

November 18, 2018

Daniel 5

Prayer: Dear Lord, We ask you to be with us during this worship service as we study your ancient word. Please make it speak to us anew. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The Handwriting on the Wall

Have you ever known good and well what was going to happen before it did?

Say a friend borrowed money and didn't pay it back. And then he wanted more and you gave it to him. You knew you weren't going to get it back.

Or say, a child pitched a tantrum in a store, and you gave in. And then she did it again. And when you had friends over for dinner, you and she both knew she was going to do it again.

The handwriting was on the wall. That's what we tell ourselves.

Right after college, our younger daughter Madison moved to South Korea to teach English to kindergartners. I believe I told you that she taught them from Miley Cyrus singing *Jolene*.

Those 5-year-olds would sway and sing, "I'm begging of you please don't take my man."

I just hoped their parent's English wasn't very good.

Early on Madison started e-mailing us pictures of the children, and they were truly adorable. At Halloween, one of the little girls found out that Madison Teacher was dressing up as a baseball player. So she dressed up as a baseball player, too.

Madison sent us the picture. The little Korean girl and the red-headed American girl were both dressed in striped baseball shirts, eye black, holding bats. Madison's caption was "Me and Mini-Me."

The minute we saw that picture we knew *the handwriting was on the wall*.

The next day, she signed a contract to stay another year.

If Sammy hadn't just given you a huge clue, would you have known where that phrase comes from -- *the handwriting on the wall*? It comes right out of the Old Testament book of Daniel.

Daniel is a fascinating book. We don't know who wrote it, but it is about a godly man named Daniel who was exiled to Babylon when the Babylonians overthrew the nation of Israel.

The first part of the book tells of the legendary exploits of Daniel and his buddies Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Those three go into a fiery furnace but are not burned up. Daniel goes into a lion's den, and is not eaten.

The second part of the book is an apocalypse, a collection of four visions that Daniel had. An apocalypse is a vision of the end time, like Revelation.

We think the book of Daniel was *written* during the second century before Christ was born. It was a time of persecution for the Jews.

However, the stories are *set* way back in the sixth century BCE, at another time of persecution, when the Jews were exiled to Babylon. This was a common way of writing encouragement and consolation for a group of people.

It was a way for an author to say, *I know times are bad. But they've been bad before and we made it through.*

In the early chapters, Daniel is a young man in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Like Joseph in the Pharaoh's court in Egypt, Daniel became known as a wise interpreter of dreams.

By the time we get to chapter 5, King Nebuchadnezzar has died. His son King Belshazzar has taken the throne. And Daniel is probably an old man.

If you'd like to read along, please turn to **Daniel 5**. It's located after Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

It's a long story, so we won't read the whole thing. We'll jump around a bit.

Daniel 5: 1-9

King Belshazzar made a great festival for a thousand of his lords, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand.

2 Under the influence of the wine, Belshazzar commanded that they bring in the vessels of gold and silver that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. ³So they brought in the vessels of gold and silver that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. ⁴They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

5 Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the wall of the royal palace, next to the lamp stand. The king was watching the hand as it wrote.

⁶Then the king's face turned pale, and his thoughts terrified him. His limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. ⁷The king cried aloud to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the diviners; and the king said to the wise men of Babylon, 'Whoever can read this writing and tell me its interpretation shall be clothed in purple, have a chain of gold around his neck, and rank third in the kingdom.'

⁸Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king the interpretation. ⁹Then King Belshazzar became greatly terrified and his face turned pale, and his lords were perplexed.

Like I said, the story is too long to read in its entirety, so I'll summarize the next part. The Queen Mother heard of the fear that gripped the banquet hall, so she entered. She remembered Daniel's interpretations of the dreams of her husband, Nebuchadnezzar, and recommended that King Belshazzar call on him.

So the king brought Daniel in to see if he could read the handwriting on the wall. And he promised him a bunch of royal gifts if Daniel could crack the code.

Daniel told him to keep his gifts, that he would interpret the handwriting for free. But first, he reminded him of the downfall of King Nebuchadnezzar.

God had given Nebuchadnezzar greatness, glory and majesty, Daniel said. But his pride caused him to be dethroned. He descended into madness and lived outside among the animals.

Only when he acknowledged the sovereignty of the Most High God, was his mind – and his kingdom – restored.

Picking up now at verse 22, the interpreter Daniel says:

²²And you, Belshazzar his son, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this! ²³You have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven!

The vessels of his temple have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine

from them. You have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know; but the God in whose power is your very breath, and to whom belong all your ways, you have not honored.

24 'So from his presence the hand was sent and this writing was inscribed.

²⁵And this is the writing that was inscribed: mene, mene, tekel, and parsin. ²⁶This is the interpretation of the matter: *mene*, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷*tekel*, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; ²⁸*peres*, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.'

