

## A Hope Larger Than Lions

-I read a story the other day about a simple call for help. On November 15, there was a 10-year-old boy living in Shawano County, Wisconsin, who made a 911. 'Hey,' he said. 'it's not really an *emergency*' [but] 'I ... need help on one math problem with my homework. It's like *eight*-grade level.'

He got hold of the longtime dispatcher in this rural area west of Green Bay. Her name is Kim Krause: 'Oh, well, I'm not very good at math, sweetie, but I can try. What is it?' The boy read it to her: 'Dividing a number by 10 is the same as finding one-tenth of the number. Use the phrase 'one-tenth of' or the phrase 'ten times' to complete each statement about 1,000.'

Krause immediately realized the seriousness of the situation: Decimals. So, because it was a slow afternoon, she called up the Deputy Sheriff who has a child of similar age. Chase Mason showed up to the boy's home (he must have ensured that there was another adult at home to make that safe), he pulled up a chair, and helped the boy divide and multiply by ten.

-I read this story under the 'Humankind' section of my *1440 Daily Digest* email. And what I love about it is that this boy – who, *was*, by the way, informed that 911 may not be exactly the place to go with your word problems – that this boy called out for help with something that was too big for him. (It was, after all, 'like eighth grade level.')

I love that he had this simple trust that he could ask for this show of support and depend on someone to care.

I don't want to diminish the difficulty of hard homework. But I think I love this kid's simple faith here because I want to trust for him and for us, that as the fears we face loom larger than learning decimals, we can all of us have hope in a Help that only multiplies.

As we open up to the Book of Daniel on this first Sunday in Advent – as we send up our own 911 prayers – *that* is the assurance of hope we await. /

-You recall that one of the defining events in the life and faith of Israel was the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century B.C. The exile. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, burned down the Temple, and forcibly marched away royalty, nobility, business leaders and artisans to present-day Iraq.

There the conquering king demanded that certain young men of nobility who were considered prospects for leadership be indoctrinated in Babylonian language and lore of fortunetelling. They were to be fed from the king's table and after three years brainwashing, be given positions in the king's court.

The Book of Daniel tells the story of four young men among those selected: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Do you recognize them? All 4 were forced to take Babylonian names. Daniel was called Belteshazzar, the others Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Recognize them now?

Can you imagine the grief of losing their country, their home, their language, worship and way of life? As you'll see the kings these men were made to serve demanded not only loyalty but worship. If so, they could expect wine from the king's table. If not...do you remember the fiery furnace? Do you recall the den of lions?

The question before these men who suffer the lonely fears of exile and enslavement is one that faces all persons of faith: Will they hold on to hope? Will they trust God when faced by fears too big for them? Or will they despair and give in to what's expedient?

This is from Daniel, chapter 6.1-27:

**-6** <sup>1-3</sup> [King] Darius reorganized his kingdom. He appointed one hundred twenty governors to administer all the parts of his realm. Over them were three vice-regents, one of whom was Daniel. The governors reported to the vice-regents, who made sure that everything was in order for the king. But Daniel, ... so completely outclassed the other vice-regents and governors that the king decided to put him in charge of the whole kingdom.

<sup>4-5</sup> The vice-regents and governors got together to find some old scandal or skeleton in Daniel's life that they could use against him, but they couldn't dig up anything. He was totally exemplary and trustworthy. They could find no evidence of negligence or misconduct. So they finally gave up and said, "We're never going to find anything against this Daniel unless we can scheme up something religious."

<sup>6-7</sup> The vice-regents and governors conspired together and then went to the king and said, "King Darius, live forever! We've convened your vice-regents, governors, and all your leading officials, and have agreed that the king should issue the following decree:

For the next thirty days no one is to pray to any god or mortal except you, O king. Anyone who disobeys will be thrown into the lions' den.

<sup>8</sup> "Issue this decree, O king, and make it unconditional, as if written in stone like all the laws of the Medes and the Persians."

<sup>9</sup> King Darius signed the decree.

<sup>10</sup> When Daniel learned that the decree had been signed and posted, he continued to pray just as he had always done. His house had windows in the upstairs that opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he knelt there in prayer, thanking and praising his God.

<sup>11-12</sup> The conspirators came and found him praying, asking God for help. They went straight to the king and reminded him of the royal decree that he had signed. "Did you not," they said, "sign a decree forbidding anyone to pray to any god or man except you for the next thirty days? And anyone caught doing it would be thrown into the lions' den?"

