

“Dare to Be a Daniel”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
First Sunday of Advent  
Edina Morningside Community Church; November 27, 2016

**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 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, which had windows in its upper room open toward 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 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. 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 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.”*

When I arrived into my office this morning and turned on the light, here’s what I saw. One of the poor beleaguered plants that had the misfortune of falling into my hands. I do my best, but sometimes the regular care and feeding of plants just escapes my notice. This little ivy wasn’t doing so well a month ago,

so I transplanted it to a new and bigger pot. I gave it a lot of water then, but apparently, plants aren't the sort of thing you can just set and forget. So today it's all limp and droopy, leaves hanging down with their pale undersides turned up. To my eyes, it looks like it's crawling through the desert looking for water. Or maybe it's fleeing from my care the only way it knows how. Whatever the case, this plant is in sore need of some new life.

How many of us are entering Advent feeling the same way? If you're anything like the other people I know, this time of year invites both anticipation and dread in equal measure. Cover your ears if you don't want to hear some bracing news: Christmas is only *four weeks away!* We've just made it through one holiday happening, and the next is close upon us. Just consider all the things that must be done between now and Christmas! Homes to be cleaned, menus to be planned, trees to be decorated, office parties to be endured, gifts to be bought, wrapped, and shipped. If you're one of the unfortunates who didn't get the Christmas lights hung in those balmy weeks of October and early November, it's now plenty cold for that task too. Maybe you were out in the forever-long lines on Black Friday, but I am a habitual procrastinator and end up in the panicked and even longer lines two days before Christmas. All the oughts and shoulds of the holiday season tend to get us down, even those of us who don't face family drama, financial concerns, fear for the world, grief or depression in these hectic, overwhelming days. I know there will be times in the weeks to come when I will feel like a wilted plant, wanting just to pull up the covers and wait for January.

These, of course, are first world problems. To put them in proportion, consider the "biblical world problems" of Daniel, whose story we heard just a few minutes ago. Daniel was just a young man when the occupying forces of Persia kidnapped him from his home in Jerusalem. They gave him the best education one could ask for, but it was because they wanted him to parade him around as a Persian scholar. He grew successful as a leader in Babylon, but along the way Daniel faced one challenge after another, trying to maintain Hebrew identity in a foreign land.

Today's story is just the latest example. King Darius considers himself a friend of the people and of Daniel, yet he listens to advisors who have their own hostile intentions for Daniel's life. With Darius' approval, they seek to single out those whose religion is different. They pass a law forbidding prayer to anyone or anything besides the king himself, and condemning to death those who violate this new order. Darius fails to use his position to stop such abuses of power, even when it becomes clear that the target of this law is his palace favorite, Daniel. Because Daniel's prayer life is consistent and well-known. He prays three times a day, and he doesn't hide it from anyone. In an upper room with a window that faces Jerusalem, Daniel bows to the God of Israel whose presence is symbolized by the Jerusalem temple. That's just what Daniel does, whether the conditions be fair or foul. Such regular prayer has served him well throughout his life, giving a steadiness to his faith not often seen before or since. "[Daniel is] aware of the new law passed to trap him, but he continues to pray on his regular schedule, in a visible place. [He doesn't construct his faith to fit anyone around him.](#)" So when the going gets tough for Daniel, he continues praying. When arrested under false pretenses, Daniel prays. When thrown into a den of lions, Daniel prays. When he emerges after having been protected by angels, Daniel prays. Consistent prayer is the way Daniel stays connected to divine hope. Daily connection with God is Daniel's superpower, if you will. It gives him strength to endure whatever comes his way. It grants life and hope, like water to a plant in the desert.

As I've said, there's a world of difference between Daniel's context and that of ours today. None of us face deadly persecution for the way we pray. However, we might need the wisdom of Daniel in trying to stay centered during challenging times. This means that we are imminently or already headlong into the mad rush of holiday preparations, of shopping, planning, creating, cooking, calling, emailing, deciding, etc. We run the risk of being so caught up in the busyness of the season—with shopping, planning, creating, cooking, calling, emailing, and the like—that we lose sight of the deeper meaning of Christmas

and become unmoored from our faith lives. If ever there was a time for centeredness, it is while heading into the crazy-making weeks ahead.

For that reason, the church now enters a new season too, the time of Advent. Advent is a time for Christians to follow the example of Daniel—to show loyalty to different values than those on display in the public square. In this season of Advent, we cast our hearts and spirits ahead to the incarnation, when the divine is born into human flesh—God with skin on. As another has written, "This season is one of restoration, refocusing ourselves and daring to trust the ancient promise of incarnation of a flesh-shaped, love-given, poverty-born kingdom among the people on the edge where no palace or parliament can interfere."<sup>1</sup>

This is what we are about in the church, preparing for the holy and marvelous incarnation even though elsewhere in the world conspicuous consumption rules the day. The world sings, "Santa Baby" and counts the presents under the Christmas tree, while the church sings "Come, Emmanuel", and counts the opportunities to show hope in the world for Jesus' sake. Hope then manifests in tangible ways that improve life for our families, our communities, our country and our world. Ways like Christmas carols sung beside a parkway, bringing tears to passersby. Ways like gifts for families who struggle just for the bare necessities. Ways like making and serving food for those who take shelter and move forward at Parkway United Church of Christ. Ways like regular opportunities for prayer and meaningful worship, a chance to step aside from all the busyness without and center once more on hope within. In these and many other worthy ways, Advent invites us to manifest hope, to incarnate hope, to *be* hope for the world, particularly for those in challenging circumstances. Dare to be a Daniel, connecting to God for daily life and sharing that life with others. Such Advent hope transcends the everyday and mundane, such hope is just around the corner at Christmas, and in fact such hope is already here in the name of Jesus Christ. May that hope be born anew in us—and through us for the world—this day. So that even this poor plant, which I finally watered again this morning, might manifest the hope of new life again soon!

Let us pray: *God of hope, fill us with all joy and peace in believing, that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *spill the beans: worship and learning resources for all ages*, vol. 21 (spillbeans.org.uk: Spill the Beans Resource Team, 2016), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Romans 15:13.