



Holy Disruption: Ancient Prophets for Modern Times—Daniel

Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; September 6, 2026

15th Sunday after Pentecost

Daniel 7:13–14, 27; Revelation 21:1–5

Today marks the end of our sermon series, *Ancient Prophets for Modern Times*—and what a way to end—with Daniel. In my imagination, Daniel has always seemed “larger than life.” Though the Book of Daniel is only twelve chapters, it reads like a masterpiece, filled with unforgettable stories: Daniel in the lion’s den; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace because they refuse to worship the king’s statue; and King Belshazzar, who in the midst of a lavish feast has the audacity to use vessels stolen from the Temple in Jerusalem to praise gods of gold, silver, wood, and stone. Then comes the mysterious handwriting on the palace wall—and Daniel alone is able to interpret its message: the end of the foolish king.

A theme running through Daniel is the ebb and flow of empires. Kingdoms rise and fall. The empire may write the headlines, but the empire does not write the ending. Daniel was written for people who knew the shadow of empire—displacement, cultural pressure, and powerful rulers making decisions that affected ordinary people with no voice in the room. It speaks to those who wonder: How long can this last? How do we remain faithful when the forces around us are so

much bigger than we are? How do we keep hope alive when it seems the powerful will always win?

These questions are remarkably contemporary. We may not live in Babylon, but we know something about empires—governments, corporations, technologies, and cultural forces that can feel beyond our reach to influence. We know what it's like to wake up wondering what has happened overnight, to scroll through one more crisis, one more injustice, one more frightening headline. Brian McLaren, in *Life After Doom*, writes about the temptation to become so overwhelmed by what is wrong with the world that we begin to believe nothing we do could possibly matter. Doom can become more than something we experience; it can become a way of seeing. But Daniel offers us another vision: "As I watched in the night visions," he proclaims, "I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven." This figure is given dominion, glory, and kingship—and then comes the promise: "His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed."

Daniel isn't just predicting another political regime; he's making a theological claim about where true authority resides—not in the kingdoms of this world or rulers who appear invincible, but with God and God alone. The passage goes on to say that the holy ones of the Most High shall receive and possess the kingdom forever. This is not only a vision of what God will do someday; it is a reminder of who we are called to be now. We belong to another kingdom. Our deepest allegiance is not determined by borders, political parties, economic systems, or the cultural moment. We live here. We love this place. We care deeply about our communities, our neighbors, and this beautiful, broken earth. But our ultimate allegiance belongs to God.

To say that our citizenship is in God's kingdom doesn't mean withdrawing from the world; it means being sent into it to live according to God's purposes. If God's kingdom is a kingdom of justice, we practice justice. If it's a kingdom of peace, we become peacemakers. If it's a kingdom where the stranger is welcomed, the vulnerable protected, and every person beloved, then we begin creating that kind of community wherever we are.

The Book of Revelation takes Daniel's vision even further as John gives us a glimpse of God's promised future: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples...he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." And then comes God's great promise: "See, I am making all things new." You see, the master plan is not for God to whisk us out of here. God is not abandoning this world he created. God is making all things new. God dwelling among us. Tears wiped away. Death, mourning, crying, and pain no more. Not an escape from the world, but its renewal. That's the future toward which we are called to live.

In so many ways, Daniel seems larger than life. Perhaps that is why these stories endure. Because every generation needs people who remind us that a human life *can* become larger than itself, that the way we live *can* leave a mark far beyond our own years. Here in East Tennessee, we know something about that. Just a few days ago, we said goodbye to someone whose life had become “larger than life”: Dolly Parton. It’s hard to imagine Tennessee without Dolly. Her music traveled far beyond these mountains, but what has filled my news and social media feeds these past few days are stories of her goodness and grace, her generous heart, and her deep faith.

