

Lions & Tigers & Prayer, Oh My!
The Monroe Congregational Church
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Daniel 6:6-27

I had only one thing on my shopping list: a light-blocking curtain for the downstairs bedroom. It would be a quick trip to the chain superstore, I couldn't possibly get distracted. (I know, right?)

So I made my way into the store and was heading straight for the Housewares Department when I happened to glance to my right. That's when I got distracted. I was just so surprised, although I shouldn't have been.

But I was—I know how this works, it happens every year. It was only the second week in October and there they were in all their holiday glory: Christmas Trees—and lots of them, in all kinds and sizes! Next to that were wreaths, gigantic 15-foot tall blow-up Santa Clauses oddly standing next to palm trees, and all other kinds of kitschy tackiness, there on full display.

I tried not to stare judgmentally at the people picking through wrapping paper, miles of scotch tape and indoor and outdoor lights, but then it got personal: snow shovels and ice scrapers. And then it got downright mean: snow blowers. Did I mention that it was only the second week of October?

We know how this goes, it happens every year. We've barely finished with Labor Day and the Halloween decorations go up. Just when we're beginning to think about carving pumpkins, the electric reindeer show up in our neighbor's yard. And just when recipes for what to do with leftover turkey flood our in-box we hear the first strains of Bing Crosby singing about a White Christmas.

Today we welcome the season of Advent, a short, four-week time of waiting, anticipating, and preparing for the coming season of Christmas. But Advent is also a season of questions...

Like, if this time is really supposed to be about hope, peace, love and joy, why does it so often play out as the Season of Stress and Distraction?

Maybe I'm just feeling that vibe because all three of my family members are working in some form of retail this year. They come home with feet throbbing and tell me stories about customers who seem to be at the end of

their rope. We talk about the pressure this season can bring, and how so many of us end up striving for a kind of perfection that few ever live up to.

Deep in the Hebrew Scriptures is an ancient story of a young Jewish man who remained faithful to God under some "wild" pressures. Daniel refused to be unfaithful to his faith and values, which caused him to be in conflict with the powers of his time. So when he was caught praying to his God, he figured it would be better to die quickly as a 'not so happy meal' than to die slowly by denying who he is.

King Darius was a tyrant; and his kingdom was ruthless. After he places him in the lion's den, the king tries to get some sleep. He tries, but he can't. Somehow, Daniel makes it through a long night in the lion's den and (presumably) goes on to live happily ever after.

And it was nice that Daniel was delivered, but so many others aren't. His foes (and their wives and children) were not so fortunate. They cut that scene from the Children's Bible. Seems brutal to us, but that was just how they punished evil doers back then.

Nonetheless, the story leads us into deeper questions that we all should ask; like:

What dark, frightening den are we trying to escape today?

How willing are we to let our actions mirror our values?

How do we confront that which encourages us to give up and give in?

Or... to be more direct... how, in this season of Advent, do we manage to keep the main thing the main thing?

I'll be honest; sometimes the internal struggle of clinging to hope, peace, love and joy feels like a battleground. The warmth we long for is tempered by the emptiness of trying to keep up, step up and measure up.

What has the power to undo our Advent hope, peace, joy and love? I imagine that for every one of us, the answer to that question will be different. Which is it for you?

Is it family tension? This can be a difficult time for those dealing with the pain of separation and divorce; or those who are trying to figure out the first holiday season in a new family dynamic.

Or maybe the thing that seems to undo our hope, peace, joy and love is just the age-old issue of over-consumption. Here it is, the weekend after Thanksgiving—we should be filled up! But we're not... at least I know I'm not, because I always tend to want just a little bit more.

Sometimes I get angry because I feel like I'm not measuring up. I don't wear the most stylish or flattering clothes all the time and my kids usually don't have the newest gadgets. My anger turns more into self-loathing when I remember that clergy aren't supposed to be all about that.

This year I'm missing my grandmother whose birthday was two days before Christmas and she always made a big deal out of the holidays. I catch myself looking at gifts that would be perfect for her. I know that I'm not the only one trying to smile through a big family meal when one or more dining room chairs sit empty.

Mostly, I feel tired from just so much stuff going on; parties and gatherings and coordinating schedules and work commitments, waiting and wondering and... whew! I know I don't have to give in to all of it, but I do. Every year.

How about you? When you think about Advent, do you hear just a little growling from the shadows? Does this time of year ever make you feel like you're going to be eaten alive? And has it ever kept you up at night?

For Daniel, leaning into the wild wind of the Spirit and being lost in prayer helps him to turn away from dark moments of fear. It protects him from the lions, and gives him hope.

In his world, prayer is not a pretty speech at the dinner table or a tool for getting what he wants. In Daniel's world, prayer is a dangerous and powerful act of resistance against the powers that disorder and oppress God's beloved people.

As we head into the holidays (which for some feels like a lion's den) how do we remember to stay centered in love for each other, and for the God who stands with all of us?

When we're hungry; when we feel like we're running on empty, just plain worn out, beyond tired, let's challenge each other to stop and fill ourselves with prayer.

When we find ourselves frustrated or angry, let's see it as a sign to stop and take a deep centering breath, close our eyes and ask the Spirit of God to breathe some fresh air into our lives.

When we're lonely and the emptiness seems to run so deep, let's consider it an invitation to stop and remember that God, the One who sat in darkness with Daniel offers hope even today.

Throughout the history of the Church, faithful people have prayed for deliverance. In some cases, they escaped their fate and were saved from the situations that threatened them. Others have suffered for their faith, we call them martyrs. Today, in this part of the world, we may not suffer persecution for our faith, but we may still need deliverance from the grief, pain and struggles of life.

Usually God does not deliver us by having our problems miraculously disappear. We're saved in different ways. God may give us the "peace that passes all understanding." At other times, when we are weak, God may give us strength. Or we may find comfort in our grief, which encourages us in our long-term struggles and gives us hope in hopeless situations. The black and red feathers on our dreamcatcher remind of us these sleepless nights and waiting in hope.

Friends, we wait for a lot of things but somehow waiting for God feels different. Perhaps this time of Advent provides the space for our faith to inform our waiting. We wait and prepare. We look for our God, who is a God of deliverance and won't be boxed in by our expectations. May the hope of God guard our hearts as we wait together. *Amen.*