

## Daniel 6:6-27

The beginning of the advent season takes us to Daniel 6. In the midst of the Persian Empire, diasporic Judeans struggle to maintain their fidelity to God. In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great marched through Judea during his conquest of the Persian Empire. Biblical scholarship refers to the ensuing period as the “Hellenistic Period”, recognizing the influence of Greek culture, language, literature, philosophy, athletics, art, and architecture in Judea and other provinces within the empire.

While some may have welcomed elements of Greek culture — the elites of society would likely have found it politically expedient to assimilate, at least to some extent. Aspects of Greek culture would run up against traditional Jewish identity. Greek cultural practices such as the worship of multiple deities, the representation of those deities in statuary and coins, athletic activities performed naked, and different dietary practices were just a few activities that would prove problematic to many.

When Alexander died without an heir, his empire was divided between four generals. Judea came under the rule of the Ptolemies, then the Seleucids. In 167 BCE, responding to local unrest, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV occupied Jerusalem and turned the Jewish temple into a Greek temple by sacrificing a pig — typical of a Greek ceremony, but a sacrilege for Jews — and erecting a statue of Zeus. Distinctive cultural and religious practices, like observing the sabbath and circumcising one’s sons, were banned.

Concerns about adopting Greek culture turned into a crisis for many Jews. How should one respond to Antiochus’ policies? The story in Daniel 6,

provides a glimpse into how some ancient Jews interpreted questions of how to be faithful to God under these challenging, even dangerous circumstances.

However, Daniel does not fight, or try to go unnoticed, or make a speech willing God to intervene before dying a martyr's death. By depicting Daniel quietly but firmly remaining faithful to what really matters while working within the "Babylonian" government, the story points to a hope for change within the system; the Judeans' faithfulness, however, brings about a change in perspective in the king.

The figure of Daniel has emerged as "distinguished" due to his "excellent spirit." Consequently, he holds a place of responsibility in the imperial court. At the same time, he is still an outsider due to his devotion to the Lord. This passage alternates between three points of view throughout the chapter.

The first point of view is that of the Governors, Presidents and Satraps: Darius may have been new at ruling an empire, but he was far from naive. To establish himself and his rule over the former Babylonian territory, he appoints 120 satraps, each responsible for a certain geographical region. Darius' major concern was corruption. He knew that political power presented an opportunity not only for oppression, but for corruption. Darius was afraid that he would not be able to adequately supervise the satraps with such a large kingdom, and they would enrich themselves at his expense. So, he appointed three governors over the 120 satraps. He wanted to create a system of accountability.

These men are people of power and influence, but this influence also brings deep insecurity. They recognize Daniel's spirit, but instead of deferring to Daniel, they collectively scheme to assault his character and entrap him. They do so through calculated steps of flattery and manipulation of the king. The unity of these men is astonishing. Anyone with experience in a board meeting of the privileged (whether a faculty board, elders, bishops, pastoral staff, etc.) will understand the difficulty of reaching such clear consensus as stated in Daniel, that "All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counsellors and the governors are agreed ... "

Exploiting King Darius' vanity, a conspiracy is born. Keeping Daniel from rising above them and ruling over them would be no easy task. To accomplish their goal, to discredit Daniel and do away with him against the king's will, the conspirators must deceive the king. The group represents itself as spokesmen for the entire number of prefects, satraps, commissioners, officials and governors. Their deception led the king to conclude that Daniel agreed with their proposal. Daniel's faithfulness to the king was flawless. His obedience to the laws of the land forced his enemies to pass a new law directed exclusively at him and his destruction. The only fault they found with Daniel was that he was too godly.

Although Darius signed the injunction, it was clearly a calculated manipulation to produce the written document, which they will later use against Daniel. They are labelled as "conspirators," using the document to force the king to execute an innocent Daniel for his public worship of the Lord. Such an action is an irresponsible stewardship of the privilege that they had originally been given by the king.

The second point of view is that of King Darius: Daniel's rise to power under Darius was not the result of his remarkable accomplishments under the Babylonians. Daniel "began distinguishing himself among the commissioners and satraps". because of the "extraordinary spirit" he possessed. Darius recognized not only Daniel's wisdom, but his integrity and faithfulness. Whereas the king's court is presented as insecure and fanatical, Darius, himself, is portrayed as good-natured, weak and ineffectual.

News of the king's plan soon spread to the regional leaders. This was a crisis. Daniel's peers were jealous. But, for them it was more serious. His ability and especially his honesty threatened them. The king was thrilled to have a man of ability and honesty - but not so for the corrupt leaders - Daniel threatened their corruption. They could neither corrupt nor deceive Daniel. If he were to rise above them, they could not continue their corruptive ways.

Accusing a man favoured by the king was dangerous, the conspirators had to be sneaky. They began by asking the king about the law. He acknowledged that the penalty for breaking this law was to be cast into the lion's den. Only at this point did the conspirators shock the king with the announcement that Daniel has been found violating this very law. Their accusation was meant to impress upon the king that Daniel had not merely broken the law once, he was persisting in violating this law, showing complete disregard for the king and his authority. Darius was greatly distressed and spent the remaining daylight hours trying to find a way to deliver Daniel from the lion's den.