Dolly was a Christian, but she wasn’t interested in using her Christianity to control or condemn others. Her faith didn’t make her smaller or more judgmental; it made her heart larger. She welcomed people. She loved people. She was generous with people. Christianity was never an arrogant status symbol for Dolly. It was something she lived. And she lived it with an expansive love—for people of every color, every nationality, every walk of life. For decades, she was a steadfast and vocal ally of the LGBTQ+ community, even when doing so carried a real risk of losing some of the people who had made her famous. She chose love anyway.

Born in a one-room cabin in the hills of East Tennessee, Dolly Parton went on to win eleven Grammys and an Emmy. She built Dollywood and, beyond that, a business empire that has provided livelihoods for thousands of people. But her proudest achievement was one that could never be measured in awards or dollars: helping millions of children learn to read. She began the Imagination Library in honor of her beloved father, who never had the opportunity to learn to read himself. What began as an act of love for one man grew into a gift to children around the world.

And Dolly didn’t simply talk about generosity. She put her money where her heart was. She could have chosen to become a billionaire. Instead, she chose to give. When the Gatlinburg fires devastated communities in 2016, she established the My People Fund and gave families who had lost their homes \$1,000 a month for six months with an additional \$5,000 at the end. She helped fund research that contributed to the development of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine. When Hurricane Helene brought devastation and loss to East Tennessee, Dolly gave millions of dollars to those who were hurting and called upon other businesses to join her. And just this past year, she made a significant gift to East Tennessee Children’s Hospital, which now bears her name: the Dolly Parton Children’s Hospital.

Unable to have children of her own, Dolly found a way to open her arms and her heart wide enough to become, in some sense, a mother to children far beyond the boundaries of her own family. That’s part of what makes her legacy so enduring. Dolly understood something about love—something she learned from Jesus: love isn’t something we cling to for ourselves alone. Love keeps making room. Love keeps reaching beyond the boundaries we draw. Love keeps finding

another child, another neighbor, another stranger, another person who needs to know that they matter.

And maybe that's why so many people feel that Dolly belonged to all of us. She used the gifts she had been given—her imagination, her voice, her money, her influence, her hands—not just to make a name for herself, but to make room for others to flourish.

When I think of Dolly's hands, I can't help but see those long nails playing a guitar. How did she manage that? I'm reminded of *9 to 5*, the song she wrote after tapping her fingernails like a typewriter while working on it in her hotel room. Out of that rhythm came words that spoke truth to the powers that be: "Working 9 to 5, what a way to make a livin.' Barely getting by, it's all takin' and no givin'. They just use your mind and they never give you credit. It's enough to drive you crazy if you let it..." This feels like another place where Dolly's story meets Daniel's. Daniel bravely spoke truth to power. He repeatedly put his life in service to the God he trusted. He refused to pray to anyone but God. He kept showing up faithfully—day after day—come what may.

Most of us will never be Daniel or Dolly. Our lives may never become "larger than life." But that is hardly the point. For every one of us has been given something with which to bless the world: hands to serve, voices to speak, hearts to love, and lives to bear witness to the God we trust. The question is not whether we will become Daniel or Dolly. The question is: What will we do with what God has placed in our hands? Which is why I love that we will end this series by blessing our hands. Our hands are remarkably ordinary. They wash dishes, type emails, hold babies, plant gardens, make meals, turn pages, write checks. They open doors, build, repair, and create, and reach out to someone who is hurting. They carry the marks of our labor—the calluses, scars, wrinkles, and evidence of years spent doing the ordinary work of being human. And yet these ordinary hands are the very hands God has chosen to use.

Empires rise and fall. Headlines change. But God's vision remains: justice and peace, reconciliation and beloved community, a creation made whole, and God dwelling among us. The prophets have given us eyes to see beyond the chaos—to see that the story is not over, that God is still at work. And now God has placed that work in our hands—not the work of saving the world—that belongs to God—but the work of making room for love, tending what has been entrusted to us, and becoming signs of the future God has promised. Even now, in ways both large and small, God is making all things new—and God is inviting us to put our hands to that holy work. Amen.