

“Keep Hope Alive”
November 17, 2024
Scripture: Daniel 12:1-3; Mark 13:1-8

In nearly 40 years as a minister, I don’t believe I have ever preached on the book of Daniel. That’s not by design, exactly, but I’ve never really understood where it’s coming from. Interestingly, in Christian Bibles, Daniel is part of the collection of prophets, but in the Jewish Bible, Daniel is part of the section called “Writings,” where we find Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Esther. So, the book of Daniel hasn’t traditionally been treated like the prophets.

The first half of Daniel, chapters 1-6, takes place during the exile in Babylon. But it wasn’t written in that era; it was written much, much later. The stories of Daniel and his three friends standing up to the demands of King Nebuchadnezzar come across almost like children’s stories. They are heroes who survive the fiery furnace and the lion’s den and never compromise their commitment to the God of Israel by bowing down to Babylon’s king. As I’ve said before, the exile in Babylon was the most traumatic and formative experience in Israel’s history. So, a portrayal of heroes from that era is a way to offer commentary on their current experience.

These stories were told at a time when Israel was going through another trauma, the Greek occupation under Antiochus IV. As scholar Sharon Pace describes it in her commentary on Daniel, “Antiochus’s reign was marked by the outlawing of Jewish practice, the desolation of the sanctuary, persecutions, and deaths of the innocent.” This was happening in Judea during the second century BC, about 300 years after the return from exile. In the second half of the book of Daniel, chapters 7-12, Daniel is given a vision of what was to come for Israel. Pace writes, “Since Daniel, as visionary, is presented as the same person who suffered under ‘the first Nebuchadnezzar,’ the message is clear: the community can endure the many subsequent Nebuchadnezzars who are to come—including Antiochus.”

In other words, the book of Daniel is written as resistance to the atrocities the people are experiencing; it’s written to keep hope alive.

Unfortunately, many Christians have understood Daniel as a sort of blueprint for the future. There’s a stream of Christianity known as “Dispensationalism” that uses the predictions of eras in Daniel’s vision as a literal timeline to predict the Second Coming. In doing that, it seems to me, they’ve robbed this book of its purpose. Daniel is an example of apocalyptic literature. Apocalypse just means “unveiling.” It reveals something about God and how God is at work in circumstances that seem hopeless. The people under Antiochus were in despair. He was relentless in persecuting them. He called himself “Epiphanes,” which means “God manifest.” Antiochus IV expected his subjects to worship him. You can imagine how that would go over in Judea. He defiled the temple by erecting a statue of himself in it. When the Greeks were finally driven out of Judea by the Maccabean Revolt, the first thing done was re-dedicating the temple, which is how Hanukkah originated.

Stories like Daniel gave people a sense of hope when they feared all was lost. They looked to the time when, as our reading this morning describes, the Archangel Michael would

come to defeat their enemies and bring back those who were unjustly killed to redeem them and set the world right again. For people who have no control over their circumstances this kind of literature is empowering. It provides fuel for their resistance and allows them to endure.

Both the Jewish and Christian faiths were born in situations of oppression and injustice. For Jews, the exile in Babylon led them to center their history around the Exodus out of slavery. They keep hope alive by remembering the story of deliverance and liberation. God did not forget them then, and will not abandon them now. Over and over they use their history as a source of hope for the future.

That's what we see happening for Christians in the gospels. Our spiritual ancestors used the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus, and his death and resurrection, as a source of hope in a world where they had no power and could easily become hopeless. This section of Mark's gospel, chapter 13, is often called the "little apocalypse." It paints a dire picture of the world unfolding before the community where there is destruction and mayhem, natural disaster and war. As in Daniel, the events predicted by Jesus, the destruction of the temple, is a current reality. The gospels are all written in the shadow of the Roman invasion of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, when "not one stone is left upon another." But that's only the beginning; it will only get worse from there.

Jesus warns his disciples that they can expect all sorts of resistance from the authorities in power, both Roman and religious, as they seek to follow his teachings. The gospel of compassion and generosity is a threat to a system built on fear and coercion. And as things get worse for them they will be tempted to listen to voices promising them a way out of their suffering. There will be those who claim, "I am he:" I am he who alone can fix this; I am he who will protect you; I am he who will be your retribution. Such people, he tells them, will lead them astray.

He tells them to persevere in their commitment to the gospel, no matter how difficult it becomes, no matter how tempting it is to give in to hatred and fear and bigotry. They must keep hope alive within themselves and in the world by remaining steadfast to the way of compassion.

I think one of the most common misinterpretations of this material is to think that it calls on us to be passive in the face of injustice. Over the years the church has often told people living in oppressive circumstances to keep their heads down and accept their condition. But that's not what we find Daniel doing. Daniel confronts the ruling authorities and refuses to give in to their demands. Jesus rides into Jerusalem knowing full well what will happen if he continues to teach people about God's kingdom. They aren't passive. They don't just accept things as they are. They keep hope alive by showing how to defy the powers aligned against them, not through force, but with the power of love and devotion.

In a world where so much is out of our control, where people in power call for mass deportations of refugees and immigrants, where people are targeted for discrimination because of their gender identity, where a Christian nationalist worldview threatens to take control of education and healthcare, it can feel hopeless. It's tempting to just keep our heads down and our mouths shut. But we're called to keep hope alive.

Keep hope alive by standing with those whose lives are threatened by deportation, by being advocates on behalf of refugees and immigrants. Keep hope alive by being allies to people who are gay, lesbian or transgender, insisting on their right to participate fully in society without restrictions. Keep hope alive by advancing a Christian faith rooted in the command to love your neighbor as yourself and to see your neighbor in the lives of people of different faiths and different ethnic origins. Keep hope alive through acts of compassion and generosity and justice even when the cost is high and the risks are great.

When we do what's needed to keep hope alive, we become Daniel in this place, refusing to give in to forces of hatred and fear. We become the presence of Christ, revealing God's kingdom that overcomes every earthly ruler and turns darkness into light, sorrow into joy and despair into hope.

Amen