Reluctantly, the king gave the order for Daniel to be brought in and thrown into the lion's den. Darius speaks words of encouragement to Daniel. He assures Daniel that His God would most certainly deliver him. Having spoken words of faith and hope to Daniel, he had Daniel lowered into the lion's den, the stone cover put in place and sealed. No man dared tamper with the stone to deliver Daniel.

In his anguish about Daniel, the king is sleepless and unable to eat, until he rushes to the lions' den in the morning. He calls out to Daniel to see whether God has saved him, and it seems that he's expecting Daniel to be fine. The nervous king doesn't peek in. He calls out to Daniel, with the expectation of an answer.

"Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you constantly serve, been able to deliver you from the lions?" Seeing Daniel alive and well prompts the king to acknowledge the God of Israel. All through the story, his words have been hesitant and conflicted. Now he speaks with clarity and purpose, praising God by saying: "For he is the living God, and he will endure forever. His kingdom will never be destroyed, and his rule will never end."

With great pleasure, the king gave orders to remove Daniel from the lion's den. With great indignation, the king also gave orders to arrest those who had maliciously accused Daniel, along with their families, and had them cast into the den of lions.

Although historically we know Darius as one of the longest reigning leader of the enormous empire, in Daniel 6 we are presented with more of a

caricature of a fumbling king. When confronted with the trap to execute Daniel, he is easily swayed by the counsel, and persuaded by flattery (“Long live King Darius”) and manipulation (“Your majesty must recognize ...”). Rather than acting within legitimate royal authority, his counsel corrals him into an unjust execution. He ends attempting to mollify the terrible judgment with the words, “May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!” The king does not stand as one with much effectual authority. The continued actions of the king show empathy, but mostly emphasize his weakness. His anxiety is paradoxically related to his powerlessness.

The third point of view is that of Daniel: Here was a man Darius could trust in a leadership position who would not cause him to “suffer loss.” Recognizing his unique abilities - Darius planned to promote Daniel, placing him in charge of all the commissioners, prefects, and satraps. Daniel embodies the ideal of faithfulness. Already, we know that he has worked himself into a position of influence within the Persian court, to the point that the others go through much effort to permanently strip him of influence. They knew that his character was unassailable, so they maneuvered the king into a position of sending Daniel to death. Aware of the new edict, Daniel continues praying to the Lord, willingly falling into the trap of the imperial counsel, and resulting in an immediate death sentence through the lions.

Many of these prayers of petition were for the blessing of the king and kingdom of Babylonia as confirmed in the Book of Jeremiah. The conspirators’ law intended to prevent the very prayers which brought God’s blessings on this nation and its people. The Jewish captives brought the blessings of God on the kingdom of their captors. Jerusalem not only

symbolized the hopes of the Jews, but it was the place their God met with them and heard their prayers. God chose to mediate his blessings through his chosen people, the Jews, and through his chosen place - Jerusalem.

According to the Old Testament scriptures, the God of Israel is God alone and those who would be blessed will be blessed through his people, Israel. There is no way Daniel could redirect his petitions to the king, rather than to God, and not face Jerusalem

This is a relatable moment for our communities. Sometimes, our suffering comes to us quite deservedly, through poor decisions or our own neglect of God. But in this case, suffering comes completely due to the sins of others. This part of Daniel gives no indication of any anxiety, though admittedly, the text is silent in the final moments as the stone is sealed against the lion's den.

But at the end of the time, in complete darkness and the constant threat of danger, when pulled from the den, Daniel praises Darius, perhaps mockingly, then gives credit not to his own character, nor faith, but to the protective angels. This is different from the narrative voice that declares that it was Daniel's "trust in God" that saved him.

But Daniel is no pushover. He declares his own innocence before the king. The story ends with major role reversals for the three main parties: Instead of condemning the innocent to execution, Darius commands his men to rescue Daniel. Instead of acquiescing to the counsel, Darius brings them to death. He includes the families of these leaders as well, hints that it is both

punitive, but also ensures against any future foment against the king. Instead of an ineffective, bumbling ruler, Darius now embodies a decisive king, condemning the guilty, rescuing the faithful and promoting worship of the Lord.

In the world of Daniel, prayer is not a polite remembrance around the dinner table. In the world of Daniel, prayer is not a tool for getting what you want from God or making you feel better. In the world of Daniel, prayer is not a pious navel-gazing that isolates or protects the praying one from trouble. In the world of Daniel, prayer is a dangerous and powerful act of resistance against the principalities and powers that disorder God's good world and oppress God's beloved people.

As we enter a period of reflection on the incarnation of Christ, this chapter of Daniel provides three different perspectives on our own life. We may enter and examine times when we have misused our power in heinous ways like the presidents and satraps. We must examine the times when, like Darius, we refuse to stand up for injustice and remain passive and ineffectual. And we must also look at Daniel as a model for us on suffering innocence.

