***“With the Clouds”*** by S. Finlan, at First Church, December 2, 2018

**Daniel 7:2–14 (New International Version)**

2 In my vision at night. . . 3 four great beasts came up out of the sea. . . . 7 The fourth beast was terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims. It had ten horns. . . . 8 One horn had eyes like a human being, and it spoke boastfully. 9 As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze.

10 A river of fire came out before him. . . . Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened. 11 I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking, until the beast was slain. . . .

13 In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

**Luke 18:1–8; 21:27**

Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ 4For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming. . . .’ 7Now will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?. . . . 21:27They will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.”

I want to talk about the fear and hope that the Jews experienced at the time of the writing of Daniel. This is in the second century b.c., when Judah was under the thumb of a Greek Syrian empire that succeeded the collapse of Alexander the Great’s empire. Although the Jews had been through periods of domination by various empires, none of them had tried to repress the Jewish religion. But one of these Syrian emperors tried to force the Jews to worship the Greek gods. He even built an altar to Zeus, and right in the Jewish temple he sacrificed pigs.

Can you imagine how horrifying and insulting this was, to any believing Jew? But the tyrant didn’t stop there. He brutally killed a number of Jews who resisted non-violently. Second Maccabees is written to honor these brave non-violent martyrs. But before long, the Jewish response became militant. An armed resistance was organized by the Maccabeus brothers. They managed to drive the Syrians out of Jerusalem and then they undertook to cleanse the temple from the defilement of the Syrians.

The lamp they had in the temple was able to stay alight on fumes while they awaited a shipment of new, pure oil. This is the story that Jews tell at Hanukkah. Some of these events are told in the book known as First Maccabees.

But what about the inner life, where hope is born? What about the injustice, the suffering, the yearning for freedom, the desire to serve God, and the hope that God would protect the people? Such religious thought is found in Daniel. In chap. 7 we see some of these hopes addressed. It is a court scene on the judgment of *empires*, rather than the resurrection of the dead and the judgment of *individuals*, as in Daniel 12.

Here the Ancient of Days oversees a heavenly and dramatic court scene. Four grotesque beasts arise out of the sea, representing the Babylonian, Persian, and other empires, each one committing violence, and then getting crushed in turn. The horn that spoke boastfully represents the Syrian dictator, and he gets crushed in the end. After that, the author envisions the Jews coming to power, represented by a *human*, “one like a son of man” (7:13), rather than by a beast.

So Daniel 7 pictures God vindicating and raising up the Jewish people and empowering them to replace all these beastly empires. You see, it is really all about hope and vindication, the yearning for *humane* rule and of honor for the Jewish people. Daniel does not emphasize either military liberation or martyrdom, as the first two Maccabean books do, but rather God’s direct and decisive action. Hope refuses to accept that the suffering of the just is meaningless. God will vindicate them in the end. Daniel 7 is an expression of hope in times of trouble.

For Christians, the phrase “one like a son of man” has a very different meaning. It is identified with Jesus, and the kingdom given to the son of man is understood to be a *spiritual* kingdom, not a material one. This view is reinforced by the court scene being set in *heaven*, and by the kingdom being *everlasting*. So it ceases to be hope for Israel as such, but is hope for all who seek God’s will.

Hope also fills the two passages in Luke. In Luke 21, Jesus explicitly links his Second Advent or Second Coming with the Daniel passage (which is known to early Christians), saying “they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27). Since his First Advent was as a little baby, not “with the clouds,” that has to refer to his Second Advent.

Luke 18 is also about hope, but at first it makes no reference to either the First or Second Advent. It is about the need to *persist* in praying. In the story, a widow is persistent in asking for relief from a grumpy and reluctant judge. Finally the judge relents and rules for her just to get her to leave him alone. So how much *more* will God—a fair and compassionate judge—“grant justice . . . to ones who cry to him day and night” (18:7)? God will answer the persistent prayer for justice, so don’t give up hope. Be like the widow who persists.

It even says “he will quickly grant justice to them” (18:8). That implies in *this* lifetime. Then comes the surprising finish, which is about his return, but it never seems to get any attention. Jesus asks “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

I think the implied answer is yes, but it’s not obvious. It’s really an open-ended question. Will the human race make progress toward that time when there will be widespread “faith on earth” (Luke 18:8)? Progress so far has been gradual and difficult, and is often followed by periods of regression and disintegration. Will we bear fruit, will we grow spiritually, so that there *will* be faith on earth when the Son of Man returns, or will apocalyptic scenarios occur? What really matters is that the kingdom be built *within us*, so that we are ready to be greeted by Jesus, whether in this lifetime or the next.

We are reaching way beyond our pay-grade if we claim to know when the Son of Man will return. Jesus said no one knows the day, not the angels, or even the Son of Man himself (Matt 24:36).

And so, Jesus asks the open-ended question “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” This seems to imply that he will come during a season of faith. In any case, our instructions are the same: be honest, be just, walk humbly with your God. And trust that “His dominion is an everlasting dominion” (Dan 7:14). That is the promise from Daniel, and we have the promise from Luke that God will grant justice. *These* are our sources of *hope*.

Advent is about preparation, hope, and faith. You can keep hope alive in your life. You start by letting “Christ [be] formed in you” (Gal 4:19), as Paul exhorted. With surety in your own heart, you can then be a ray of hope for others. They will see the love of God in your lives. It starts at home—in your own heart.