

Hard Times: Hope From The Prophets
HOPE IN THE LIONS' DEN

Daniel 6:6-23
I John 4:16b-21

*Live with integrity; trust in the Lord;
and have no fear!*

A sermon preached by
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This week we finally got around to watching *Black Panther*.¹ It was the first superhero movie in the Marvel franchise to have a Black hero and to celebrate African culture. In that sense, it was highly significant. It was also highly successful and very entertaining.

One of the standard features of the superhero movies and action films like *Star Wars* is the resolution scene at the end. After the climactic battle to defeat the forces of evil, there is a scene or two that ties all the loose ends together and projects a sense of hope for the future. In *Black Panther*, (spoiler alert) the advanced civilization of Wakanda, which has previously been closed to the outside world, begins to share their resources to make the planet better. There is always hope at the end.

Today we are ending our sermon series called “Hard Times: Hope From The Prophets.” I have been amazed over and over how this series that we planned last fall has been so relevant to the situation that unfolded in the spring of this year.

We began in June with Walter Brueggemann’s definition of a prophet as “an emancipated imaginer of alternative.”² From the early days of Isaiah through the destruction of the nation through the exile in Babylon through the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple, the prophets were men who were not bound by the conventions of religion or politics. They spoke truth to power, and they had divinely-inspired imaginations to see an alternative future. It was a future beyond the death, destruction and oppression caused by the sin of the people. It was a future with hope.

The words of the prophets have spoken to us this summer, giving us an alternative narrative to the despair, depression, and anxiety of the pandemic. They have given us words of faith in the uncertainty of the economy. They have given us a vision of hope as we have seen the continued oppression of racism. I think they have been incredibly helpful.

So today we are ending our journey through the prophets with a great story out of the book of Daniel. Daniel is actually two books, written at two different times in two different languages. The first six chapters are stories told to entertain and instruct, about a Jewish man who does well in the court of a foreign king. Think about Joseph in Egypt or Mordecai in the book of Esther. These so-called “court tales” in Daniel were probably composed a

hundred years or so after the Babylonian exile, looking back to tell the stories of a righteous man.

The second half of Daniel, chapters 7-12, are a new type of literature that emerged in the two centuries before Christ. It is called apocalyptic literature, and it tells the story of the conflict with evil and evil's defeat by God. Apocalyptic literature is written to give hope and to call the oppressed people of God to persevere in their difficulties. These words are the latest words composed in the Hebrew Scriptures. They foreshadow some of the teachings of Jesus, and they are often paired with the Book of Revelation, which is also apocalyptic. But that's a whole different Bible study!

Many of us have heard the story of Daniel in the lions' den since we attended Sunday School or Vacation Bible School as a child. Daniel was one of the top administrators in the Kingdom of Persia. The Persians under Cyrus had defeated the Babylonians in 539 BCE, and many of the Jews went home to Jerusalem, but some, like Daniel, stayed in Babylon. Darius, the king in this story, was the second ruler of the Persian Empire after Cyrus.

Daniel was a Jew, so the Persians considered him a foreigner. The Persian politicians began to plot against Daniel, but there was a problem. They could get no dirt on Daniel. There was no negligence or corruption in his administration.

But there was Daniel's religion. He was a devout believer in the God of the Hebrews. So the good old boys went to the king with an appeal to his ego. They wanted him to declare that for 30 days everyone in Persia would only pray to the king and worship him. Whoever prayed to another god during that time would be thrown into a den of lions. It sounded good to Darius, so he made a royal proclamation to that effect.

The good old boys knew they could catch Daniel praying to his God, and so they did. They reported him to King Darius, who was very distressed, because he really liked Daniel. But he couldn't change a law he himself had made, so he had Daniel captured and thrown into the lions' den. Before Daniel went down, Darius himself came to him and said, "*May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!*"³

A stone was rolled over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it himself. Then he went home and couldn't eat or sleep for worrying about

Daniel. First thing the next morning, the king returned to the lions' den and called out for Daniel. Daniel said, "I'm OK! God shut the lions' mouths because I have done no wrong." They pulled Daniel up, and there was not a scratch on him, as the Scripture says, "*because he had trusted in his God.*"⁴

Anybody reading this story in the 4th century BCE would have understood its point: Daniel is a good man; God is a good and powerful God, and God saves those who trust in him. What word of hope does it bring to us today?

First, we will do better if we live with integrity. Daniel was honest and upright and faithful to his tradition of belief. Earlier in the book, Daniel and three of his friends refused to eat the food of the captors, instead keeping a kosher diet of vegetables and water. It made them look so healthy, the king appointed them to his royal court. When prayer to any god but Darius was outlawed, Daniel continued to go to his room three times a day, open his window, and pray toward Jerusalem. It would have been much easier just to go with the flow, but Daniel had too much integrity to do that. His success was due to his faith.

Chadwick Boseman was the actor who played the hero, King T'Challa, in *Black Panther*. Boseman died last week at the age of 43 after a four-year battle with colon cancer. In addition to *Black Panther*, Boseman also had starring roles in two other significant movies: *42*, about Jackie Robinson, the first Black player in modern professional baseball, and *Marshall*, about Thurgood Marshall, the first Black justice on the Supreme Court. Boseman's success, like Daniel's, was based in his integrity and faith.

