

The Writing on the Wall

Daniel 5

5 King Belshazzar threw a huge party for a thousand of his princes, and he drank a lot of wine in front of them. ² While he was under the wine's influence, Belshazzar commanded that the gold and silver equipment that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem's temple be brought to the party so that the king, his princes, his consorts, and his secondary wives could drink wine out of them. ³ So the gold^[a] equipment that had been carried out of the temple, God's house in Jerusalem, was brought in; and the king, his princes, his consorts, and his secondary wives drank out of it. ⁴ They drank a lot of wine; and they praised the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

⁵ Right then the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the king's palace wall in the light of the lamp. The king saw the hand that wrote. ⁶ The king's mood changed immediately, and he was deeply disturbed. He felt weak, and his knees were shaking. ⁷ The king yelled, calling for the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the diviners.

The king told these sages of Babylon: "Anyone who can read this writing and tell me its meaning will wear royal robes, will have a gold chain around his neck, and will rule the kingdom as third in command."

⁸ Then all the king's sages arrived, but they couldn't read the writing or interpret it for the king. ⁹ At that point King Belshazzar was really frightened. All the color drained from his face, and his princes were also very worried.

¹⁰ Upon hearing the commotion coming from the king and his princes, the queen entered the banqueting hall and declared, "Long live the king! Don't be so disturbed. Don't be so frightened. ¹¹ There is a man in your kingdom who has the breath^[b] of holy gods in him! When your father was alive, this man was shown to possess illumination, insight, and wisdom like the very wisdom of the gods.^[c] Your father King Nebuchadnezzar appointed this man as chief over the dream interpreters, enchanters, Chaldeans, and diviners. Yes, your father did this ¹² because

this man—Daniel, the one the king named Belteshazzar—possesses an extraordinary spirit, knowledge, and insight into the meaning of dreams. He can explain ambiguities and resolve mysteries. Now in light of all that, summon Daniel! He will explain the meaning of this thing.”

¹³ So Daniel was brought before the king. The king said to him, “So you are Daniel, the Daniel from the exiles that my father the king brought from Judah? ¹⁴ I have heard that the breath of the gods is in you and that you possess illumination, insight, and extraordinary wisdom. ¹⁵ Now, the sages and the dream interpreters were brought before me to read this writing and interpret it for me, but they couldn’t explain its meaning. ¹⁶ But I’ve heard that you can explain meanings and solve mysteries. So if you can read this writing and interpret it for me, you will wear royal robes, have a gold chain around your neck, and will rule the kingdom as third in command.”

¹⁷ Daniel answered the king: “Keep your gifts. Give the rewards to someone else. But I will still read the writing to the king and interpret it for him. ¹⁸ Listen, Your Majesty: The Most High God gave kingship, power, glory, and majesty to your father Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ Because of the power God gave Nebuchadnezzar, all peoples, nations, and languages were terrified of him. He did whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted: killing or sparing, exalting or humbling. ²⁰ But when he became arrogant, acting in stubborn pride, he was pulled off his royal throne and the glory was taken from him. ²¹ He was driven away from other humans, and his mind became like an animal’s. He lived with wild donkeys, he ate grass like cattle, and dew from heaven washed his body until he realized that the Most High God dominates human kingship and sets over it anyone he wants.

²² “But you who are his son, Belshazzar, you haven’t submitted, even though you’ve known all this. ²³ Instead, you’ve set yourself up against the Lord of heaven! The equipment of God’s house was brought to you; and you, your princes, your consorts, and your secondary wives drank wine out of it, all the while praising the gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone—gods who can’t see, hear, or know anything. But

you didn't glorify the true God who holds your very breath in his hand and who owns every road you take.

²⁴ “That's why this hand was sent from God and why this message was written down. ²⁵ This is what was written down:

MENE, MENE, TE-KEL, and PARSIN.^[d]

²⁶ “This is the meaning of the word MENE: God has numbered^[e] the days of your rule. It's over! ²⁷ TE-KEL means that you've been weighed^[f] on the scales, and you don't measure up. ²⁸ PERES^[g] means your kingship is divided^[h] and given to the Medes and the Persians.”^[i]

²⁹ Then Belshazzar commanded that Daniel be dressed in a purple robe, have a gold chain around his neck, and be officially appointed as third in command in the kingdom.

³⁰ That very same night, Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. ³¹ Darius the Mede received the kingdom at the age of 62.

This has been the sermon which I have been dreading since we started this series on the elements of our faith. I say this because this particular text does not shy away from the fact that one of most basic elements of our faith is confession, is naming all the times we have sinned. This text from the prophet Daniel does not let us ignore that one of the very basic elements of our faith is acknowledging all the times we ignored God's wisdom and in our arrogance, put ourselves in the place of God concerning the judgement of others.

Now I'll admit that this word “sin” makes me uncomfortable. This is in large part to the way the word “sin” has been used and abused over the years. It has been

used to make people feel less than. This misuse of the word sin has caused more hurt and damage to people than the Church will ever know. Which is why it is important we have a healthy conversation about sin and how it falls into the elements of our faith. As people of faith we cannot deny that the concept of sin needs to be a part of our conversation when it comes to our faith, to understanding what we mean when we say becoming the people God created and calls us to be.

You see, in our faith tradition, this idea of sin started out as being rooted in the narrative that there are times in all our lives when we miss the mark, when we miss the mark of being the people of justice, being the people of grace, being the people of love that God created us and calls us to be. By naming, or confessing these times, we recognize that we have added to the brokenness of this world. We recognize that we are called to do the hard work of reconciliation so that God's Kingdom can come here on Earth as it is in heaven. By inviting us to name all the times we ignored God's wisdom in our lives and instead bought into the false narrative of power and greed which this world thrives upon, we as people of faith begin to open paths for justice and mercy to come to fruition not only just for ourselves but for all of God's people.

