



“The Writing on the Wall”

a sermon by

Rev. Katie Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

November 9, 2005

Nestled in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament in the book of Daniel is the story of a prophet, Daniel, who found favor with king Nebuchadnezzar because he interpreted the king's visions. Nebuchadnezzar had sacked Jerusalem and taken over by forcing Chaldean culture on the Israelites and robbing the ritual vessels of their temple for his personal use. The king took pride in the fact that he had built up his empire for his glory, but was humbled by God, as Daniel had foreseen, until the king repented of his pride, and acknowledged that all things in his kingdom came from God, for God's glory. This story takes the first four chapters of the book, and now we will hear from the fifth chapter, when the action suddenly shifts to tell the story of Nebuchadnezzar's son, Belshazzar, who has ascended to his father's throne. Because of some significant historical issues and the nature of the experience described, the story is chalked up as folklore of the Jewish community intended to express a message to the reader about the life of faith and nature of God in the 400 years before Christ was born. It is an obscure story and one that does not get much of a hearing, so listen for God's Word from the fifth chapter of Daniel, selected verses.

“King Belshazzar made a great festival for a thousand of his lords, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. Under the influence of the wine, Belshazzar commanded that they bring in the vessels of gold and silver that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them ...they drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the wall of the royal palace, next to the lampstand. The king was watching the hand as it wrote. Then the king's face turned pale, and his thoughts terrified him. His limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. The king cried aloud to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the diviners... then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king the interpretation. Then King Belshazzar became greatly terrified and his face turned pale, and his lords were perplexed... Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king said to Daniel, “So you are Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah? I have heard of you...Now if you are able to read the writing and tell me its interpretation, you shall be clothed in purple, have a chain of gold around your neck, and rank third in the kingdom”

Then Daniel answered, “Let your gifts be for yourself, or give your rewards or someone else! Nevertheless I will read the writing and let you know the interpretation ...the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar kingship, greatness, glory, and majesty. And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. He 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 heavenly throne, and his glory was stripped from him...until he learned that the Most High God has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals, and sets over it whomever he will. And you, Belshazzar his son, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this! You have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven! The vessels of his temple have been brought in before you, and you and your lords have been drinking wine from them. You have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know; but the God in whose power is your very breath, and to whom belong all your ways, you have not honored. So from his presence the hand was sent and this writing was inscribed....Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; Tekel, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.” Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed in purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made concerning him that he should rank third in the Kingdom. That very night Belshazzar, the

Chaldean king, was killed.”

Over the past five weeks on Wednesday evenings I’ve been teaching a class on the book of Revelation. You wouldn’t necessarily know it from our passage today, but the book of Daniel falls in the same genre of literature as Revelation- apocalyptic. It is considered as such because both books deal not only with the last days of the many kingdoms of the earth, but take up the question of the power that we as human beings are given by God. We are given the power to choose and to act according to our own will, and that power can be used for good or for ill. It is also interesting to note that in both books, their early pages depicting the power and politics of the time set the stage for the prophetic voice- calling leaders and nations out for their abuse of the power that they have been given and their tailspin into the sin of idolatry- worshiping goods and people in place of God. It is in this context that the community of faith- from the early Jews in exile to modern day Christians- has had to thrive. It is in this context that the prophet Daniel had to look the king of the dominant culture in the eye and tell him he was going to die.

I picture this young king and feel a little sorry for him. How could he not be so vulnerable to the excesses of his office? To the indulgences of his lavish lifestyle? After all, when you are enjoying the view at the top of the food chain as the superpower that consumes the culture of all the weaker people around you- in this case the Jews- it is difficult not to look down on everyone else. And, as C.S. Lewis would say, when you spend all your time looking down, you aren’t looking up. This king made a crucial oversight when he looked over the God of Abraham. And so, when he took the cups from the pillaged temple in Jerusalem and passed them out, filled with wine, to his pals, he chose to use his power to degrade the religion of those his nation had conquered, to claim the riches of conquest for himself singing praises to gold and silver, and to insult the wrong God- the one living God who had had quite enough of the dangerous and deadly foolishness of his kingdom. And so, as is characteristic of Apocalyptic literature, a sign was given. In this case a real showstopper- or buzzkill as the case may be. The writing on the wall mysteriously appears and the king and his guests sober up real fast. In this case the sin is pride and idolatry and persecution and the prophet is Daniel who is called to proclaim that the king and nation’s ego and aggression will not stand. In fact, has already fallen.

