

“Daniel: The Power of Prayer”
 delivered Sunday, June 27, 2010
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 Daniel 6:1-23
 Children’s Stories for Grownups Series

When we issued the invitation for people to request favorite childhood bible stories for preaching this summer, the email sent my way for a sermon from Daniel was accompanied by this observation: “When I was a child, I was in a musical at my church called It’s Cool in the Furnace and I can still remember some of the songs about Daniel in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. I also remember a vivid picture from a Sunday School pamphlet of Daniel being surrounded by sleeping lions, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard a sermon from the book of Daniel.”

My guess is few of us have heard a sermon from the book of Daniel. In the Common Lectionary’s three year cycle of appointed readings, Daniel shows up once – on Christ the King Sunday, and most of us preacher-types tend to celebrate Christ the King, frankly, by preaching about... Christ! In my, almost twenty-five years of preaching, I’ve preached one sermon from Daniel. I was about six months out of seminary when I didn’t know any better! You see, as the only apocalyptic book in the Old Testament, it is difficult preaching terrain – it’s like the Revelation to John on steroids, filled with exotic visions and hard-to-imagine, fanciful stories.

Take for example the most familiar expression we use today from Daniel – “I saw the writing on the wall.” The context of that expression, which has come to mean a bad omen of the future or misfortune comes from a wild scene out of Daniel in the preceding chapter. The Babylonian King, Belshazzar and his court are praising the gods of gold, silver, iron, bronze and stone, when the disembodied fingers of a human hand appear to write on the wall of the royal palace a warning of Babylon’s downfall to come. You’ve got to admit, it sounds more Harry Potter than the Bible, a more comfortable text for an excessively zealous end-of-the world kind of preacher than for a staid Presbyterian like me. But when the request came in, “please preach a sermon from Daniel,” and I sat down and read the whole book, I found myself in an interesting drama in this much neglected corner of the Bible.

As one commentary describes it, Daniel reflects “a world about as congenial to our daily experience as the Arabian Nights... a world of kings and harems and eunuchs, of bawdy pagan rituals and drunken orgies, of bizarre methods of punishment involving fiery furnaces and pits full of lions, and of strange dreams and visions.” And that’s just the first half of the book! Add the second half, where “the reader discovers a strange universe of symbolic beasts, of winged angels and rank upon rank of other heavenly beings...of heavenly judgment scenes, and three distinct apocalypses of the coming End.” (1)

The value of this, as with all apocalyptic literature, is to cast what we believe about God upon the largest, cosmic screen possible, so that the mysteries with which we live day to day, can also be seen as places of holy revelation. Apocalyptic visions which proclaim the coming end of the world, and God’s ultimate victory of life over death, are always written during seasons of extreme oppression and uncertainty. The book of Daniel is intended to give hope to the oppressed and the powerless, but as Holy Scripture it is not just a tract for hard times. In a narrative way, this odd and peculiar text makes profound religious truth claims about the future, evoking faith in God and in God’s ultimate plan for salvation.

And so, in the hardships of our time, as our country continues to be at war on two fronts, while the economy inches forward in fits and starts, ups and downs, and as the tar balls roll up on the Gulf beaches reaching further and further eastward, and leaving us to wonder how long this oil spill will last, to wonder how much of God's goodness will be destroyed. As we also deal with our own personal difficulties, the loss of loved ones, the decline of good health, the insecurity this economy has rendered, the broken relationships, the transitions of life that open upon all kinds of unknowns, this strange and peculiar scripture has something wonderful to say to us. From the bottom of a pit filled with lions – through Daniel – God's gracious intervention speaks a good word, in response to our prayers.

