

*Texts: Daniel 6:6-27; Luke 23: 1-5*

*Subject: Daniel's Hope in God*

*Theme: Hope for What?*

First Sunday of Advent; Nov. 29, 2020; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

When I was ten or eleven, I wondered if I would ever be tall. My mother is about 5' 4", my dad is 5'6" I think. Their fathers were taller. I was always the smallest kid in my class. So in those days, I hoped that my growth spurt was right around the corner. I think my mother at one point even investigated hormone therapies and surgeries. We decided against it. It was expensive and sounded painful. Why would I hope for that? I don't know. I guess I thought if I was taller I'd be better at hitting a baseball - okay. Maybe be better able to defend myself against bullies - there were a few. But I was happy, and enjoyed reading books and climbing trees and going to the beach. So what if I wasn't going to be six feet tall.

We strange humans hope for the things we don't have, I suppose. We hope for things that are out of our control. We hold onto hope when circumstances are stacked against us. We hope, sometimes, because that's all we have. So we hope. But, *hope for what?* My kids are hoping to get everything they want for Christmas. But many desperately hope for more monumental things. Many of our neighbors are hoping to find work before unemployment benefits run out. Others hope to find a place to live so they can get off the street. Some hope for an end to violence in their country.

Daniel's hope was in God alone.

This book of Daniel begins with six chapters that introduce us to the world of the exile, and to this prophetic character and his friends. They were among the ones sent

away to Babylon. Once taken from their homeland, the people of Israel *hoped* that God would deliver them, and longed to find a way to worship God in this strange land. This was a defining moment in the history of the people of God. They were not able to worship in the temple, and at times it was not even safe to pray. They had to focus on new ways of being faithful. There was increased emphasis on dietary laws, or keeping kosher. They focused on keeping the sabbath as a day of rest, and they focused on the Word of God - the Torah. It was in this time that the first five books of the Hebrew Bible were finalized - *the Pentateuch*. They made a way, but they *hoped* that God would still be with them, they hoped God would send a Savior, and they *hoped* to go home.

It was in this time that this story, and other versions of it were shared, about Daniel, who was so favored by the King that the King even considered letting him run the whole empire, and the other leaders are jealous, so they get King Darius - not a historical figure that we can be sure of, to declare a law that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, except to the King, would be sentenced to death by Lions - thrown into the Lions' den. The King falls for it, and his own law comes back to haunt him when they discover Daniel praying to his God - just as he always did, facing Jerusalem in the upper room in his house. They come and arrest him and throw him in the Lion's den, even though the King likes Daniel a whole lot. He says, "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, protect you." And the king goes home.

But he doesn't eat or sleep - one commentator pointed out the paradox here, as the King has the best beds and the finest foods. He anxiously waits to see what's going to happen next. What is the king hoping for? Does he want Daniel to be saved? How would that make the king look? Foolish, at least. He's been tricked by the satraps and

rulers, who were jealous of the faithful outsider, Daniel. The morning comes, and the King quickly went to the lion's den, and shouts at the prisoner: "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve *been able* to deliver you from the lions?" The seemingly all-powerful King Darius, who was manipulated by the leaders of the court, conned into signing a law to which he was bound against his will - appears to *hope* that Daniel's God was powerful enough to save him.

And Daniel is untouched. He's safe. After all that has happened, those who chose to conspire to bring about the ruin of the faithful Daniel, end up being the powerless ones. Daniel says that because he was found blameless, because he was innocent, God sent angels to shut the lions' mouths and spare him from harm. The King responds by throwing those who had accused Daniel into the Lion's den, along with their whole families, where the hungry lions *brutally* devour them. Justice is served.

Is that what Daniel was hoping for? Is that what God does?

This story is stranger than it seems on the surface. I wish our lives were so simple. If it was simply a foregone conclusion that the faithful would always be protected from disaster, injustice, disease, and all kind of calamity, this would be a different world. We wouldn't worry about masks or vaccines, and we'd just go on with our normal lives, and tell each other to pray harder when something bad happened. Some people do that. We wouldn't face depression or fight with each other, or struggle to pay our rent, because we'd be sure that God would always provide. God does, but not always in the ways we can see. We wouldn't long for justice, because we'd know that God would always punish those who take advantage of our neighbors who are poor, the sick, and the elderly.

If that was the kind of world we lived in, we wouldn't need to hope at all - because we would just know. As it is, faithful people across the globe face genocide, persecution, hunger, violence, and disease every day. We proclaim we are one in Christ Jesus, and we tear each other apart over politics. We become estranged from one another and our siblings get left behind. So it must be that we can't fulfill the law on our own. Our power to fix everything is just not strong enough. It seems something is beyond our control. So like King Darius, we get anxious. We get frustrated and act out. We despair and turn inward on ourselves, turn away from our loved ones and our neighbors.

We can worry, or we can hope. But *hope for what?*

It was back in the Spring of 2020, when we were hoping to be back together for worship on Easter Sunday. We had hoped that the pandemic would be under control - the curve flattened, and we could move on. I was on the phone with Bishop Deborah Hutterer and she said that we might be in for a long wait. We've been through the Easter season and the the long stretch of the church year called Time after Pentecost, and now we enter into Advent, still waiting - waiting for the time when we can gather as the people of God in this place. We await a time when it will be physically safe for us to sing the praises of the Lord, to greet each other with a hug and a kiss, and to come together to receive the Lord's supper. It's been far too long. I've been worried at times. But I've been strengthened and blessed by our church leaders and our staff. My family who loves and relies on me. My friends who call and check in, and all of you who pray for this church. We are still waiting. While we wait, we hope. We haven't given up hope.

We are worshipping still - yes, online. We are serving meals here every day - carry out for seniors and homeless neighbors. We are delivering groceries for families out of work and partnering with local agencies who provide needed food and help. We are sharing what we have been given from God's abundance. We are still sharing the heart of Christ in the heart of the city.

King Darius sees what God has done for Daniel, and can't help but praise the Lord. He writes to all the people in the empire, in all their languages, and preaches to them! "He is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end." Darius and the whole world has heard what the Lord has done. "He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth."

This is the time of the year for signs and wonders. We get to bear witness once again to the glory of God who comes to be with us, in all our hurt and pain and misery, to dwell with us, and grow with us, and heal us and teach us. This is the season when we can face the reality of our world, when we name the injustice around us, when we confess our failings, and place our hope not in ourselves but in the God who created the whole universe, and chose to save us.

Alexander Pope wrote early in the 18th century that, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." (He was only four and a half feet tall.) Let's enter into this new season renewed in hope for a savior - not one elected, not a team hosting a trophy, or conquering with weapons of war, but one who is born among us. Let's advent like we mean it - looking to and longing for the wholeness and new life that God brings us every day in Jesus Christ, our hope, who was and is and is to come.

Amen.