The Christological interpretation of Old Testament texts is way overdone in pulpits. But in this case, Daniel 6 warrants self-reflection on Christ. This will help us capture an essential part of the Advent, and prepare us for a rich season of reflection.

In our own time, there are many excuses why we don't share our faith. We can easily blame the media, schools, and other organizations. But the most



effective witness has always come, not from organizations, but by people of courage and conviction. The most convincing witness is YOU. When you believe and live boldly out of the faith God has given you in Jesus Christ, others will notice and the word will spread.

We need to examine the times when, like Darius, we refused to stand up for injustice and remain passive and ineffectual. And we need to look at Daniel as a model for us on suffering innocence. This chapter of Daniel calls for self-reflection on Christ. Daniel is a model for all people of faith, not sitting by and passively hoping someone else will do what he is called to do, but risking his life to live faithfully and boldly.

**Amen.**

## PRAYERS FOR FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT -- DECEMBER 1, 2024

As the dark awaits the dawn, so we await the One who is to come. Let us pray together in expectation: for creation, for our communities, and for all those in need.

Heavenly Father-nurturing Mother, we enter this new church year with gratitude and anticipation, worshiping you with song, the lighting of the advent wreath and meaningful readings.

Lord Jesus Christ, you have come and you are coming. You have been here from the beginning, you have been here in time, and now you come to us in this very hour. You remind us about yet another day, and another hour, another coming of which no one knows the moment, except the Father. You bid us to be ready.

We give you thanks that you have deemed the messiness of our lives to be good soil for your Holy Word. Help us to hear your sacred stories of regeneration as promises of new life for this generation and generations to come.

When times are dark, when we face an uncertain future, when there are so many things in the world that seem broken, when so many daily experience fear, anxiety, pain and oppression, may we remember to always turn to you, the bedrock of our faith, trusting in your promises that your Kin-dom comes near. Creator of all life, who illumines every time of darkness, Be our God of hope.

Strengthen, protect and equip us in this advent season, helping us to set our hearts and minds on the joy of celebrating your Son, Jesus, come to live with us. Help us to set aside time from the many distractions and activities of this holiday season to return to what is most important, our relationship with You. May we daily take time to slow down, to be still, to spend time in prayer; enjoying simply being in your presence knowing you are our loving and gracious God and we are your beloved. Open our hearts that we may be refreshed, nurtured, and feel deeply loved. Help us to truly focus upon God incarnate, God in flesh, God for real, God with us now.

Known to us, compassionate God, are persons with needs beyond our own ability to fix: the mentally ill, those with addictions, those undergoing treatments or waiting for test results. We thank you for all who attend to the sick, the weary, and the ones who feel separated from you, the church, even each other. Hear our prayers spoken aloud or in the silence of our hearts for those whom we name who need a special measure of your grace ... especially Pastor Kristin Steele, Jean and Ian McKain. As you come to them and be their healer, hear us pray.

In a world of rich resources, help us to remember the poor, the homeless, the lonely, not only in memory, but also in love, for they are our brothers and sisters. Use our caring, giving, helping, and living with the poor as ways to be your incarnation. And may we see you incarnate in them.

We yearn, for the day when nations shall beat their swords into plowshares. We yearn for the day of peace, when we can all walk in the gentle light of Christ. We look to your Son, who lived another way, taught a different lesson, emanated the Holy Spirit, and died a sacrificial death. He is the Messiah, and through Him we boldly pray.

We pray for the leaders of all nations: that they may be guided by God's wisdom in promoting the well-being of all members of society, in protecting the powerless, and in promoting justice, so that all may experience freedom with opportunities to create a purposeful and thriving life.

We pray for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Anne Germond, our synod councils, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders, musicians and volunteers, Grace Lutheran in Burnaby - Rev. Nathan Fong, Mount Zion Lutheran in Smithers, our sister congregation in Peru and Pastor Ana Maria Jara. Bless all joint initiatives in worship, fellowship and service to the community. Help them to remain faithful in service to your Word. Let them preach the gospel boldly to people everywhere who are weighed down by guilt and sin so that they might be set free.

So we give thanks because we are able. In all the days of our lives may we remember your goodness and mercy. May we remember that you are the Creator and Redeemer of ALL - regardless of race, culture, gender, sexual orientation or political views.

Redeemer of all life, who comes to us in the humble birth of a newborn child. We give thanks for those who have gone before us, for those among us today, and for those who will surely come after us. We pray for our children, our elders, and those we now name aloud or in the silence of our hearts ...

Advent God, there is so much we do not know or understand about ourselves and our world. We are like children opening our gifts and finding the wrapping is as interesting as the contents. We offer our praise and thanks for the gifts of awe, curiosity, and imagination. Like young children, take us into Advent and a new year with all our wonder, delight, and creativity enlivened, as we offer our praise and thanks. Give us fresh eyes, and grateful hearts, to see your hands at work in the world. O Lord, we pray.

**Amen**

With joy and gladness let us pray the prayer Jesus taught us.

**Our Father ...**