



First United Church of Oak Park

The Writing on the Wall

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Daniel 5

Imagine if someone destroyed our building, kidnapped us, and then used our communion chalices for their drunken party to celebrate. That's what's happening in this story.

Exploring the story this week, I became fascinated with one particular line: "But you did not honor the God who holds your life and all your ways in their hand. Therefore, God sent the hand that wrote the inscription."

This led me to take inventory of the hands in this story. We have Belshazzar's hand, holding sacred vessels from the temple, now destroyed, making a mockery of the ancient Israelites and their God in whose hands are life itself. We have Daniel's hands into which Belshazzar tries to put gifts, but Daniel refuses. We have the empty hand, writing on the wall.

The Book of Daniel is set after the Babylonians have attacked Jerusalem, plundered the city, and taken Israelites into exile. Daniel's hands are empty and weak. He is at the mercy of the Babylonian king. Daniel is a prophet. When we talk about prophets in church school, we say, "a prophet is someone who comes so close to God, and God comes so close to them, that they know what God wants them to do and say." Belshazzar is like an anti-prophet, straying so far that even though he watched what happened to his father when he messed up and could have easily predicted the outcome of his behavior, he still acted like a fool. Even when the writing was literally on the wall, he had no idea what it said or what he should do.

There are those that hold the tools of destruction in their hands, who use fear tactics, hate, and loud voices to claim the superiority of their religion or their way of life. The God of love that we preach and praise here in this sanctuary is gentle and kind, and to follow in the way of our God is to sometimes look weak. Sometimes it is to show up to the fight with empty hands.

It's easy to feel weak and powerless. Watching the news this week, I certainly did. The writing should be on the wall for hatred, for racism, for gun violence, for anti-trans legislation, for every policy, law, or action that harms creation. It seems so obvious. But I guess it isn't, because watching the news this week, I know that sometimes those who would do harm show up armed and win, and we show up empty handed and feeling powerless.

Before interpreting the writing on the wall, Daniel takes a moment to explain to Belshazzar why he shouldn't need this explained. He reminds him, your father Nebuchadnezzar "killed those he wanted to kill, kept alive those he wanted to keep alive,

honored those he wanted to honor, and degraded those he wanted to degrade. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he acted proudly, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and his glory was stripped from him.” Why would Belshazzar think things would go any differently for him?

Much of the Hebrew Bible is dealing with the worldview that it’s my god v. your god and whoever’s god is strongest and cleverest will win and that god’s worshippers will succeed in their endeavors. If you were the biggest and baddest nation, you had the strongest god. Following that line of thought, Belshazzar’s god was stronger than the God of little old Judah whose temple his father had destroyed. He won, so he deserves the spoils. “Remember those silly little containers we plundered from their sacred temple? Go get them and let’s fill them with booze and party!” With drink in hand, he was mocking the weak little God of the people they’d conquered.

Belshazzar thought, “since we won this earthly battle, we’re the strongest and best.” But what Belshazzar didn’t understand is that just because you are a victim of someone else’s violence doesn’t mean you’re weak. Just because you won’t fight fire with fire doesn’t make you less. The God of ancient Israel was not weak. The God of ancient Israel simply didn’t need a sword in hand to show strength. The God of ancient Israel needed only an empty hand tracing out a word of truth. That empty hand was more powerful than any weapon of war.

Mene mene tekel parsin. Numbered, your days are numbered. You have been weighed and found wanting. Your kingdom will be divided.

This God was worshipped by an underdog nation that didn’t always win in battle, but that is not strength. Battles and rulers and nations come and go. The truth remains that violence and destruction cannot maintain themselves forever and ultimately, the writing *is* on the wall for anything that does not honor the God whose desire is for creation to thrive.

The Book of Daniel invites us to see the writing on the wall. Live in the truth even when the lie looks stronger and easier and comes with shiny spoils. Stay faithful even when your side is losing and even when it costs you. We do not serve a god who vies for position with weapon in hand. We serve the God of love and justice and truth, who time and again shows us that our strength is weakness and our weakness is our strength. Look at David and Goliath, look at Daniel in the lion’s den, look at Jesus and death itself.

When we come so close to God and God comes so close to us, we know what God wants us to do and say. We won’t win every battle. We will sometimes be underdogs, victims, or losers. That’s ok. Being a victim doesn’t make you weak. As Christians, we are not supposed to have the biggest weapons, to vie for the top position, or yell the loudest. We are supposed to draw near to our God with empty hands, ready for God to use them, perhaps to trace out a word of truth.

Amen.