

Many of you have heard the expression, “the writing on the wall.” It’s a phrase that indicates something bad is about to happen. For example, “She saw the writing on the wall and left her company for a new job before the layoffs began.” What you may not know is that the origin of this phrase is from the book of Daniel, chapter 5. And that’s our story for this morning.

*King Belshazzar made a great festival for a thousand of his lords, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>So they brought in the vessels of gold and silver that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. <sup>4</sup>They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. (Dan. 5:1-4)*

This story takes place many years after the stories about Daniel’s refusal to eat the king’s food and Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. Now Nebuchadnezzar is dead and Belshazzar is king. Daniel would have been

an old man by now. Belshazzar calls the nobles of his kingdom together to show off his fabulous wealth and power. He profanes the sacred vessels taken from God's temple in Jerusalem, by using them for a drunken orgy and to celebrate other gods. As we'll see, God is not amused. We continue the story in verse 5.

*<sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>Then the king's face turned pale, and his thoughts terrified him. His limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. (Daniel 5:5-6)*

This sounds like a scene from a bad Hollywood horror film, with that disembodied hand writing on the wall! The king is understandably terrified, and rounds up the usual diviners, enchanters, and magicians to tell him what it means. But, as usual in these stories, they are useless, leading to even greater fear on the part of the king. Fortunately, the queen mother tells the king about Daniel, who had helped Nebuchadnezzar in similar situations. So Daniel is called to the court.

*<sup>13</sup>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? <sup>16</sup>... I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. 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.” <sup>17</sup>Then Daniel answered in the presence of the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, or give your rewards to someone else! Nevertheless I will read the writing to the king and let him know the interpretation. (Dan. 5:13,16,17) Daniel tells the king what he can do with his rewards, making it clear that God’s wisdom cannot be bought!

The story continues. <sup>18</sup>O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar kingship, greatness, glory, and majesty. <sup>19</sup>And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him... <sup>20</sup>But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he acted proudly, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and his glory was stripped from him. <sup>22</sup>And you, Belshazzar his son, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this! <sup>23</sup>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, your wives and your concubines 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.* <sup>24</sup>“So from his presence the hand was sent and this writing was inscribed. <sup>25</sup>And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. <sup>26</sup>This is the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; <sup>27</sup>TEKEL, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; <sup>28</sup>PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” <sup>29</sup>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.

<sup>30</sup>That very night Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed. <sup>31</sup>And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old. (Dan. 5:18-31)

Wow! This is another one of those stories that doesn't appear in children's Bibles! There's a lot here, but let's focus on two points. The first point is an uncomfortable one. In Gal. 6, St. Paul puts it like this, <sup>7</sup>*Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.* (Gal. 6:7) Belshazzar arrogantly assumed that he could profane the sacred temple vessels from the Jerusalem temple without consequence. But our Creator

has certain expectations for each one of us, and he holds us accountable for how we live. We often think about that accountability happening the distant future, at the final judgment, if we still believe in such things. But sometimes, we reap what we sow in the here and now, which is what happened in this story.

For example, if we are unfaithful to our spouse, we may lose our family. We drink too much or become addicted to drugs, and we lose our friends or our job. We cheat at work and get caught and get fired and lose our reputation. We hold onto a grudge and before we know it we become a bitter person that no one wants to be around. We don't do our schoolwork and get a failing grade. The story reminds us that sometimes we reap what we sow right here and now. And that is not something we want to dwell on. We'd rather focus on the love and compassion of God, right? Of course we would. But what if God's judgment is part of his love for us?

Miroslav Wolf, a Christian theologian from Croatia, used to reject the concept of God's wrath and judgment, believing that it couldn't be reconciled with a God of love. His experience in the Bosnian war in the early 1990s changed his mind. He writes, "My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region

from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry...

How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandfatherly fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators' basic goodness? (No!) Wasn't God fiercely angry with them?

Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love." You see, God loves us too much to leave us as we are. He will use even judgment to hold us to account and change us. That's the first lesson of the story.

Second, this story of Daniel reminds us of the importance of speaking truth to power, as Daniel did fearlessly here. When we see evil, the mistreatment of some people or the lack of compassion toward others, we need to speak up. To our government. To our bosses. To our school leaders, as happened recently in a nearby district regarding racism. To our

church leaders. To our police. To various activists. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that all government, bosses, schools, police and activists are evil. But they are all led by fallible humans, and when their practices are evil or result in evil, we need to speak up, like Daniel did. And sometimes God will use our words to bring about change, so that our society becomes a little more like the Kingdom of God.

On this Juneteenth weekend, the story of David Hankey seems a good illustration of this. David's family farm on Mummasburg Road was overrun by the Confederate Army on July 1, 1863. As the rebel troops arrived, a neighbor, a black woman, ran into their home, seeking shelter from the Southern troops. If captured, she would be returned to slavery in the South. The troops demanded that she be handed over. Hankey refused, offering instead that she and his family would cook for the soldiers while they were there. The rebel officer agreed, but Hankey's farm was absolutely ripped to shreds, partly because of his refusal to turn over the woman.

Seven years later, black men were finally allowed to vote in Pennsylvania as a result of that war. But some local political leaders attempted to deny our new black citizens their rights. David Hankey stood

outside the township's polling place in 1870 and made sure that African-American citizens were afforded their right to vote. Like Daniel, Hankey is a good example of someone standing up and speaking truth to those in power. It took courage, but it made a real difference to that black woman and to other black neighbors in our community.

This morning we've heard stories from 2500 years ago and from over 150 years ago of people speaking truth to power. I wonder, how is God calling us to speak truth to power today?