

Daniel's Hope  
Daniel 6: 6-10a, 11-12a, 13b-17, 19-23, 25-27  
Luke 23: 1-5

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Daniel 6: 6-10a, 11-12a, 13b-17, 19-23, 25-27

... the presidents and satraps conspired and came to ... king [Darius] and said to him, "O King Darius, live forever! All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions. Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked."

Therefore, King Darius signed the document and interdict. Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, ... and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.

The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God. Then they approached the king and said, ... "Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the interdict you have signed, but he is saying his prayers three times a day."

When the king heard the charge, he was very much distressed. He was determined to save Daniel, and until the sun went down he made every effort to rescue him. Then the conspirators came to the king and said to him, "Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no interdict or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed."

[So] the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" A stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, so that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel.

Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?"

Daniel then said to the king, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong."

Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. ...

Then King Darius wrote to all peoples and nations of every language throughout the whole world: "May you have abundant prosperity! I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: For he 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; for he has saved Daniel from the power of the lions."

Luke 23: 1-5

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.' Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.' Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.' But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'

This Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent. You may have noticed the blue paraments and the decorations. You probably remember Lent, which is the forty days each year when we prepare for Holy Week and Easter. Advent is the four weeks each year when we are preparing for Christmas.

Advent is not as penitential as Lent is. While we do confess our sins, as we do every week, the focus is more on God's amazing love and God's willingness to come down here ...for us.

I know that Christmas is no longer a surprise. We have all known about Christmas since we were little kids. The television ads for Christmas sales and the saccharine Christmas specials, both animated and live-action, started the afternoon of Thanksgiving Day, if not before. If you have not yet gotten tired of them, then just wait.

What happened at Christmas is not a surprise, but it is very easy for the life-altering meaning to get lost in all the glitter and the packages and the tinsel. So, for the next four weeks, we are going to talk about what it means. To put the story into context, we will hear the stories of Daniel and Joel first, and then we will hear the familiar words of Isaiah's prophecy and Gabriel's announcement, Augustus' decree and the shepherds' proclamation.

This story of Daniel in the lions' den is a familiar one, isn't it? This is a story we teach to children to teach them that God will always go with them, and to have faith even when they are scared. That is a good lesson.

But wait, there's more!

There is more to this story than Daniel and the lions.

It is the sixth century BC. Daniel lives in Jerusalem when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquers it and takes all the people he considers worth taking back to Babylon. There Daniel gains prominence by interpreting dreams and by wisely advising the king.<sup>1</sup>

The court of Nebuchadnezzar is not a peaceful, non-threatening place. You may remember the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace.<sup>2</sup> But Daniel continues to serve the king loyally and well until he dies and his son, Belshazzar, becomes king.

Belshazzar is weighed in the scales and found wanting. The writing is put on the wall. Belshazzar is killed and the Babylonian Empire is conquered by the Persians, residents of modern-day Iran.<sup>3</sup>

King Darius of the Persians has one hundred and twenty regional governors, or satraps, reporting to three men whose title is translated as president, who reported to him. Darius knows a good administrator when he meets one, so he makes Daniel one of

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel 2,4.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel 3.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel 5.

those three presidents. There Daniel does such a good job that he is a threat to the satraps and the other presidents – the king is planning to put him over the whole kingdom.

The presidents and satraps are the men of influence in the empire, but they are, clearly, profoundly insecure. They recognize that Daniel is as good as the king thinks he is, so, instead of working for and with him, they conspire to get rid of him in a bloody and gruesome way. I have to wonder if the brutality of this plot is not also intended as a warning to other social climbers. These men have privilege that the king has given them, but, instead of using it responsibly and in the best interest of the kingdom, they act immorally to protect their privilege above all.

While the court is insecure, bordering on paranoid, King Darius is good-natured, but a weak and ineffective leader. History tells us that Darius was one of the longest-reigning rulers of an immense empire, but he is portrayed here almost as a caricature.