In the book of Revelation about 500 years later, the sin that the prophet John calls out is the pride of the emperor, the idolatry of the people, and the persecution of the subordinate culture by the dominant one- in this case the early Christian community by the Roman empire. It would seem things haven’t changed much for the community of faith. But rather than pillaging the temple and enslaving the people like Balshazzar, Emperor Nero dressed Christians in the skins of wild animals and turned them loose in the coliseum to packs of half-starved dogs. Dipped them in oil, bound them to crosses, and burned them at the gates of his temple for firelight in the evenings. And the home of stoic philosophy and the birthplace of the ethicist becomes a profanation in the eyes of God all for the sake of the preservation of authority and amusement of the masses. The writing on the wall for Cesar would be the endurance of the churches and the prophecy of those he sought to kill for they did indeed accurately envision the collapse of his own empire.

Many are quick to make a correlation between these texts and the crimes of our own culture against the humanity it oppresses in order to maintain its wealth, status, power, influence, and position in the world, touting an ego and authority that feeds upon self-reliance rather than reliance upon God. They are quick to understand the events of today as precursors to the rest of the story of God’s judgment. And that is a provocative conversation to be sure. But what I find equally if not more intriguing is the commentary this passage makes on the role of the prophet in the kingdom, and God’s insistence in the writing on the wall that over and against all the powers of this world he will always have the final Word. The prophet is given the terrible task of calling a

spade a spade- of standing before the most powerful forces in the world- and telling them that you see that their current path will destroy them. That, though they have overlooked God and the care of his people, God has certainly not overlooked them.

It is a hard word of truth to say that, the way you see it, results of their internal audit have shown that they have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. To help those in the dominant cultures of business and economics and law, medicine, government and education, in any sphere of life for that matter, to understand that the problem and the sin lies in their perception. It lies in the perception that power was given to them for their own glory and the building up of their own kingdoms, rather than the glory of God and the building up of his. It lies in the ways those who cannot defend themselves are casually and quietly consumed in order to preserve wealth, comfort, and position in society or in the ways every desire is justified and sanitized so such things as guilt or workplace ethics don't get in the way of getting the job done. It is a tough call to ask a culture to realize that their days are numbered and they must soon realize that, "The importance of a kingdom is not measured by its size or by the weight of centuries, but by its reason for being...."¹ And the way it gives glory to God in each choice it makes, in every step it treads through this world.

The story is told of the old shepherd in his tent. He lit a candle, bit into a date, but found a worm inside. So he put down that date, picked up another one, only to find another worm. Again he put that one aside. When he bit into a third date, he saw yet another worm so he blew out the candle and ate the dates.² We cannot be as those who turn a blind eye to the infestation of sin around us. We cannot ignore the writing on the wall because whether we like it or not, God's kingdom will always have the final word. And as disciples of Jesus Christ we are invited to discern our part in sharing that Word with the world, the Word that promises 'release (from) bondage to sin and decay and death in spite of the arrogant users of power who revel in their debauchery and challenge God to do his worst.'³ For the Word of God is the only thing that will stand forever. So you might as well start working for it.

I wonder where you find yourself in our story today? Perhaps you identify most closely with Daniel who is left as the only one in the king's court who can see God's vision for the future and is being asked to share it when you know it is not what the king wants to hear. Perhaps you find yourself standing startled before the writing on your own wall when you thought you had it all figured out. Or perhaps the role of the crowd most closely identifies where you find yourself today- being sobered up suddenly to the problem with the party you are attending, and wondering if you shouldn't perhaps just excuse yourself from the table. The prophet's tough call is to examine how they themselves will use their own corner of power and freedom for the work of the kingdom, to discern what role their voice will play in the proclamation of God's final Word to a lavish and self-determined world. To help them see that in God's power alone is their very breath. And to him alone belong all their ways. Amen.

¹Interpretation Bible Commentary: Daniel: Ed. J.L. Mays, P.D. Miller, P.J. Achtemeier (John Knox: Louisville), 2005. 105

²From Dr. Alan Zimmerman's Tuesday Tip for 9/27/05. Available online.

³Interpretation Bible Commentary: Daniel: Ed. J.L. Mays, P.D. Miller, P.J. Achtemeier (John Knox: Louisville), 2005. 105

