

Advent is a time of expectation, of anticipation. But for us here in the Northern Hemisphere it is also a time of gathering darkness.

I have shared it before, how the darkness during advent is a necessary darkness. Darkness is the harsh noise – the image of the chaotic cosmic forces advancing on the serene pure innocence. It is the buzzing of the dissonant sounds.

Advent is not fuzzy preparation for Christmas, but a time of questions yelled out into the night. It is a bracing of the body and a straightening of the spine against the oncoming darkness...whilst listening for that clear pitch of light.

These are the tones of the advent season. They are hard to hear. But today – this season – I invite you to join in the walk through the chaos toward the light of hope.

You will notice we are using strikingly different texts this year than we would normally be using. This is because this year is Year 3 of the *Narrative* Lectionary, and this lectionary does not mention the more familiar advent stories until the fourth Sunday – right before Christmas.

Over a nine-month period, the narrative lectionary moves through the overarching biblical story. This lectionary is not simply a series of stories; rather, it is a series of stories that enable us to better understand and appreciate the broader biblical story.

Today is the first Sunday of the church year – the first Sunday of Advent. And we will touch on two stories that we don't normally preach about but carry us on a journey towards the light.

First, the story of Daniel.

It began with jealousy. It began with Daniel, a child of Israel in exile in the present-day Iraq. Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Mischah and Abednego were favoured over all the exiles because they were wise and smart and healthy...plus they were experts at interpreting visions and dreams sent by God. We know the story of the fiery furnace – where Daniel's friends were thrust into the furnace and protected by God's hands. Later, Daniel interpreted the "writing on the wall" that signaled the immanent end of Nebuchadnezzar's son, Belshazzar's rule over the Chaldeans.

Daniel proved himself worthy of note by the incoming rulers, the Medes, and soon found himself one of three presidents who were to rule over about 40 satraps each and report to the king.

Now the satraps and other presidents were *really* jealous of Daniel because he and King Darius got along really well. And they decided that they wanted Daniel out of there, but because Daniel was near perfect, they figured the only way they could really get him was through God.

So they conspired against Daniel and tricked the king into making a decree – and a document that couldn't be changed – that "anyone who prays to anyone for 30 days except to King Darius – would be thrown into a den of lions. King Darius signed the document and made the law and it was enforced.

Daniel knew about the law and the consequences of praying to God and being found out doing so, yet still every day, he went home and prayed 3 times a day. The conspirators came and found Daniel praying.

After reminding the king of his law that couldn't be revoked, they brought forward Daniel and said, "See, you've got to throw Daniel into the lion's den because he prayed to his God and not to you."

King Darius was very upset and tried until evening to save Daniel, but his law proved to be "foolproof" and Daniel was thrown into the den of lions.

"May your God, whom you faithfully serve deliver you!" and a stone was laid before the mouth of the den – and sealed with the king's ring – so that Daniel would not escape.

The king fasted all night and couldn't sleep and, in the morning, went down to see what became of Daniel.

"O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?"²¹ Daniel then said to the king, "O king, live forever!²² My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also, before you, O king, I have done no wrong."

Daniel was removed from the den and was perfectly fine. The king, then threw all the satraps who had accused Daniel – and their families – into the den of lions and, before they reached the bottom of the den, they were overpowered and devoured.

This both shocked and delighted the king and he wrote to everyone throughout his world and sent out a decree that everyone should "tremble and fear before the God of Daniel,

For he is the living God, enduring forever.
His kingdom shall never be destroyed,
and his dominion has no end.

He delivers and rescues,
He works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth;
for He has saved Daniel
from the power of the lions."

There were several things that were NOT in Daniel's favor.

First, he was in exile. He was captured from his family home – the Land which God had given God's people – the Hebrews. He and his friends were captured and taken away and plunked down into a city and a country with politics and religion that was completely unfamiliar to him. Yet Daniel and his friends managed to figure out a way that they could live out their faith and hope and trust in Yahweh God AND keep their culture and traditions.

At the same time, they could keep participating in the politics and government of 2 enemy nations. Daniel survived the overtaking of the Chaldeans by the Medes and remained powerful within their government as well.

I cannot imagine what kind of man Daniel was – although I likely would have been intimidated by his character whilst secretly admiring his fortitude and faith.

The second story we have this Advent is the passage that Bryce read from Luke 23:1-5 when Jesus was before Pilate and Pilate asked, “are you the king of the Jews?” and Jesus answered, “You say so.” After Pilate found no reason to accuse Jesus, the crowds and the chief priests insisted on his persecution. Stating, “He stirs up the people by teaching all over.”

You may wonder what Daniel and Jesus have in common that the narrative lectionary puts them together for the first of Advent.

Both Daniel and Jesus were faithful to God. They actively lived out their faith and did not hide this from the world and those in power at the time.

Both Jesus and Daniel did not stop their actions of faith even when threatened with persecution and death. They did not deny their actions and remained firm – rather dying than giving up on what they believed to be the right thing to do.

Would this have been a conscious choice to purposefully break the law to follow their conscience? Yes. In both cases their actions were deliberate and defied social ethics.

In short, Daniel and Jesus’ defying the authority of the day was a 'teleological suspension of the ethical,' where the usual ethical rules are temporarily overridden by a higher, divinely ordained purpose.

In other words, it means they were temporarily setting aside ethical norms (like following the laws of the government in the case of Daniel) in order to pursue a higher – divine command or personal faith.

In yet even more other words, if a specific law causes you to sin, don’t follow that law because your allegiance lies with God and God’s law is greater than the laws of the world.

Confusing? Yes. It has taken me almost 30 years to figure it out. And here, I thought that I would never ever return to my religion and modern thought religion and philosophy course that I took in college with Harry Huebner.

What was it that motivated both Daniel and Jesus? What held their purpose? What kept them going when they knew the consequences of their behavior?

It is, quite simply, love. But seriously, not the kind of love that we call school crushes, but a ferocious love –the kind of love that is described in Song of Solomon 8:6-7

⁶ Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.
7 Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love
all the wealth of one's house,
it would be utterly scorned.

The kind of love that we sing of when we sing, "Above the tumult and the strife, I hear its music ringing it sounds an echo in my soul, how can I keep from singing."

And that is it. This first Sunday of Advent we are invited to stop and listen for that clear voice amid the chaos of this world and follow where it leads. Hopefully not literally to the den of lions...but maybe it metaphorically will.

Where will you go? Where will the journey take us this Advent? Where will you be invited to lean into the chaos to catch a whiff of the Spirit? What will God call out of us?

In the season of Lent, we are invited to give up practices that have been hurting our relationships with God or with ourselves or others. The focus is on letting go.

In Advent, however, we are invited to take up a new practice or to grow a spiritual discipline that we are already practicing. What practice is God calling you to pick up so as to foster and nurture and strengthen your faith?

Spiritual disciplines, like practicing prayer, journaling, art, works of compassion, practicing deliberate kindness, all these direct our attention to help us to listen and comprehend. They focus our attention to hear, see, smell, taste, touch, know and anticipate God's love song in our world.

When we hear God's love song will we follow? Will you sing along? I invite you to travel with us this season as we walk through the darkness toward the unseen dawn.