

Daniel 6:6-27

So the presidents and satraps conspired and came to the king and said to him, 'O King Darius, live forever! All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counsellors 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, which had windows in its upper room open towards Jerusalem, 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 concerning the interdict, 'O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions?' The king answered, 'The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked.' Then they responded to the king, '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.'

Then 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 the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no food was brought to him, and sleep fled from him.

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 for ever! 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. The king gave a command, and those who had accused Daniel were brought and thrown into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. Before they reached the bottom of the den the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces.

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 for ever.
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.'

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. I know that it's hard to believe, but we're entering the time of preparation for Christmas.

Christmas isn't a surprise anymore. We've all known about Christmas since we were little kids. The television ads for Christmas sales and the saccharine Christmas specials 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 any more, 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 sounds sort of familiar, isn't it? We teach our children this story, but we don't tend to talk about it much among the grownups. It does not even appear in the Revised Common Lectionary, the most common arrangement of Scriptural texts for preaching.

But there is more to this story than a kids' story.

Daniel has gone through a lot even before this particular story. He lived in Jerusalem when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered it and took all the people he considered worth taking back to Babylon. Daniel interpreted the king's dreams and became an important person in the Babylonian court.¹ Then Nebuchadnezzar died and his son, Belshazzar,

¹ Daniel 2,4.

became king. Belshazzar was not as strong as his father, and the Babylonian Empire was conquered by the Persians, from modern-day Iran.²

Daniel has to start over. He rises to prominence again, and the men who are already in power are threatened. The king is seen here as ineffective and weak, easily swayed. The satraps manipulate him into sentencing Daniel to death, even though he doesn't want to.

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. This whole situation is not his fault in any way.

I believe that some of us can relate.

Sometimes we suffer, and the reason is our own stupidity and bad decisions. If we are honest, I suspect that we have all been that person. I know that I have.

But sometimes a blameless person suffers due to the sins of other people. Sometimes a blameless person suffers, and it is no one's fault. We do injustice to those who suffer, and to all those who care about them, if we do not acknowledge that these things happen, too.

² Daniel 5.

Daniel suffers here, when he has done no wrong. He is in danger of dying in a gruesome way, not because he did something wrong, but because of other people's sins.

We are suffering right now with this pandemic. We would all rather have had big family gatherings for Thanksgiving. We would all rather be together in the sanctuary now. But it's not safe. Over a quarter-million people have died from COVID-19 so far, just in the United States. Over six thousand just in Ohio. It is not because they sinned. They did not deserve to die. The thirteen million Americans who are sick do not deserve to suffer.

This whole pandemic is not because we sinned. This pandemic is not God's judgment on us, or on the United States, or the world. This pandemic is not God's judgment on political leaders of any party, affiliation, or brand. None of us did anything to deserve this.

But here we are.

Daniel knows that he doesn't deserve what's happening to him, but there he is. He goes into the lions' den in hope. He comes out validated, victorious over his enemies.

God's people have gone through a lot. Floods, plagues, invasions. Daniel had a front-row seat for some of it, but far from all. And a lot of the

Hebrew Scriptures tell the story of how, as they were suffering, they waited for God's Messiah to come.

During Advent, we remember this waiting for the Messiah. As Christians, we are waiting, too. We're waiting for the Second Coming of Christ. Every time we celebrate communion, we sum up our faith by saying, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

We are waiting right now.

We are waiting for Christmas. We have a pretty good idea that that will be on December twenty-fifth this year.

We are waiting for vaccines to be distributed, and for enough people to be vaccinated to get this pandemic under control. We think the vaccines will start being distributed starting next month and going well into 2021.³

We are waiting for the Second Coming. We don't know when that will be.⁴

These things are going to happen. They're just not happening when we want them, which is, of course, right now.

So what can we do now?

Prepare our hearts for the coming of God's own Messiah.

³ That is what the CDC is saying at this time.

⁴ Matthew 24:36.

Wear our masks. Be sensible about social distancing.

“Live into Hope of captives freed, of sight regained, the end of greed.”⁵

We know the ending of this story, even if we don’t know how long a story it is. Let’s live our lives like we know the ending of the story.

Love God. Remember that, ultimately, God has got this.

Love our neighbors. Feed the hungry. Work for justice. Do what we can to protect our neighbors and ourselves.

Push away despair, and live in the hope that the world didn’t give us, so the world can’t take it away.

Even in the middle of a pandemic, God loves us. And, in the end, God wins.

Thank God.

Amen.

⁵ Jane Parker Huber, *Live into Hope*, 1976. In *Glory to God*, #772.