

Rev. Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager
December 1, 2024
Sermon: Hello, Courage

Text: Daniel 6:6-23

I know it's a long scripture story and not quite the sentimental Christmas narrative one might expect to hear on December 1st, butbelieve me the Lion's Den has a lot to say to us!The book of Daniel was written in a time of persecution to help those living under threat and exile. You may recall, the book of Daniel is found in the Old Testament section called the Prophets sandwiched between the prophets Ezekiel and Hosea. Daniel is part of the genre known as apocalyptic literature (found in the book of revelation too at the end of the Bible) and is revelatory and fantastical in nature).

By the time we meet up with Daniel in the text for today, he's been in exile in a strange land following the Babylonian takeover of Jerusalem. His peers in leadership are quite jealous of him as he is favored by the foreign Persian King. There are echoes of many other biblical characters here and the jealousy that runs through many relationships. Prior to this part of the story, the king is tricked by his subordinates into passing a rule that would punish Daniel and anyone like him who prays to a God other than the king. Indeed as we follow the arc of the story we see the wise and upright Daniel quite undaunted by the machinations and power plays swirling around him. Because of his violation of an arbitrary law, Daniel suffers the punishment devised by his political opponents. Some commentators note that in Babylonian traditions the lions' den is symbolic of the political infighting that occurs among various individuals and groups fighting for recognition, control, and political power and influence. It does sound like an apt description of our Congress doesn't it?

While we don't know too much about this legendary character, Daniel certainly is a veteran prayer. Three times a day no matter what he prays. His prayers flow out of an open window to God knows where. Prayer for Daniel is his own form of civil disobedience and it gets him thrown into the Lion's Den for it. The benevolent but spineless King Darius, seems to have a heart, and is frightened by what could happen to this favored "son." We see him waiting and worrying through the night about what will happen to Daniel. Will he be eaten? Oh my! Daniel it seems with God's help is a "Lion Whisperer"

In the morning, we discover along with the King that an Angel has blocked the mouth of the lion and the wise and upright Daniel is spared. Hurrah! The boulders put up blocking his freedom, do not lead to his death but only lead to more life.

Living in these quasi apocalyptic days, on this first Sunday of Advent, I am struck by the challenges of attending to our daily lives against a backdrop of noise and waiting...waiting for the other shoe to drop, or the next doctor's appointment, or the incoming administrations threatening political appointments, or the shaky ceasefire in the Middle East to hold and beyond. There are many threatening kings and lions out there. We live in a time that calls for courage.

What strikes me most about this passage is that Daniel prays through it all. The outside world doesn't stop its intrusions but that doesn't seem to matter. We don't know how Daniel prayed, though the text said he also states he prayed on his knees, but whether he spoke words in Hebrew aloud or sang into the darkness or cried with his fists flailing up to the heavens.

We don't know if he simply sat in silence listening to his heart and the lion's beating. Maybe he people-watched through an open window before he was thrown into the pit and prayed for the others walking on the street down below. Maybe he bowed his head and thought of his family or simply sat in the silence listening to his heart and the lion's beating. Maybe he chanted and the hum of his prayers lulled the lion to sleep?

God knows, there is no one way or right way to pray. No guarantee any prayers will be heard at all. Whether we pray communally in church together or in private.

You don't have to believe in anything in particular. You don't have to be a legendary character from scripture or hold any specialized schooling or professional certificate or use perfect words. When we teach our confirmation students about prayer we remind them that prayer can be as one poet wrote, "simply patching a few words together for this isn't a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak."(— **Mary Oliver, Thirst**)

People seem to think ministers have the corner on prayer. Lordy, nothing could be farther from the truth. We just have more practice at it— call it an occupational; hazard.

In fact, I've a hunch that you O Eternal Listener Mother God, Wherever you are, prefer the imperfect and stuttering whatever comes out from our hearts kind. No intermediaries needed. What a relief.

A former orthodox rabbi wrote that "Jewish tradition teaches that even when we cannot speak, God can hear what is in our hearts. ...Maybe our prayer looks nothing like we thought it would. Maybe that's because our lives look nothing like what we thought they would. And maybe that's the point — we need to learn how to pray again so we can see ourselves anew.<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/01/opinion/prayer-god-religion.html>

Sometimes when I feel too heartbroken for words, I rely on old standbys like the Lord's Prayer or the one I have over my desk by Howard Thurman (1899-1981). Theologian, mystic, and educator who mentored many in the civil rights movement including Martin Luther King, Jr.

Let us pray:

Open unto me-light for my darkness.

Open unto me-courage for my fear.

Open unto me-hope for my despair.

Lord, Lord, open unto me. Amen.

(Open unto me-peace for my turmoil.

A few weeks ago, in church we wrote our own prayers on sticky notes and added them to the sacred bowl. I have a hunch that if we'd kept the bowl on our communion table all month it would be overflowing by now...I will tell you it was a privilege to read through your prayers and I found them praying in me even as I carried them in my heart these days. Prayer helps us to do that for each other.

As Steve expressed last week in his sermon, we are expectantly waiting as a church in this "Kairos time", of holy listening to the ways we might act courageously into the new year as a community of faith and love. What will our Kairos Statement be ? What is our prayer together?

On this first Sunday of Advent, we prepare for all that is to come in this holy and hectic season. Sean McCarty and friends have decked the halls as you can see, the Giving Tree is now sparkling with lights, and maybe like me you've greedily finished that last slice of leftover apple pie! These Advent weeks, our church and home calendars, promise festivities, potlucks, and the Christmas Pageant. There are gifts to buy and band concerts to attend, and family dynamics and Christmas lists to write and check off... As Steve preached so eloquently last week, we are expectantly waiting as a church in this "Kairos time", of holy listening to the ways we might act courageously into the new year as a community of faith and love.

And, in the midst, we can leave time to create some quiet spaces, To pray near an open window and let whatever comes pool out across the sky.

To wonder about what courage we may be called to now in this Kairos moment as a people, as a church, as a family.

As we live into the interplay of time and the wild braiding of Christmas' past, present and the hoped for not quite yet here yet future where Christ comes to birth in each of us.

The story of Christmas is the story of courage. The courage it takes to say yes to the nudgings of the Spirit calling us in our dreams to bigger things, whether it's to raise a family, or forge a new path in the wilderness or begin again with someone you love. Courage to be present in the midst of change and uncertainty. To sit with the heartbreak until morning.

The courage it takes to enter Kairos time that quality of sacred time pregnant with hope to envision a kingdom of God where all people are loved, fed and dignified: It takes courage, lion hearted courage to wait attentively, expectantly for the right time to act, to speak, to sing or to change...

Courage has the word "coeur" or heart in it in the french translation. "Be strong and let your heart take courage", sings the ancient psalmist (Psalm 27.6).

I recently learned the sign for Courage in American Sign language- the sign for courage begins with the sign for fear and moves outward from it.¹

Let's try it (invite them to also make the sign for courage). "Start with open hands at your shoulders, hands open claw shaped from your shoulders and bring your hands out into fists of strength." (Courage in ASL also has many meanings from health, bravery, recover, wholeness)

Courage, courage my friends! (do the sign). May we all tap into our hearts of courage this Advent season as we pray for one another and the world and journey together to Bethlehem and back...Amen!

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHQCLZDvEh>.