

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
Rediscovering Jesus: The Son of Man
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Daniel 7:13-14; John 1:43-50

The year was 1721. For most of us, it is not a particularly auspicious year. Yet it is one that resonates in our history to this day because 1721 was the year in which Peter the Great declared that Russia was an empire. That declaration was not simply a change in nomenclature, but it signaled a change in national understanding. Czar Peter believed that Russia was the inheritor of the ancient Byzantine Empire, or as most of us in the west know it the Eastern Roman Empire. And because Russia was the new Byzantium it gave Peter permission to expand the Empire and conquer his neighbors. Peter began by taking lands from the Ottoman Empire to have a warm water port on the Black Sea. Next Peter turned his attention to the west and engaged Sweden in a long, drawn out, costly war, which led to Sweden giving Russia ice-free ports on the Baltic. Over the years Russia continued its expansion until it became what would be the third largest geographic empire the world has ever known. This history resonates today because Vladimir Putin has made it clear that his ambitions in Ukraine have nothing to do with “de-nazification” of that nation, but it has to do with recreating the Russian Empire. It has to do with Russia reclaiming its rightful place as Byzantium. In interview after interview, Putin has made clear that his actions and their justification are identical to those of Peter the Great and are intended to re-Russify and expand the Russian Empire.

While we as Americans might find this concept of Empire a bit odd in the 21st century we shouldn't. We shouldn't because Empires and the dream of empires never really die. All we need to do is look at the past and witness the rise and fall and rise of empires. All we need do is look at some of the Biblical Empires such as Assyria, Babylonia, and Rome. These empires rose and fell multiple times over more than a thousand years each. Each time they fell there would be an eventual revival driven by feelings of tribe, nationality, and religion. Their gods would call them back to conquer, destroy, and subjugate their neighbors. They would wreak destruction on all those around them claiming that they had a divine right to do so. The pride and desire for empire is like a virus that once it infects the body simply refuses to let go and people will do almost anything to reclaim their rightful place in the world. And if you are wondering why I am waxing on about empire, it is because we cannot understand Jesus as the Son of Man without understanding Empire and the role it plays in the one title Jesus claims again, and again, and again. Let me explain.

The book of Daniel purports to be set in the great Babylonian Empire; the Empire that conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem. The stories it contains are about Daniel and his friends who are Jews taken into exile by this great Empire. The purpose of these stories is to show readers what faithfulness in exile looks like. The reality of the book of Daniel however, is that it was not written during the Babylonian exile but was written in a time when the Jewish people were in danger of being exterminated. This was the time of the Jews' oppression by the Seleucid Empire. The Seleucids were Greeks who took control of the Holy Land after the death of Alexander the Great. While several generations of Seleucids had been on good terms with the Jews, there arose one who was not, and his name was Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Antiochus made the decision that he would eliminate the Jews and their faith. Thousands were killed and imprisoned. The Book of Daniel was written to encourage resistance to Antiochus and trust in God. And it is in that conflict then that the image of the Son of Man appears. As we read, the Son of Man is a being who, with the backing of God will be given “...*dominion, and glory, and kingship, such that all peoples, nations, and languages would serve him, and his kingdom shall never end.*” In other words, the

Son of Man would be God's regent on earth for an everlasting Kingdom of God. It is this name above all other names that Jesus uses to describe himself.

The question that confronts us then is, what Empire was Jesus confronting and conquering as the Son of Man? Many of his followers assumed that the Empire was Rome. Throughout history others have assumed it was all non-Christian Empires, which was the impetus for the Crusades and other holy wars including those in which Christians killed other Christians by the tens-of-thousands. I would argue this morning that it was none of these. The Empire Jesus had come to conquer was instead, the kingdom of darkness. Ok, I know I sound like someone from Star Wars or Lord of Rings. "Jesus, I am your father, come to the dark side." But if we are to take the Gospel of John seriously what we need to understand about Jesus is that he is described as the light of the world. *"What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."* In other words, for John, the battle if you will, is not between one earthly human empire and another, it is a battle for the very soul of humanity. It is a battle between the forces of darkness and light. What do I mean by this? What I mean is that there are forces that shape human beings, cultures, and communities. These forces can be dark...meaning forces focusing on hate, violence, racism, homophobia, and death. Or, if you will, these are the forces that diminish the life God offers. There are also forces of light...meaning forces that focus on life, love, forgiveness, reconciliation, equality, and compassion. These are the forces that enhance the life that God offers.

What Jesus is about as the Son of Man then is that that of empowering internal transformation that results in external transformation. The internal transformation of darkness to light is not intended to simply be a gift that makes us feel better about ourselves, or act in more Christlike ways as individuals...though it is certainly intended to do that. It is also intended to create communities, or if you will, empires of light that shine into the darkest empires of the world. This is what Jesus means when he says in Matthew that we, his followers, are to be the light of the world. We are to be those who, as followers of the Son of Man, become both individually and collectively, beacons for life, welcome, forgiveness, and compassion in an often-dark world.

This contest of Empires is the reason that you matter. And by you I mean both you as individuals and you as Everybody's Church. You matter because you are called to be agents of light as the followers of the Son of Man, who is the light. We are to be light to the world such that all persons we encounter have an encounter with the light; that all people we encounter can see themselves as beloved children of God. We are to be light shining in the darkness. At the same time, we matter as Everybody's Church because we have chosen to be a light to the world. We have chosen to be a community of light in which all persons are welcomed, nurtured, and then sent out to be light to the world. We are light in what we do with Foster Care, at Alcott Elementary School, in Mexico, and with all the agencies we support.

My challenge to you for this morning is, to ask yourselves, "How am I as a follower of the Son of Man, being light to the world around me?"