

Sermon

Spy Games Story – Magic 8 Ball, Fortune Cookie

- greatest event in the history of the university
- planned for weeks
- Magic 8 Ball...
 - “My sources say no...”
- ...vs. Fortune Cookie
 - 2 fortunes (a good omen...)
 - “Look not to the things of the past”
 - “The project you are currently working on will be a success”
- My friends and I danced around the magic 8 ball, jeering, mocking it... The other customers gave us some funny looks...
- Now of course it’s all ridiculous – neither plastic 8-balls nor slips of paper inside of cookies actually have any control of our destiny or any ability to predict the future...
 - But they capture our imagination because we all want to know...

On Telling the Future

Or at least, we all *think* we want to know the future. Like it will give us an edge... We think we want to know what is going to happen. We want to know the end of the story, how it is all going to come out.

That’s usually why we get so excited about apocalyptic visions. Another movie about the end of the world came out a couple years ago. 2012. It broke \$200 million in the first week.

We think that if we know all the details about the end of the world we’ll be able to see it coming, maybe prepare for it. We want to be ready for the apocalypse, because it’s exciting.

The book of Daniel and the Vision of Daniel 7

The book of Daniel starts out with stories. The first 6 chapters are filled with stories that we learned about in Sunday School – Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego and the fiery furnace; or the story of the hand writing on the wall, Daniel in the lions’ den...

Chapter 7 tells a different kind of story. Here we have Daniel dreaming alone at night - with visions of great beasts rising from the depths...

History lesson

Daniel is troubled. He sees an angel and asks, "What does it all mean?"

"The four beasts are four kingdoms that shall arise," he is told.

[Stay off the page... You've told this dozens of times before. Only the highlights matter.]

It's time for a history lesson. You can't really understand Daniel without it. (I'll try to channel my inner history teacher and make it interesting. :-) You see, some 2500 years ago, Israel was a small nation in an age of empires.

These ancient empires conquered the known world. First came Babylon – out of the valley between Tigris and Euphrates, the heart of present day Iraq. Under king Nebuchadnezzar they conquered Jerusalem, leaving the city and the temple in ruin and carrying its people off into Exile.

But Babylon itself was overtaken by the Empire of the Medes. And they themselves were enveloped by the Persians. It's like a fish that gets swallowed by a bigger fish, which itself gets swallowed by another still bigger fish...

These are the first three beasts that come out of the sea – that arise from the murky waters of chaos. The lion is Babylon. The bear is the Empire of the Medes. And the Leopard is Persia. These were vast empires that claimed much of the known world.

And then a fourth beast arose – "terrifying and dreadful and powerful."

This was a new kingdom, out of the West. Alexander the Great led the Greeks as they conquered the known world. But Alexander died young and other kings arose to take his place. "The beast had 10 horns, and the 10 horns were 10 kings, so the story goes..."

170 years or so before Christ, there came another king – Antiochus IV, Epiphanies... He usurped the throne by violence at a young age...

"And as I was considering the horns, another horn appeared, a little one coming up among them; to make room for it, three of the earlier horns were plucked up by the roots..."

Antiochus was a Greek king who decided the only way to hold onto Israel was to make its people into Greeks themselves. He entered the temple that had been rebuilt and placed there – in the holy of holies – a statue to Zeus! He slaughtered a pig on the altar.

"Then shall come an abomination that brings desolation - let the reader understand!"

Antiochus held great feasts at which he forced Jews to eat pork. If they refused, they were tortured and killed. The punishments were gruesome. He killed the children of faithful Jewish parents who had circumcised their babies...

He was trying to destroy all hope. To break their spirit - strip the people of their identity and so pacify them into loyal subjects of the Empire...

This wasn't how it was *supposed* to work. God is supposed to bless the righteous and bring justice to the wicked, but here the faithful are the ones who are killed. They are suffering not just in spite of their faithfulness, but *precisely because* they are faithful.

Daniel's early readers are here - in the midst of Antiochus' imperial reign of terror... what are they to do?

But the beasts' reign is not forever. As Daniel dreams, he sees the Ancient of Days descend. The beasts are overthrown... A vision of the future.

Andor

Our family is into Star Wars. Everett even brought in the Star Wars helmet he's been working on to show his friends this morning. :-) The world of Star Wars is dominated by the Empire... Ruthless and powerful, they rule with an iron fist. Legions of storm troopers, and fleets of storm troopers, it seems like the cruel imperial reign will last forever...

There's a character - in one of the newer shows - a young man named Nemick who is part of a small group beginning to take a stand. He writes:

"There will be times when the struggle seems impossible. I know this already. Alone, unsure, dwarfed by the scale of the enemy. Remember this. Freedom is a pure idea. It occurs spontaneously and without instruction. Random acts of insurrection are occurring constantly throughout the galaxy. There are whole armies, battalions that have no idea that they've already enlisted in the cause. Remember that the frontier of the Rebellion is everywhere. And even the smallest act of insurrection pushes our lines forward. And then remember this. The Imperial need for control is so desperate because it is so unnatural. Tyranny requires constant effort. It breaks, it leaks. Authority is brittle. Oppression is the mask of fear. Remember that. And know this, the day will come when all these skirmishes and battles, these moments of defiance will have flooded the banks of the Empire's authority and then there will be one too many. One single thing will break the siege. Remember this. Try."

Conclusion

This is Daniel's reminder to his first hearers - to those suffering under the reign of Antiochus, and to us. He's giving them hope.

This is not some passive hope. A hope that someday God will take care of things for us. No, it's a dangerous hope. It is a hope that gives us the courage to act, the courage to keep standing, even when the struggle seems impossible. For we are not alone.

The Ancient of Days sits upon the throne and the beasts of Daniel's day and our own will be thrown down.

Like my wife says, we are called to be “dangerous hoppers” – remaining faithful, to stand - against despair and violence, to stand against tyranny - to stand with the most vulnerable - sticking our necks out to do what’s right, no matter how fiercely the beasts may howl. For they do not have the final say...

Amen.

Sending

As it happens, just a short time later, Antiochus - at the height of his power - falls from his chariot while rushing to a battle. He takes ill from his injuries and dies. After him, the Jews become free. There is a “happy ending” at least for a time...

But here in the midst of it, when Daniel wakes from his dream, he is still troubled. The final hope does not erase the present struggle, the present pain. But it may give us courage to stand faithful to the very end. May it be so. Amen.