

DECOLONIZING DANIEL

Daniel 6: 19-23, 25-28 (chapter 6 provides background)

I came to Canada as an immigrant from Greece at a time in Greece when to declare your faith openly as a Protestant was to risk being mocked and sometimes worse. Protestants were tolerated, but not always in a friendly way... And my grandmother was a refugee who survived a genocidal campaign of Armenians in Turkey, because Armenians were othered as foreigners racially, and also as Christians within an anti-Christian regime. She made it to Greece where eventually I was born, but as Protestants in an ethnically Greek-Orthodox nation, identifying oneself as Greek and non-Orthodox was to be thought of as racially flawed.

Coming to Canada, though, we found Protestantism alive and well and so we fit happily into a broadly evangelical culture where we were welcomed generously. I grew up learning the bible stories and a favourite of mine and no doubt that of many children in church school was the story of Daniel. But how was the story of Daniel taught? A favourite children's hymn was: "Dare to be a Daniel." Let me quote some of the words:

Standing by a purpose true,
Heeding God's command,
Honour them, the faithful few!
All hail to Daniel's band!

Chorus refrain: Dare to be a Daniel,
Dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm!
Dare to make it known.

Hold the Gospel banner high!
On to vict'ry grand!
Satan and his hosts defy,
And shout for Daniel's band.

This song taught us about Daniel's courage, confessing his faith even at great risk to his life, and being courageous in proclaiming it. The hymn and the teaching was also a missionary's manifesto. Missionaries went into foreign lands, just like Daniel in Babylon, proclaiming the faith and saving souls from damnation. Whether it was indigenous people on Canadian soil or people of other faiths in other parts of the world, missionaries went as a vulnerable few into foreign and sometimes hostile places as courageous heroes of the gospel. That's what we were taught.

But was all this also imperialist propaganda? Making other peoples into Christians was also about making them into British North Americans and making them lose everything that made them not fit in and assimilate, which included their cultural traditions, spirituality, and religion too. Christian missionaries worked alongside governments and corporations too, invading other peoples for land and resources. Individual missionaries may have been idealistic, naïve, and maybe ignorant, but too often they served a colonizing agenda. Not in all places but in many places like among indigenous peoples in Canada. Just because they were Protestants it didn't make them any different than what my family experienced from those in other parts of the world who wanted to assimilate us into them.

OK, so what about Daniel then? Is Daniel like the rest of the scriptures all about converting the heathen masses and doing so courageously in the face of resistance to conversion? Or is Daniel and the scriptures a very different story than what I and many of you, perhaps, were taught?

Well, some years ago now, I was privileged to read another interpretation of Daniel, one provided by African American Womanist scholars of the Hebrew Bible. What a different reading! So then, what's the story of Daniel really about? Well, the story of Daniel is about a young Hebrew man who not only survives colonization but thrives. And he thrives because he stays true to his traditional spirituality which roots him. And more than this. The colonizing power who tries to erase his cultural identity is eventually destroyed. Daniel outlasts four emperor kings and he even prophesies a final judgement when all colonizing empires will have to answer before God when God's messiah ruler will arise to establish a kingdom of true justice and peace in the world.

OK, this is quite a grand summary. Let's break it down. What are the best known stories in the book of Daniel? Well, there's Daniel in the lion's den and there are Daniel's three friends: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who are condemned to be burned alive in a fiery furnace. In both stories the men not only survive but are vindicated and their God whom they hold onto is acknowledged as the true God. But this is not about a white European Christian God against the pagan and ungodly hordes. No. A better parallel would be indigenous children who survive residential schools, the foster care system, and many other ways their indigeneity was being forced out of them. They have found a way to hold on and grow in their traditional spirituality toward their healing and some are alive now to see the whole colonial system collapsing under condemnation. To support the reparation and recovery of indigenous people and to recognize the evil of the colonial system we have been a part of, is to serve Daniel's God.

OK, but let's take an even deeper dive into the book of Daniel and the story it tells for it is super-fascinating!

The book is divided into two parts. The first part begins when Daniel and his young friends are only boys, taken from their families and raised in the royal court in far-away Babylon. Their task

is to forget everything of where they come from. They are given new Babylonian names, are made to learn a new language, dress in a new way, and learn new customs which includes what they eat also. But even as little boys they find creative ways to hold onto their culture, their language, their spirituality, and their faith. And throughout every attempt to punish them when they are found out, they survive and are vindicated. Their God saves them. And because they keep rising up, they gain further respect and admiration from their colonial rulers. Those who try to sabotage them are the ones who end up punished.

Finally, through every episode of their rising up after being threatened, Daniel and his friends are approached by the king for advice. And what is the advice these great emperor kings are given? “Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you,” Daniel says: “atone for your sins with justice, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged.” (4:27) What audacity Daniel! Telling the king he is committing injustice by enslaving peoples and that his success and peace as a king will be tied to him liberating peoples rather than enslaving them!

