

My sermon title this morning is an amalgam of two of the most significant movies of my teen years. One arrived as the relatively unheralded work of a young producer with only one hit to his credit, featuring a cast of unknown young actors with a pair of elderly British actors to add gravitas to what was seen as a “kiddy movie” storyline and the uncredited voice work of an American stage actor whose film work had been limited to art house fare. The other was a much-anticipated, hugely expensive epic from a multi-Oscar winner, featuring a cast of stars, including the long-awaited comeback of the greatest actor of the previous generation. That first movie, in 1977, was then simply known as “Star Wars.” Now, understood as the opening of the middle trilogy of George Lucas’ grand cinematic epic, we call it “Episode IV” or “A New Hope.” The second movie, in 1978, was “Apocalypse Now,” the sprawling, dark meditation on America’s involvement in Vietnam superimposed upon the plot and characters of Joseph Conrad’s classic novella, “Heart of Darkness.”

I began thinking of these movies as I was doing preparatory work for this sermon several weeks ago. The scriptures that I read a few moments ago seemed at first glance to represent the themes of those films: Daniel equating to “Apocalypse Now” and Zechariah’s speech in Luke to “A New Hope.” But the longer I worked with those passages, the more I realized that what Francis Ford Coppola had in mind with his vision of the collapse of American morality was quite the opposite of Daniel’s vision. In fact, as one might guess would be the case for the first week of Advent, both of these passages carry a strong message of the virtue traditionally associated with this Sunday: Hope.

Before I get into the hope of either of these passages, a few words of introduction for the Book of Daniel may be in order. I confess, I feel like a bit of a pretender teaching on Daniel with Dr. Pam Scalise sitting in the front row, since she’s the author of an upcoming commentary on that book, but I’ll do my best. The Book of Daniel is easily divided into two parts, the first six chapters which are stories about Daniel, a young Jewish exile in Babylon, and his friends, and chapters 7 – 12, which purport to be visions seen by that same man. In fact, many scholars are convinced that this book came into its final form long after the Exile, probably around the time that the Seleucid Emperor, Antiochus IV, was persecuting the Jews during his reign in 175-164 BCE. It’s likely that this was the last book composed in what we know as the Old Testament. I’ll return to its historical significance in a moment.

If you remember the Book of Daniel at all, it’s likely that you remember some of the stories from that first section, like the one I read to the kids earlier. We might call it “The Adventures of Daniel.” These stories are, frankly, tall tales: Daniel and his friends demonstrate the benefits of a healthy lifestyle; Daniel rises to prominence in Babylon because he can interpret the king’s dreams; Daniel’s three friends survive being thrown into “the fiery furnace” through divine intervention; Daniel likewise survives the lions’ den. They are, much like the comic books I grew up with, fantastic adventures showing that good triumphs over evil.

The second half of the Book of Daniel is preferred by those who are constantly seeking clues to the future in the Bible. From a genre known as “apocalyptic,” these visions purport to tell the future of the Children of Israel and the world. But apocalyptic literature is and has been badly misunderstood by readers for centuries. Daniel and other apocalyptic writings in the Bible, including its final book, The Revelation to John, were never meant to be understood as

predicting the future. Their bizarre settings and terrible monsters, not unlike comic books, were to be understood as veiled references to current events, usually when the People of God were under attack from external forces. Indeed, the word “apocalypse,” understood by most now to refer to the end of the world, actually means “an unveiling.” These coded messages, which would have been impenetrable to the enemies of the Jews or the Christians in their time, were understood by the faithful to be descriptions of their own plight and, most importantly, reminders that God and good would ultimately triumph. In Biblical literature, “Apocalypse Now” equals “A New Hope.” Rather than the ambiguous, gloomy, and violent end envisioned by Francis Ford Coppola, Biblical apocalyptic points us toward hope. The Death Star will be destroyed; Darth Vader will be defeated; the story ends in reunion and joy.

What we have in Daniel, chapter 7, is a disguised description of the situation of the Jews under Antiochus IV, who called himself “Epiphanes,” the “visible manifestation of a god.” The four beasts probably represent the four empires under which Judah has suffered, to greater or less extent: Babylon, Persia, Ptolemaic Egypt, and Seleucid Syria. Those last two are the remnants of the great empire of Alexander the Great, divided among his generals upon his early death. The “fourth beast,” Syria, controlled Judah at the time Daniel was likely written. Never benevolent overlords, the Seleucid emperors reached a new low with Antiochus Epiphanes, who banned the observance of Torah, including circumcision, set up his own statue in the Temple in Jerusalem, and further profaned it by having hogs sacrificed to himself there.

But Daniel’s vision is meant to reassure, not simply to recount the dreadful circumstances or to terrify, notwithstanding the grotesque and frightening imagery. Those suffering under Antiochus would have been reminded that there had been mighty empires before which had tried to crush the Children of Israel. All had failed. The promise here is that Antiochus would also fail, as indeed he did, his excesses leading to the Maccabean revolt remembered in the upcoming holiday of Hanukkah and the brief-lived Hasmonean Kingdom of Israel. The Ancient One, or Ancient of Days, who destroys the beasts is, of course, a personification of Yahweh. And, perhaps most significantly, Yahweh rules and acts through “one like a human being,” or, in older translation, “one like a Son of Man.” Those reading or hearing this apocalyptic, this “veiled message,” were reminded that human beings had a role to play in the defeat of evil. Christians, a little over two centuries later, would remember Jesus referring to himself, obliquely, as the Son of Man, and would cast him as the hero of their own apocalyptic literature, in the Gospels and, of course, in Revelation. In all of these reportedly gloomy scriptures, the message is always the same. Take hope! God wins! We continue to hear echoes of this word of hope in the early music of U2, in the song “October”: “Kingdoms rise / And kingdoms fall / But you (God) go on and on.”