Chadwick Boseman was baptized and grew up in the Welfare Baptist Church in Benton, South Carolina. He sang in the choir and was active in the youth program. He graduated from Howard University in Washington, D.C., and in 2018, they asked him to come back and give the commencement address at graduation. He began, "First, [I give] honor to the Creator and my ancestors on whose shoulders I stand." He spoke about his struggles to maintain his integrity and how it had sometimes cost him jobs as an actor. He said, "Sometimes you need to feel the pain and sting of defeat to activate the real passion and purpose that God predestined inside of you." Then he quoted one of the Old Testament prophets: "God says in Jeremiah 'I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to

harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Boseman closed with this thought: “When God has something for you, it doesn’t matter who stands against it. God will move someone that is holding you back away from the door and put someone there who will open it for you, if it’s meant for you. I don’t know what your future is. But if you’re willing to take the harder way, the more complicated one, the one with more failures at first than successes, the one that has ultimately proven to have more meaning, more victory, more glory, then you will not regret it.”⁵

Live with integrity, and your life will provide a foundation for your faith. Then when you encounter the hard times, you can still live with hope. You can win the victory. You can leave a legacy.

Daniel’s integrity set the stage for his act of trust. Daniel knew God, and he trusted that God would take care of him. When they lowered him into the den of lions, the peace in his heart radiated to the savage beasts, and they kept their mouths shut and their appetites in control. The next morning, when they brought Daniel up without a bruise or a scratch, the king was flabbergasted. But Daniel was not surprised. When you trust in God, God provides what you need in the moment you need it.

Oxford professor John Lennox wrote a book on Daniel in which he told a story about a Russian man who spent years in a Siberian prison for the crime of teaching his children the Bible. He described to John the horrors of the *gulag*, and John was questioning in his heart whether his faith would hold up in such a trial. The Russian sensed his thoughts and said, “You couldn’t cope with that, could you?” John stammered out an incoherent response, but the Russian grinned and said: “Nor could I! I was a man who fainted at the sight of his own blood, let alone that of others. But what I discovered in the camp was this: God does not help us to face theoretical situations but real ones. Like you I couldn’t imagine how one could cope in the *gulag*. But once there I found that God met me, exactly as Jesus had promised his disciples when he was preparing them for victimization and persecution.”

Lennox added, “We can be confident, then, that the Lord will give us a sufficient amount of grace to handle whatever comes our way, whenever it comes our way—and not necessarily a moment before!”⁶ God will give us

whatever we need (maybe different from what we want) when we need it. You can trust that.

Living with integrity in ourselves and trust in God, we never have to be afraid again. Daniel was not afraid to be cast down into the den of lions. Fear is just not a part of faith. Throughout Scripture, almost every time God shows up, the first words we hear are, “Have no fear.” In the New Testament, this witness is found in the First Letter of John: “*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*”⁷ The only perfect love is God, but when God is there—and God is always there—fear flees.

We live in a scary time right now. Fear and anxiety are our constant companions. We are afraid of the coronavirus, afraid of getting infected, afraid to touch our face. Some of us are afraid of losing employment. The violence and injustice and political turmoil have our emotions in a fearful state. Mental health professionals have been warning for months that the internal effects of fear and anxiety can be just as destructive and anything going on outside of us.

But God shows us a better way. If we live with integrity and trust in God, we don’t have to fear. We can have courage for today, courage for the future. We can take the steps we need to take to live victoriously.

It’s like that first jump off the high dive when you were a kid. (At least this is how it was for me.) You finally get the courage to climb that ladder, and when you get to the top, you walk out on that flimsy board. You want to go back, but you can’t, because there are kids lined up on the ladder, and there are people watching you from the side of the pool. So you just resign yourself that you are about to die, and you jump off, expecting to sink like a stone. But you hit the water, and you don’t sink. You float back up to the surface, and you break the water and shake your head, and what do you do? You laugh! Because it was fun! It was exhilarating! You want to go again! What were you so afraid of? You should have had more faith.

Today we have come to the end of this part of our journey. Next week, we are going to start a much shorter series called “The Power of Words.” There are so many words being thrown around right now, especially in this political season. As Christians, how are we supposed to use our words? We’ll see.

We are going to end our journey today with refreshment. The refreshment of faith. The holy meal. The Lord's Supper. As we share Communion today, I want to share a final verse from the prophets that I think summarizes their whole message. We didn't preach on it, but it has peeked in on several of our sermons. You may know it and love it already. It is Micah 6:8: "*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*"⁸ This is what it means to live with integrity, to trust in God, to live with courage and without fear, to live faithfully. Don't ever forget this: There is one God, and this God is your God. You all are God's people, and each of you is God's child. Whatever may come, you can cope; you can overcome; you can conquer. Whatever hard times you face, you can always have hope.

¹ *Black Panther*, written by Ryan Coogler, Joe Robert Cole *et al.*, directed by Ryan Coogler, Marvel/Walt Disney Studios, 2018.

² Walter Brueggemann, *From Judgment to Hope: A Study on the Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), vii.

³ Daniel 6:16.

⁴ Daniel 6:23.

⁵ Adele M. Banks, "Chadwick Boseman: Man of faith in real life, 'Black Panther' on screen," <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/09/01/chadwick-boseman-faith-christian-black-panther>.

⁶ John C. Lennox, *Against the Flow: The Inspiration of Daniel in an Age of Relativism* (Oxford: Monarch, 2015), 147.

⁷ I John 4:18.

⁸ Micah 6:8.