"Absolutely," said the king. "Written in stone, like all the laws of the Medes and Persians."

<sup>13</sup> Then they said, “Daniel, one of the Jewish exiles, ignores you, O king, and defies your decree. Three times a day he prays.”

<sup>14</sup> At this, the king was very upset and tried his best to get Daniel out of the fix he’d put him in. He worked at it the whole day long.

<sup>15</sup> But then the conspirators were back: “Remember, O king, it’s the law of the Medes and Persians that the king’s decree can never be changed.”

<sup>16</sup> The king caved in and ordered Daniel brought and thrown into the lions’ den. But he said to Daniel, “Your God, to whom you are so loyal, is going to get you out of this.”

<sup>17</sup> A stone slab was placed over the opening of the den. The king sealed the cover with his signet ring and the signet rings of all his nobles, fixing Daniel’s fate.

<sup>18</sup> The king then went back to his palace. He refused supper. He couldn’t sleep. He spent the night fasting.

<sup>19-20</sup> At daybreak the king got up and hurried to the lions’ den. As he approached the den, he called out anxiously, “Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve so loyally, saved you from the lions?”

<sup>21-22</sup> “O king, live forever!” said Daniel. “My God sent his angel, who closed the mouths of the lions so that they would not hurt me. I’ve been found innocent before God and also before you, O king. I’ve done nothing to harm you.”

<sup>23</sup> When the king heard these words, he was happy. He ordered Daniel taken up out of the den. When he was hauled up, there wasn’t a scratch on him. He had trusted his God.

<sup>24</sup> Then the king commanded that the conspirators who had informed on Daniel be thrown into the lions’ den, along with their wives and children. Before they hit the floor, the lions had them in their jaws, tearing them to pieces.

<sup>25-27</sup> King Darius published this proclamation to every race, color, and creed on earth:

Peace to you! Abundant peace!

I decree that Daniel’s God shall be worshiped and feared  
in all parts of my kingdom.

He is the living God, world without end. His kingdom  
never falls.

His rule continues eternally.

He is a savior and rescuer.

He performs astonishing miracles in heaven and on earth.

He saved Daniel from the power of the lions.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.* Let’s pray....

-OK. So the advisors to King Darius are jealous. Daniel has been elevated to bear administrative responsibility for all of Babylon. And they weren't. So in their anger they play to the king's arrogance. They have him issue a decree forbidding anyone from praying to any god but him.

But Daniel can't bow down to Darius. No more than he can give up his name to be Belteshazzar, which means 'God is my Judge.' The story reports his courage so matter-of-factly. As if he shrugs, thinking 'well, you know, narcissistic king, threat of lions,' opens his windows, and offers his thanks and praise to the Lord as usual. As if such simple trust were simple. As if he doesn't look grinning power in the face, feel the loneliness of his exile, feel the lonely gap between what is and what should be, and *choose* to have hope anyway, *choose* to throw open his windows, fill his soul with sunlight of thanksgiving and the oxygen of praise.

-Eugene Peterson, in his introduction to the Book of Daniel, reflects on just how difficult it is to trust and obey God, especially when we're bullied into compliance by attractive lies ('You can have all the world, says the devil, if you will just bow down to me.' It's a struggle to *stand* in faith, to remember who we are in God's grace and truth, when there are such powerful cultural rewards to be gained by denying him.

-The contrast in the story is purposeful. Daniel demonstrates quiet courage. This is 'like, eighth grade level.' And he chooses to depend on God for what's too big for him. With thanksgiving and praise, he holds onto hope. Darius, for his part – demonstrates egoism and cowardice. He gets no credit for *liking* Daniel, but doing nothing to protect him from his own foolish, violent policy of self-worship. He gets no points for being sad about sealing the lion's den with his signet ring. Darius is taking care of number one. Unbreakable law? Tradition of the Medes and the Persians? Notice how this conflicted king waits to see how things play out, then changes the supposedly unchangeable law of who is to be worshiped. Notice how he simply substitutes who he's going to have eaten and tries to get a photo op with the Power that tamed his lions.

-The simple definition of injustice is *theft*. It's an abuse of power to take something that should belong to someone because they are a child of God. An abuse of power to steal someone's life, liberty, property, or dignity.