For our conversation today, we are reclaiming this understanding of sin because it provides the context for our text because long before Daniel was ever in the lion's den, he was interpreting the writing on the wall. He was telling the

powers that be, telling the oppressive systems, telling us as people of faith, that for far too long, we have foolishly bought into the false narrative of human importance in this world while ignoring our prophetic call to bring about the Kingdom of God. And in doing so, we as the people of God have abandoned our responsibility towards justice and mercy for all.

At first glance, this story seems to be just another story in our Bible about one of God's prophets speaking out against the foolishness of a king. On the surface, this story seems innocent enough but when we really begin to pay attention, we realize that this is no ordinary text. The author first lures us in and then bam...confronts us with our sin by using language which our capitalistic system can understand...the language of money, the language of the marketplace, the language of commerce. The author uses the very language which built our oppressive system to denounce the narrative of power and greed which rules our world. The author uses the language of money to point out how the values which regulate the transactions of the marketplace go against everything we hold as Truth about the Kingdom of God.

Like I said, the story starts out innocent enough. We hear about feast being given by the king. There is no special occasion, nor is this a gathering to celebrate a national holiday. No, our story starts with just an ordinary night at the King's table where power, greed, and excess are on display, a feast where gluttony and

waste are personified. We are told that thousands of people are there, eating and drinking at the king's table.

Then the King has the bright idea to bring the sacred vessels taken from the Temple in Jerusalem when the city was destroyed so that he, his friends, and his family could all drink from these vessels. And if that was not disrespectful enough, they all began to praise the gods of silver and gold.

Of course, we know what happens. A large hand appears and begins to write a message which no one could interpret. The king promises a purple robe, a gold chain, and a place of rank to anyone who could interpret this message. No one from the king's household could do so. Suddenly, the queen mother remembers Daniel. She tells the king to bring him in because she remembers that Daniel has been able to interpret things for kings in the past.

Daniel is brought in and tells the king that his reign is at an end, that "the king has been counted, weighed in the balances and has been judged as having a deficit", that his kingdom will come to an end, given away to other foreign powers.

Our story ends with no reaction from the king. He simply does what he says he would do. He places a purple robe upon Daniel, gives Daniel a gold chain, and declares Daniel the third highest ranking official in all the kingdom. And in the

very next verse, we are told that the king is killed and Darius the Mede takes over his kingdom.

Again, as people of faith, it would be so easy for us to simply say that this is just another story in our Bible, to brush it off because we know this story is not historically accurate but as I have lived with this text this past week, I have come to realize that there is more to this text than first meets the eye. As I have read this text over and over again this past week, I kept coming back to the king's reaction or should I say lack of reaction when Daniel interprets the writing on the wall.

For me, this lack of reaction is disturbing on so many levels. There is an acceptance of what is and what is to come which goes against what I know to be true about God's grace. But that is another sermon for another day. What captured my attention more than anything while reading this text is this.... there is not a willingness on the part of the king and all his cronies to change this atmosphere of power, greed and excess which they created to rule their world.

I simply could not get pass this part of the story. Maybe it is because all of the things going on in our world right now...the protests, the hurt too long ignored now bubbling up to the surface. Maybe it is the reckoning of a system built on the motto: profits over people, or maybe it is the utter lack of leadership by so many who are in power here and around the world...but I simply cannot help but feel

that this moment is the writing on the wall for us as a society, as a culture but more importantly as people of faith.

There are so many clear signs that the way we live, the way we engage in relationship with others, with Creation, with God is not what God intended when God called us to be in covenant with one another as people of faith.

The writing is on the wall... On the whole, as a society, as a culture, as ones who participate in a system which values profits over people, we have been counted, weighed in the balances and have been found to have a deficit.

I wish I could tell you how this story will end but I honestly do not know. I think we can all agree that we are at a turning point. And as much as I hope that there is a willingness to change this atmosphere of greed, power and excess which we have all created to rule our world, at this point, I am just not so sure.

I say this because changing the system, reframing the narrative from profits to people, will take all of us naming the moments when we missed the mark of being the people of justice, being the people of grace, being the people of love that God created us and calls us to be. It will take recognizing that we have added to the brokenness of this world. It will take all of us doing the hard work of reconciliation so that God's Kingdom can come here on Earth as it is in heaven. And given our track record as humanity, I am not so sure we are up for all that. We are too easily

distracted. We give up when it becomes complicated. It is just easier to ignore our complacency in building up, and yes even thriving in a system which benefits only a select few.

I know that this is a pretty depressing place to end the sermon so I will simply leave us all with this.... I don't pretend to have all the answers but one thing that I know to be True is this...as disciples of Christ, we serve a God who overcame the grave and brought forth new life for all of God's people. We worship a God that when the world said death and darkness had won, showed us that love will always reverse the story. As people of faith, we are named and claimed by a God who will make a way out of no way, reminding us that fear and worry will never be the last word.

So it is truly my hope and prayer that in this moment, when we are seeing the writing on the wall, we will have the courage to name all the times we ignored God's wisdom in our lives, that we will have the strength to change the false narrative of power and greed which this world thrives upon. It is my hope and prayer that we will do the hard work of reconciliation because when we do, pathways towards justice and mercy begin to open not only just for ourselves but for all of God's people. And then and only then, will the Kingdom of God come here on Earth as it is in Heaven. May it be so. Amen.