When things are supposedly saintly, I expect them to be cleaner, cheerier, with pep and joy, like “when the saints go marching in.” I want to be in *that* number!

But the characteristic here is suffering. Jesus focuses on those who hunger, who weep, who receive hate. After that dour collection, he turns to declaring woe. Not much pep or joy. And that’s the pretty reading!

Daniel himself says his creepy visions worried and alarmed him. No kidding! Multiheaded beasts crawling out of the sea with wings getting torn off and beachside heart transplants and a mouthful of ribs, all before the final pyromania. It makes you wonder whether this freaky, gory reading was chosen more for Halloween than for All Saints Sunday. Oh when the saints go marching in, I don’t wanna be in that number! Leave me out of it!

That’s the surprise, the shock in these readings. We presume we’d want to strive for being a saint and actively pursue the parade. But these are a bit lackluster in their appeal. It sure doesn’t market very well: You, too, can be hungry and tearful and the least popular! If that’s not enough, act now to be threatened by terrifying beasts!

Jesus says, congrats! Good news! You can rejoice and leap for joy! And you’re practically unable not to leap up now clicking your heels with a big ol’ WHOOPEE! You can hardly wait to start loving enemies and turning the other cheek and facing persecutions. Sign me up! Where’s the line! I want to be in that number!

Now, I want to say directly and clearly that that is not commended to us in these readings or in faith. You are not to go on the hunt to seek out suffering. Don’t extrapolate. If you are being abused you should not just put up with it. If you’re oppressed you shouldn’t be patient. If your leaders are beastly you it’s not just to suffer through the chaos and violence. The message is NOT that such endurance will make you better.

Yes, God wants you not to succumb, but to survive. But God is not telling those already hurting that they should be further humiliated or that pious quietude is the path ahead.

What is reinforced here, rather, is where we look for hope when things are bleak (which, after all, is when we look for hope). This flips our notion of sainthood on its haloed head. It’s not about achieving special spiritual status to move up the ranks of holy hierarchy. This isn’t primarily what you should choose to do, not for taking justice into your own hands. It’s certainly not about how good you are at suffering. The question is what will ultimately help. And the focus is on God’s will and Jesus’ work. That is where hope is.

So, again, I trust it’s apparent that when Jesus is saying “blessed are you who are hungry,” he’s not commending that you go on a diet. He’s not talking about fasting. As much as today we want our offerings to change lives, these words from Jesus aren’t really supporting emptying your cupboards for the food pantry. For people who are hungry and starving and lacking, Jesus says: you have a place in my kingdom. Even if you’re not receiving what any human should deserve, you have a place with God, in God’s household, as God’s children. You are not forgotten, not left out. That’s no small hope.

Luke particularly helps us know in Jesus this God of reversals, lifting up the lowly and casting the mighty from their thrones, God born to homeless refugees, who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty, who includes the outsiders and speaks peace and won’t let death wreck our relationships.

So “blessed are you who weep” may resonate today, when you’ve been invited to bring grief and sorrows and confrontations with loss. Again, Jesus isn’t suggesting you chase after sadness in order to get blessed. But when that is your reality, when you’ve encountered death that would seem to swallow up life’s goodness, when depression traps you, tears overwhelm you, when you know this much much too well, Jesus assures you remarkably—practically impossibly—that

laughter will be yours. Joy will come, especially when you've been too long denied it.

It's a strong reassurance, a really good word of hope, even without any specificity of details: when will we laugh, and why, and how? I don't think Jesus is so imprecise as to be vague. He's not promoting a notion that things change and life goes on. He's sure not saying, yeah you may be sad for now, but you'll get over it and forget the bad stuff. You'll move on. It'll get better. Those are dismissive platitudes, not God's hopeful promises.

If it's not directly clear in those verses that God is one who gives joy and laughter and love and satisfied appetites and your proper place and undoes all evil, Daniel makes it clearer that God is our hope, as after four beastly kings then God sends one like a Son of Man, the right leader forever and forever and ever, which sounds like a long time.

A little background: this story of Daniel is set in about 553 BC but is describing the course of events in 167 BC. It's historical fiction, like if you wrote a story about having a vision when Abraham Lincoln was president that alluded ahead to Donald Trump.

So in 553 BC, Daniel's people were in captivity under the Babylonian Empire. After that came the Medes and the Persians, the first three beasts. By 167 BC, they had been suffering under the Greeks. The particular emperor in power was represented by that little horn with a big mouth, bragging and bragging. Calling him little was a put down, but the bragging came from him calling himself "God Manifest." This story proclaims that his rotten rule would be overthrown, that God wouldn't let that stand. God would set things right. This vision is for encouragement to live with hope in God.

We might relate to a little man with a big bragging mouth claiming to be much more than he is coming to power. We can flee a beast and move to Canada. We may want to imagine if enough of us fight back, we could take the beast down. We may try to take comfort that the next beast to come out of the chaotic sea may be a bit

better. "Impeach the beast" has a fun ring, but it shouldn't be our best hope.

I don't use these political statements lightly. I use them on behalf of people who don't just dislike or disagree with our president, but are suffering, whose families are being torn apart, whose farms are lost, whose housing is taken away, who are being threatened and killed. On their behalf, it is false hope to say that they should suffer patiently and wait for the next election. Our hope needs more.

When people are hungry, real hope isn't finding five dollars to buy a fast food burger. Not being drug tested for food stamps would be some step. But an assurance that they will be filled, that the God of the universe is on their side, that is ultimate and is necessary.

For many of us, these are very hypothetical. We live secure as the rich and full and laughing, those who are spoken well of. It's easy for us not to hope.

But when we face mortality, that may remain our clearest moment of needing hope. Our physical fitness regimens no longer pay out. Vitamins don't revitalize. Doctors and insurance policies and medical miracles prove vain. I'm reluctant even to name the situations, because this is the suffering that we privileged people still do know, and don't need our noses rubbed in it. I can talk of destruction and hunger and persecution and those words may pierce us less. For however terrible our suffering is, really it still happens to be small. But weeping and death we know.

We, too, know we need hope. I can't fully articulate the hope for you. I am reluctant to remove it only to some endtimes heavenly banquet, though I'm also certainly against dismissing that ultimate hope of the resurrection to eternal life. Hope is bigger than my visions or my words.

But if I can't say how or when, I can still say that our almost impossible hope comes from God, who came as a human one, the Son of Man, who takes your hand, to institute God's kingdom among us, loving enemies, bringing reconciliation, the first fruits of life that endures

forever and forever and ever. You want to be in that number. And you are. Congrats! Good news! Here's the promise of Jesus: you will leap for joy. Can I get a big ol' WHOOPEE?