He is easily swayed by bad counsel, and easily persuaded by flattery and blatant manipulation. He allows his court to corner him into an execution that he knows is unjust, and his words to Daniel, “May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you,” are so weak as to almost be an apology for helplessness. Darius is the king; he is far from helpless, but he is shown here to be weak.

Daniel is the ideal of faithfulness. He prays multiple times each day, even after that is made illegal, and he trusts that God will take care of him, as God has taken care of him so far. He has gotten himself into a position of significant power and influence in

the court, and he has earned it by long and faithful service. His enemies know that they cannot make people believe that he has betrayed the king, so they create this edict and use it to manipulate the king into having to put Daniel to death.

Daniel is a role to which I think some of us can comfortably relate.

Sometimes we suffer, and the reason is our own stupidity and bad decisions. We all know people to whom this happens, and, if we are honest, I suspect that we have all been that person. I know that I have.

But this is a story of a blameless person suffering entirely due to the sins of other people. We do injustice to those who suffer, and to all those who suffer with them, if we do not acknowledge that that happens, too.

Daniel suffers here, when he has done no wrong. The law and the government, which he has served so well, have been twisted to punish him when he has committed no sin against the king or against God.

But Daniel does not despair. He goes into the lions' den with hope, hope that the God he serves will save him from this mortal danger.

God saves Daniel, and he emerges from the den unscathed and speaking truth to power as if nothing bad had happened. He tells the king that he has done no wrong, and Darius has him lifted out of the lions' den.

There are other roles in this story that we may play, or may have seen other people play.

The presidents and the satraps have enormous privilege, and they use it solely for their own benefit. Their whole attention and effort are devoted to protecting their own substantial interests, at the expense of everyone else. I believe that, at times, we have been the presidents and satraps, or, certainly, we have seen people being the presidents and satraps. The story does not end well for them. Because of the children, I cut the brutal ending for them and for their whole families, when they get just what they intended for Daniel.

King Darius has enormous power. He does not have to be bumbling and ineffective. The proof of that is that, after Daniel's ordeal, in just a few verses, Darius rescues the faithful, condemns the guilty, and promotes the worship of God. But, before that, he is weak. As king, it is his job to establish justice, and he allows injustice to happen right in front of him. He is even manipulated into being part of that injustice, while knowing it was wrong.

We have all seen people playing the role of King Darius. People who have power, but do not use it to do the right thing. Sometimes they refuse to believe that they have power, because it is easier not to have power. Sometimes they just don't want the responsibility for doing something that will upset people. But power and responsibility are a package deal – you can't truly have either one without the other. At the end of the story, Darius gets his ...stuff together and uses his power wisely and appropriately.

We have all seen people playing the role of the presidents and satraps. People who have power and influence, but not only do not do the right thing, they actively do

the wrong thing. They act solely to protect themselves and their power and they hurt innocent people in the process. To deny that these people exist and have power in our world today is to blind ourselves to the truth. At the end of the story, the presidents and satraps are unable to save themselves or their families from justice for their crimes.

We have all seen people playing the role of Daniel. We have known people who were suffering through no fault of their own. We may know people in that situation right now. We may be people in that situation right now. At the end of the story, Daniel's hope is rewarded. He is restored to his position and God is praised from one end of the empire to the other. Daniel goes on to prophesy the coming Messiah, who would come to save God's people from captivity to the sins and slavery of the world, just as God had saved him from the beasts of prey.

So, in the next week, look at the roles you are playing.

If you are being the presidents and satraps, change your role. Have hope in God instead of your power or position, and your hope will be rewarded.

If you are being King Darius, then pause and get your stuff together, as Darius does. Use what power you have to do justice, remembering always to love mercy. And have hope that, in the end, God will prevail.

If you are being Daniel, then continue in hope. Remember that the God who did not abandon Daniel in the lions' den will not abandon you. Jesus walked instead of us into the lions' den that was Pilate's court, and Jesus suffered with and for us.

But, no matter what role you are playing, continue in hope.

AMEN.