Victor Frankl survived a concentration camp where all these things were stolen. He wrote a reflection called *Man's Search for Meaning*. It's a famous contribution to human wisdom. Frankl claims the one thing that cannot be stolen is my choice of how to respond to injustice. He is known for suggesting that the one thing a Nazi guard could not take from him was his choice to respond with love.

-The sermon that will now ring in my ears when I read the book of Daniel is one by Martin Luther King, Jr. King gave a sermon on Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the pulpit of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta where he served as co-pastor with his father. It was November 5 of 1967. This sermon was after the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, after the Birmingham nonviolent demonstrations against the Jim Crow segregation system, after being put in jail, after the obscene threats of violence against King's children, after demanding the right to vote for African Americans in Selma met brutal violence on Bloody Sunday, after King had

begun work to oppose segregated housing, poverty and the Vietnam war.

He spoke of the courage to live for the Lord even when it's against the law.

[T]here comes a time when a moral man can't obey a law which his conscience tells him is unjust. And I tell you this morning, my friends, that history has moved on, and great moments have often come forth because there were those individuals, in every age [and] in every generation, who were willing to say "I will be obedient to a *higher* law." These men were saying "I must be disobedient to a king in order to be obedient to *the King*." Unquote.

Daniel disobeys *a* king in order to be obedient to *the* King. Daniel trusts God in exile. He trusts God in grief. Daniel trusts God in loneliness. He trusts God in danger. Daniel trusts God in grave injustice. He trusts God even in the face of death.

-The heart of MLK's sermon turns on the response to threat of destruction from Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego that I hear implicitly in Daniel's response to Darius: If you throw us in the fire, the God we serve can *rescue* us .... But *even* if he doesn't, even *though* he doesn't, we will be faithful to God. We *believe* God can save us from the fires we face. We do. But if not, we're still going to be faithful to God. Still going to depend on him to care. Still going to hold on to hope.

This...means... that the ultimate test of one's faith (says MLK) is his ability to say "But if not." You see there is what you may call an 'if' faith, and there is a 'though' faith....Now the 'if' faith says, "If all goes well; if life is hopeful, prosperous and happy; if I don't have to go to jail; if I don't have to face the agonies and burdens of life; if I'm not ever called bad names because of taking a stand that I feel that I must take; if none of these things happen, then I'll have faith in God, then I'll be alright." That's the 'if' faith. You know, a lot of people have the 'if' faith.

There is a 'though' faith, though. And the 'though' faith says "Though things go wrong; though evil is temporarily triumphant; though sickness comes and the cross looms, *nevertheless!* I'm gonna believe anyway and I'm gonna have faith *anyway*....

This was the sermon from the book of Daniel that MLK gave five months before his assassination.

The thing is that Daniel couldn't *know* God would show up in the way God did. We have no promise that says faith gets us out of every fiery furnace or lion's den unbitten. But Daniel wouldn't allow all of Babylon to steal his choice to love. Daniel simply, painfully, powerfully trusted God *nevertheless*. *Daniel had a hope larger than lions*.

Which means this story is not centrally about Darius or Daniel. No. It's about Daniel's *God*. The God of our Advent hope. The With-You God. Emmanuel, come into our exile, come into our grief, come into our loneliness, come into our longing, come even into the dens that threaten death, to be with us through the night.

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Daniel 6.6-27  
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Oh Friends, what is the worldly threat you face if you hold on to hope? If you choose to have faith?

And can you trust the God come close in Christ Jesus *no matter what*? Can you offer your prayers today as a 911 call and wait expectantly for his care? Can you fling open your windows to welcome him with thanks and praise? Will you choose to have a hope larger than lions?

Because, *lions or not*, Advent means waiting for a Lord who's coming to vindicate. A Lord who's coming to redeem our suffering. A Lord who's coming to deliver us from this lonely exile here. A Lord who's finally coming to overthrow injustice, wipe away our tears, do away with death and gather us to the feast of Love's victory celebration./

This is the hope we celebrate at the Table of our Lord: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. It's a hope far larger than lions.

Let's pray.

Oh, Lord, we offer our prayer as a 911 call. Come, Lord Jesus. Come to us in our exile and grief. Come close to our longing, loneliness, and fear. Come undo injustice. Come hold us in the night of danger. Come help us face death.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come forgive. Come heal. Come reconcile. Come redeem. Come gather us to the goodness and mercy of your kingdom feast. Come light within us the candle of faith that is our hope in you no matter what.