29 Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed in purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made concerning him that he should rank third in the kingdom.

30 That very night Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed. ³¹And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

When I was a little girl, my dad and uncle bought a record store. My dad brought home an album of Old Testament Bible stories. Joseph Cotton told the stories, then a rock band jumped in with a musical version.

It's not much of a stretch to see a thread running from that album to this pulpit to those drums.

To this day, I can hear those songs and stories. The story of Daniel and the disembodied hand was one of them – nothing less than a great ghost story.

The words on the wall were Aramaic for coins or currency. In Hebrew, that's two minas, a shekel and a half-mina.

But Daniel took those monetary values and decoded them.

“God has *numbered* the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end.

“You have been *weighed* on the scales and found wanting.

“Your kingdom is *divided* and given to the Medes and Persians.”

In other words, the message predicted that Babylon would fall. And it did – that very night.

Daniel accurately read the handwriting on the wall.

King Balshazzar's offense against the Lord is clear. Idol worship. That was the biggie in the Old Testament where the Jews were surrounded by pagan religions of every kind.

The king was mid-way through a great banquet for 1,000 when he called for the gold and silver vessels that his father had looted from the holy temple in Israel. Then he and his guests began using the temple vessels as wine glasses.

To Daniel and his fellow Jews, this was desecration. Just like the desecration, in fact, that was going on in the temple when the writer of Daniel was putting this book together.

In the second century BCE, a Greek ruler named Antiochus IV Epiphanes came into power over Palestine. He moved into the temple and desecrated it by bringing in a statue of Zeus and by slaughtering a pig.

The horrified Jews who witnessed these events were the ones the author of Daniel was writing to. So he used the stories of the legendary Daniel who stood up to a foreign court 400 years before. *Buck up, he's telling his readers. God saved us from the Babylonians, and he will save us from Antiochus Epiphanes.*

When we study an ancient text, it is appropriate to ask three things: 1) When was it written? 2) To what situation was it written? 3) And what meaning does it have for us today?

The festival-goers drank from cups stolen from the temple and praised gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. *What idols do we praise?*

The handwriting on their wall told them that they had been weighed on the scales and were found wanting. *What does the handwriting on our wall say?*

Those are two questions that are as relevant today as they were when this story took place in the sixth century BCE and when it was written down in the second century BCE.

What idols do we praise?

An idol is *anything* that takes precedence over the Lord.

And so an idol can be a *good thing* that's become too important to us. Say, a job or a bank account or a relationship.

Or an idol can be a *bad thing* that's become too important to us. Say, a crack pipe or a bottle of liquor or a relationship.

An idol can be anything at all that has climbed into the position that God requires for God's self. And so that's the question for us as we near the end of our church year, as we enter the Thanksgiving season.

Sometimes we need to look around us and see what injustices need to be addressed in our world. And sometimes we need to look within and see what needs to be addressed.

Are there things more important to us than our Lord? If there are, they will eventually lead to injustice on down the road. Because that's exactly what the chasing of false idols does.

The handwriting on King Belshazzar's wall told him that his life had been weighed and found wanting. If we were to be weighed on God's scales, would we be found wanting?

There may be things in our lives that we know good and well need changing – but we're resisting. There may be things we'd do differently if we knew the ultimate weigh-in was tomorrow.

What's holding us back? What is preventing us from casting aside whatever idol has us in its grip, and leading the life that we really want to?

It can be fear. It can be greed. It can be addiction. It can be any number of things.

Perhaps you are wealthy and comfortable but somehow sense something missing from your life. Is this a season to think about sharing your life and your experience with someone else?

Or perhaps you are on the street, and telling yourself you *never* meant to spend one more winter outside. What is stopping you from accessing rehab or mental health care or our Round Table? Is your situation truly something you have no control over?

A new coffee shop opened on Stone Avenue the first day of this month. On opening day, our social workers and Nick from Place of Hope and volunteer Peg Carroll took eight members of our Welcome Home support group. Those are eight people who have obtained housing this year.

And they talked about the issues they face as housed people after months or years or even decades on the street. They talked about past medical crises and bad decisions and detours. They talked about new goals and paying bills and overcoming isolation. They encouraged one another.

They had seen the handwriting on their walls and made some brave changes.

Then this week we started our eighth round of Triune Circles. It is such a thrill to see five leaders who are taking the courageous step of saying, “Give me four friends to encircle me and advise me and encourage me as I try to reach my goals.”

I know it’s not easy to invite other people in to see your finances and your decision making. But what a bold choice!

And what a selfless choice for the volunteers who agree to come here every Monday night for a year and devote time to someone else’s life and dreams.

In this place we are all wildly diverse, but we serve one Lord.

When he writes on our walls, what does he say?

Amen.