

Please read this week's preaching text, Daniel, chapter six, before continuing.

Grace and peace be unto you from God our heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

As we embark on another season of Advent, we are meant to use this time to prepare our hearts and minds so we are ready to welcome Jesus, the Christchild, born to Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem. But that being the case, at first blush anyway, today's preaching text of Daniel, chapter six certainly seems an odd choice. In a Biblical commentary by Professor Sibley Towner, he asks the question, "Why read the book of Daniel?" and answers his own question by writing, "Although the tales about Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego... are familiar and beloved stories, they reflect a world... of kings and harems and eunuchs, of bawdy pagan rituals and drunken orgies, of bizarre methods of capital punishment involving fiery furnaces and pits full of lions, and of strange experiences with dreams and visions."

Clearly, Towner's first answer is stressing that yawning gap that exists between what was going on in Daniel's time, more than two thousand years ago and our world today. But Towner then comes around to saying, "The book of Daniel... glows with a deep conviction that God will not fail to achieve God's redemptive purpose in the world. It glows with the trust that tyranny and oppression in all their forms are not the wave of the future but that the outcome of the human experience is finally the vindication of faithful obedience, goodness, and truth. God wins in the end, and all who seek to keep the faith with God are winners as well!" And that is a message that can, and ought to sustain us in good times and in bad.

Now given what I just said, some might cry, "Spoilers!" I'm not supposed to take all of the suspense out of the story, right? But who doesn't love hearing again and again a fun, dramatic story of good winning out over evil? And truth be told, I would be surprised if more than a handful of us have read, or thought about the story of Daniel, chapter six since the time we were in Sunday School or attended Vacation Bible School. So let's jump into it shall we?

Our reading today began at verse six with the formation of a conspiracy. “So the presidents and satraps conspired and came to the king...” These people were government officials who were supposed to be protectors of the realm. Yet they started a conspiracy — something that we are hearing about far too often these days, am I right? It’s a secret agreement between two or more people to commit an unlawful or harmful act. The root of the word comes from the act of whispering together.

Anyway, we are told that *all* of the officials are *all* in agreement, though the word could also be translated as in collusion. But of course, this is curious because the opening verses of the chapter (which we skipped) portray Daniel himself as one of the most distinguished of the presidents “because an excellent spirit was in him.” So quite clearly, what these other officials were doing was based on a lie — they weren’t *all* in agreement — because Daniel had not even been consulted! Nevertheless, what these officials who clearly have it in for Daniel proceed to do is they use praise to puff up the king with flattering words, “O King Darius, live forever!” And with apparent ease they get him to agree to their insidious plot to create an ordinance “that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions.” And, about as quickly as it was proposed, it was done.

Daniel, though we are told he knew of the document, does not alter his practice of regular prayer. He continued “to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and to praise him, just as he had done previously.” And, at this point, lo and behold, the conspirators come and find Daniel doing the exact thing that the interdict had forbidden. So they quickly run to the king to ask if he indeed signed a royal decree that forbade praying to anyone or anything other than to him, the king. The king of course says yes, that he stands behind his word. “The thing stands fast.” And when the conspirators tell him of Daniel’s disobedience, this news causes the king great distress because he greatly respected Daniel. But the conspirators know that they have the king trapped by his own words. And in verse fifteen they gleefully throw his own words back at him. “It is a law of the Medes and Persians that no interdict or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed.”

So the king is forced to arrest Daniel and sentence him to death — and without a trial, he is thrown into the den of lions. But somewhat curiously, we get the impression that King Darius is more worked up about all of this than Daniel himself. Though we don't hear from Daniel, we do hear the king make a plea on his behalf, "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" And with the stone laid on the mouth of the den, it is sealed and so it would seem, was the fate of Daniel.

Yet it is here, at this climactic moment of the story, that I felt able to understand the connection of this story to the season of Advent. I am sure that you know the hymn that we frequently sing as it has been sung for centuries:

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you O Israel.

In Daniel's moment of captivity, in his lonely exile, separated from God, both he *and* we are reminded that God will never leave us nor forsake us. The Son of God will appear... Emmanuel shall come to you. It is a song of hope but also a song of assurance.

Of course, in our story we hear about how King Darius went back to his palace and fasted and stayed up all night worrying (for good reason!) about what he had done to one of God's beloved children. And we are told that at the break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. (If this sounds very similar to the story of the women hurrying to the tomb where Jesus was laid on Easter morning, you are right on track). "When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously." Something that I wonder though is who or what had already rolled away the stone that had been so carefully placed over the mouth of the den and sealed?

In any case, like those women who went to the tomb on Easter with the expectation of death and discovered new life, in this instance the King discovers Daniel is alive. He has been delivered from death by the God whom Daniel serves! And with this we hear Daniel speak for the first time and his words are, "O king, live forever!" Of course, it is difficult not to hear this as dripping with sarcasm after what the king had put him through. Daniel then decisively puts the credit where the credit is due which is with

God who sent an angel and shut the lions' mouths. And this sets into motion more of the grand reversal. Daniel is now released "and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in God."

Next, we hear that the enemies of Daniel and his God are destroyed. Now the brutal nature with which this takes place has shocked and scandalized many a biblical reader and commentator. Some have pointed out that such treatment agrees with the rule about false witness while others do not care to go there. At least one reflects more insightfully (I believe), "The author of our book had not learnt everything that God had to teach about the nature of justice." In other words, some of us to this day prefer to lean on the law as the right order of things while others of us experience God's judging and saving activity in the person of Jesus Christ. And choose to believe and trust that God will achieve God's redemptive purpose without "breaking in pieces" the bones of all those who sin against God. On the contrary, God will achieve God's purpose while bringing those very same bones to bow in repentance and adoration before him.

We see this very thing in the story as the king, who was just as guilty as the officials by signing the decree is not punished rather he makes a saving decree and a confession, "The God of Daniel is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end. He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth." This is the word of hope, faith, and love that we need to hear again and again and to internalize. For all of us are guilty of refusing to stand up to injustice and we have much too often been passive and ineffectual as Darius was. But thanks be to God and God's mercy we are ransomed in our captivity to sin by God's Son, Jesus Christ who comes to us as Emmanuel, God with us. We are given a new start and in that we can rejoice. Amen

Narrative.3 Daniel 6:6-27

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Pastor Jonathan Zielske