And speaking of songs, let’s jump ahead now in the Bible and in time to the Gospel According to Luke. The passage I read is known as “Zechariah’s Prophecy” or “Zechariah’s Song.” Like the prophecy or vision of Daniel, Zechariah’s words are a message of hope. Unlike Daniel, however, Luke does not present a veiled, apocalyptic vision, but speaks quite openly of the source and vision of hope. Rather than referring to “the Ancient of Days” and “one like a Son of Man,” Zechariah speaks of “the Lord God of Israel,” of a savior to come from the House of David, and of his own son, the one who prepares the way of the Lord, known to us as John the Baptist. Remember, Zechariah’s words come in the midst of yet another foreign occupation.

The latter Hasmonean kings had invited the Romans into Judah to help defend them against their enemies, only to find that the Romans took over and ultimately displaced the Hasmonean dynasty in favor of their own client, Herod. But Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, is not afraid to speak plainly. In his son's birth, he sees the dawning of hope for his people.

Zechariah's great song has been known in the usage of the Church as the Benedictus, the Latin translation of its first two words, "Blessed be..." In proclaiming blessings upon God, Zechariah has good precedent. This is the language used in the Psalms, perhaps most memorably in Psalm 103 — "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits..." — or in Psalm 113 — "Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time on and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised."

The Benedictus reminds us first of all of God's promise to the Children of Israel and foretells the coming of a redeemer from the house of David, Jesus. The early verses could certainly be interpreted as the restoration of the earthly kingdom of Israel under a Davidic monarch. Indeed, Zechariah might have meant them in this way, as all his contemporaries anticipated this resolution to God's promise. But seen from our vantage point, they also point to the spiritual redemption offered by Jesus, for in him we are redeemed from our spiritual enemies, sin and death, the powers of greed and selfishness, of lust and anger. The latter part of the Benedictus certainly turns in this direction as Zechariah prophesies for his son that John will bring the people knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of sins through the tender mercy of God. And Zechariah, like the great prophets of Israel before him, understands that God's mercy is not limited to Israel but is also for those who sit in darkness, for the Gentiles. With his tongue loosed, Zechariah sings God's praise and points to the universal love of the Creator.

I discovered this week one more detail of Zechariah's Song that is obscured in translation, especially, alas, in the NRSV, but is worth noting. The King James Version, the opening of the song sounds like this: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people..." Verse 78 sounds like this: "Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, etc..." In both verses, the operative verb is "to visit." I point this out because the Greek original has a very specific meaning in the Bible. "To visit – episkeptomai" carries the connotation of visiting in order to help. It is, for example, used by Jesus in the Gospel According to Matthew when he says, "I was sick, and you visited me." Other Biblical usage includes visiting the poor, the widows, and the orphans. For those who've learned through misunderstanding apocalyptic literature that visitations from God or the Coming Again of Christ involve disaster for humankind, this vision of visitation dispels the fear in favor of hope.

I've spent our time together this morning unveiling the hidden language of the apocalyptic vision of Daniel and the far clearer Song of Zechariah for a couple of reasons. One reason is that I don't want anyone here to be put off by the obscurity of the apocalyptic visions of the Bible. Part of my job as your pastor is to do the research that helps us all understand the ancient teachings of our faith with a new clarity and meaningfulness. And, ultimately, these visions are images of hope, something that we all need very much in a day when wars flare around the globe, when God's beautiful creation is in danger from the actions of those who were supposed

to be its stewards, and when the leadership of so much of the world seems to have fallen into the hands of evildoers.

I also hope to remind us all, including myself, that sometimes we can be guilty of obscuring God's good news of hope and peace, joy and love, through the use of language that is not clear to all. We must all be alert to how we use words like grace, salvation, redemption, sin, sacrifice, and what my old friend Ragan Courtney calls "the Language of Zion": code that is perfectly clear to us but probably isn't to those who come seeking the truth we have to offer. And not only our words can be coded. In a few moments, we will celebrate our monthly time of Communion, a simplified reenactment of the events at the last Seder meal Jesus shared with his followers. The actions of sharing bread and cup are innately significant to those of us who've been doing it for years and will speak in some fashion even to the uninitiated. But we must also be ready to speak openly of the hope symbolized in our actions. We may struggle with an explanation of what it meant for Jesus to die for us, but we are sure, from his own words, that he did. We need to be ready to speak of what it means to share in the Body of Christ, becoming a community with lives as integral to each other as the ear is to the eye, all under the leadership of Jesus, our head and our heart. We must be ready to say, "not only the bread of suffering but the cup of joy." And we have to demonstrate our unity and our joy to those who come seeking both. We have to live as if we have been saved: unafraid, ready to share with those in need, ready to embrace the stranger, ready to love.

Today, we have begun the season of Advent. Our consumer culture has moved the beginning of the season of preparation for Christmas to Thanksgiving Night, unable to take even a whole day to remember that for which we are grateful without running out to the stores at night to begin a new cycle of acquisition, buying presents which were intended to show love but all too often end up being part of a game of "he who dies with the most stuff wins." But we recognize that our hope does not lie in "stuff." Our hope lies in the Holy One of Israel and in the Anointed One of God, the Christ, whose coming we celebrate on Christmas whether there are presents under the tree or not. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus and his righteousness for in Jesus we have our model of life, the proof that we can live as God would have us live and the proof that we are forgiven and loved even when we do not live in such a way. To the destructive forces in our universe and in our country and in our own lives, we say that we are not afraid, that we have hope, because we know that love will triumph in the end. For that all-encompassing, ever-forgiving, open to all love of God, for Jesus, who embodied it, and for the presence in our lives of God's Spirit, who binds us together in love and hope, thanks be to God.