The glory days of Israel were a distant past. After King David and Solomon, Israel's kings were weakened, the kingdom divided against itself, it was threatened by Egypt, invaded by Assyria, and ultimately conquered by the Babylonians who marched into Jerusalem, set the temple ablaze and destroyed the city walls. All the political, religious and military leaders were marched into exile. After more than a generation, Cyrus the Persian let them come home, but it was still a home ruled by the Persians who had no regard for Israel as a people, much less for their God. While the people were wondering how on earth they could continue to be faithful to the living God, in the worst of times, these stories of the great prophet Daniel were told and retold and gave them courage. (2)

In a rather arbitrary way of rooting out any possibility for religious rebellion among the oppressed, the king signed a decree: You cannot pray for 30 days. Well, what would you do, when you knew good and well that going against the king's decree meant being thrown in a fiery furnace or a pit of lions? I would have just start praying inside my head and keeping my mouth shut. I might even take a month off from talking to God. But no, Daniel did what his faith called him to do. Prayer was so much a part of his life that he engaged in civil obedience, he threw his windows open upon the evil world around him and he prayed boldly. He prayed out loud. He disobeyed the king. He prayed the kind of prayer that believes it will be answered by the living God. Daniel shows us how to pray: to pray for God's will to win and to reign over any other earthly power, to pray boldly against all odds, to pray with hope. And in so doing his prayers give way to God's power.

One of the privileges we have in the church, not just the clergy, although we may do it more than most, but all of us have the opportunity to be with people at certain occasions to pray together: a blessing over supper with migrant workers whose hands harvest the food we eat every day; a prayer of thanksgiving at a wedding or the birth of child; traveling mercies for youth about to embark on a trip; faith shared with a sleepy child at the end of the day; a plea for petition during an illness, gratitude over lunch with a friend, or asking for God's help during a hospital visit. A while back, I was visiting someone in the hospital, and what was clear to me was that the one in bed was very ill and very tired, but maybe not yet ready to die. So wondering what to lift to God in prayer on this person's behalf, I simply asked him, "What are you praying for? Are you asking to be healed, or for the good Lord to take you home?" And the patient said, "Both."

It was a way of saying, "God's will be done..." It was a bold, courageous affirmation that his life was, as are all of our lives are, in the hand of God. "To be healed...made well...get better...can go either way – sometimes answered by a longer life, sometimes passing through death to new life. So that no matter what the words we choose to frame our asking, our prayers themselves simply trust that God will respond with the perfect answer. That's why it takes courage to pray, to make that leap of faith that whatever perils come our way, no matter how deep the pit, or ferocious the lions of life, God can be trusted.

My friend, Michael Lindvall, a pastor in New York City, tells the story of a man in the early 1950's, a youngish man whose appendix ruptured. They rushed him to the hospital. His wife prayed, his church prayed, they all prayed that he might be spared by some miracle. They operated, found the ruptured appendix, and discovered that infection had spilled into his entire lower abdomen. No good at all, but while very sick he survived the surgery. Several days afterward, the surgeon came into his hospital room. He told the man what he had found; it was about the worst he could have anticipated. The doctor said that a few days before the operation he had been visited by a pharmaceutical salesman who had left him a sample of a new drug, a powdered form of something called penicillin. The doctor said that during the operation he thought to himself, "Can't hurt." He sent to his nearby office for the drug sample and sprinkled the entire packet of the stuff inside the man's open abdomen. The man, against all odds at the time, lived to tell the tale.

Michael Lindvall asks the question for us all, "Was the commercialization of penicillin, the salesman's visit, the packet he happened to leave, the doctor's memory of it, all just good science and better luck? Or was it the answer to prayer? To believe in the power of prayer is to opt for the latter, and to act upon that choice by praying even more." Praying boldly, praying out loud, praying with courage, even when all you can see is the walls of a pit – no matter what the pit is, and feel the dangerous proximity of lions – no matter how overwhelming their growl. Lindvall concludes his story, "I am inclined to believe that prayer often works in ways that don't appear all that miraculous. Answers come in plain clothes rather than in angel uniforms; they wear the mask of the ordinary." (3)

The prophet Daniel would add: perhaps the mask of the ordinary, but one that only disguises only the extraordinary, redemptive, life-giving power of God. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Sib Towner, Daniel: Interpretation Commentary, p. 1-5.
- 2) Gratitude to Tom Are whose "Daniel in the Lion's Den" helped me summarize the context of Daniel's dilemma.
- 3) Michael Lindvall, "Payers, dreams and penicillin," The Presbyterian Outlook, Jan. 25, 2010.