But do the kings heed such counsel? Will they offer mercy and freedom to those they have oppressed, conquered, and colonized? Daniel survives the rise and fall of 4 kings over 60 years. He is taken to Babylon as a young boy. And as an old man of 70+ years he will witness the return of his people back to their homeland to rebuild it, allowed by the Persian emperor Cyrus. The years are: 597-538 BC. Kings rise and fall but Daniel and his God will be the victors. Wow! What a story!

But there’s more. The second part of Daniel contains a series of dreams Daniel has throughout the 60 years of his captivity. These dreams reveal in a bigger way the rule of God and the justice of God above the rise and fall of earthly kingdoms. There will be a last judgement and the resurrection of the dead. The colonized, exploited, oppressed, displaced, and murdered will be vindicated and comforted eternally while the colonizing oppressors and exploiters will be judged and condemned. Let me read from the opening of chapter 7:

“As I (Daniel) watched, thrones were set in place,
and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames,
and its wheels were burning fire.

A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence.

A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him.

The court sat in judgement, and the books were opened.

I watched as the beasts (empires)...

were destroyed and given over to be burned with fire.

As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away...

As I watched in the night visions,

I saw one like a human being (or a son of humanity) coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One and was presented to him.
To him was given dominion and glory and rule,
That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him (freely and joyfully in peace and not
under compulsion).
His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away,
And his kingdom is one that shall never be destroyed.”
(Daniel 7: 9-14)

The beasts force people to submit and serve them and they erase diversity of peoples, cultures nations and languages. The human being or son of humanity serving the Ancient One, on the other hand, receives worship and service as one who welcomes and cherishes the diversity that is part of the creation of God. There is no conquest, exploitation, displacement, or oppression here, just acceptance and justice.

Wow! And you know what? Each and every one of our gospel accounts has Jesus quoting this part of Daniel and applying it to himself. Jesus sees himself as this son of humanity, and the obvious understanding is that the Ancient One is his Abba God. And these visions of Daniel were so powerfully influential to early Christians who also suffered oppression, exploitation, and death under ruling empires like Rome, so that the last book of the bible – Revelation, draws from Daniel’s visions word for word to prophecy the ultimate destruction of world kingdoms making way for the rule of God and God’s messiah – the prince of peace. Isn’t this all fascinating?!

OK, so what does all this ancient storytelling have to tell us here and now thousands of years later living in a very different time?

The God we Christians are supposed to worship is a God who takes sides. God is on the side of the oppressed, the exploited, the wounded, harassed, enslaved, and destroyed. God takes sides and opposes fiercely all colonizing, dominating and exploitative human oppression of people and the earth. If we are part of systems of inequality and domination as we are as North Americans, how must we as Christians act, speak out or quietly offer compassion, care and justice to our neighbours who are harassed, exploited, impoverished, or mistreated because of their diversity of colour, culture, faith, sexuality, gender expression and so forth? The message of Daniel and our scriptures are clear. Wherever in the world or in our own backyards people are being neglected, mistreated, exploited, and destroyed, we must stand up and speak out in the name of Daniel and his God.

At the same time, Daniel was not a hater. Daniel was not bent on revenge. Daniel’s zeal was to win by being superior in his faithfulness to God and grace even to those who wanted to see him fail and fall. That’s how he survives a lifetime in captivity and even rises to high position. It’s

the same with Joseph in Egypt and Moses in Pharaoh's court until he must confront Pharaoh to "let my people go!".

How do we fight injustice as followers of Daniel and Jesus? How do we find creative ways to respond to the bitterness, cynicism, negativity, mistrust, selfishness, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia and so much more, with a higher grace?... This is so much a journey for any of us, and especially those of us who have suffered the oppression... We may fail and fall into the bitterness and the hate at times, and the anger and rage that wants to strike hard, or the despair that feels helpless and hopeless... But this is why we need to drink again and again from the waters of divine love and eat the food of divine hope in the ultimate rule of the Ancient One through the Son of humanity who carries a vision of a kingdom of justice and love... "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" we pray every Sunday. Do we reflect on what those words mean as we pray them and how they call us to live them out?

May Daniel and other biblical stories, read rightly, help us re-imagine our world and re-imagine ourselves and our place in such a world. Whether we have experienced oppression in some form from wherever we have come from in the world... Whether we appreciate fully how the systems we are a part of benefit some people while neglecting and mistreating others, intended or not... Whether we understand our privilege as a gift to be shared rather than a right to be protected at all costs... May the God of Daniel, The Abba God of Jesus, the God in Jesus as Holy Spirit flowing through, may this God penetrate our hearts anew and transform them from the inside out in these times we are living.
Amen.