

August 18, 2024

Sermon Title: Walking in the Way of Insight

Scripture: Proverbs 9:1-6

Theme: Using Daniel's Gift of Insight to explore new options of service.

I have a somewhat outlandish claim to make this morning. Of course, I guess you can say that Christians, in general, are somewhat outlandish in their proposals, thinking, as they often do, on the edge of possibility and feasibility, but otherwise outside the proverbial 'grid.' Easter is such a brave and public declaration, that we have the audacity to say out-loud that 'Christ is risen, and risen indeed.' But, my outlandish claim this morning is small in comparison, yet intentionally designed to make you think beyond normal parameters. My claim primarily concerns the Book of Daniel and secondarily, the Book of Proverbs. Normally speaking, we might find it difficult, if not impossible, to connect the Book of Daniel with the theological conception of atonement. Yet, this is my outlandish claim this morning, that the story of Daniel in the First Testament, contains hidden references to atonement. I say, 'hidden' because, beyond the reference in Daniel 9:24, one does not find any direct references to atonement.

"Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place." (9:24).

The context of this reference to atonement is Gabriel's Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks., literally, seventy (sevens), which we translate as 70 weeks. And, it is intriguing that our scripture from Proverbs starts out with the words: "Wisdom has built her house on seven pillars. (v1)." Dr. Don Colbert has a book called *The Seven Pillars of Health*, based on the organic care of the heart expressed in Proverbs 4:23, "keep your heart with all diligence, for out of the heart flows the springs of life." This is what is called the Heart Math: that the heart, with its magnetic field 5,000 times stronger than the brain, when the heart is grateful, is able to hijack the thoughts of the brain away from fear, worry, anger, bitterness, depression, into joy, peace, gratitude, and love. And, with regard to wisdom, you may remember how 70x7 is the number of times Jesus says we should forgive. This 70x7 is also mentioned in Genesis 4:24 in connection with Lamech, a father to Noah and one who heads up the seventh generation from Adam and Eve. According to, now retired, Professor Rick Lowery, Lamech represents a reversal in the history of violence and revenge, a reversal of the curse of Cain, a starting-over in the story of humankind. Seven-fold becomes seventy-seven fold, or 70x7, not for the extension for threat and revenge, but for the extension of proactive love and forgiveness. In the mind of Jesus, forgiveness must extend to the full limit of the curse, as far as the curse is found (in the words of the old hymn), and then infinitely beyond. "Love even your enemy!" is the outlandish claim of Jesus. When we walk the way of insight, we love beyond just those who love us, or just those who have returned our love in the past.

This claim is not unlike that of Daniel: "the peace of the empire shall destroy many (Dan 8:25)," this peace that destroys many is the peace of uneasiness and worry, fear and resentment," a peace for those never fully satisfied with the quietness of the land. Such a peace is perilous, just waiting for the next opportunity to disturb us and incite our anger. But the Shalom of Jesus, the

way of insight, takes us beyond the quietness of the land, or the calm before the storm, or even the calm in the midst of the storm. The outlandish claim of Jesus is that his Peace is a Peace for all seasons! The purpose of at-one-ment is to break down the dividing walls of hostility, the two, both those far away and those nearby, the many becoming one, putting to death hostility itself.

No, my outlandish claim is much smaller. My claim, does NOT apply to substitutionary atonement, as we know it from classical theology. It does not relate to the story of Azazel in Leviticus, the earliest rituals for the Day of Atonement. It does not relate to the Ransom theory or the Satisfaction theory, or even to the famous “fishhook theory” of the early Church fathers. Perhaps it relates tangentially to the Moral Influence theory of the Atonement, but not directly, in that Jesus is a change agent that brings us closer to true empathy and understanding, true insight.

No, my claim connects to a different type of atonement or at-one-ment, such as we find in Ephesians 4:8, that Jesus takes captivity captive, leading a long train of captives into freedom as he ascends into heaven. So, this is my claim, that the revealing activities of Daniel’s interpretation of dreams is a form of making atonement. So, let me present my proposal this morning with words from the story of Daniel:

Nebuchadnezzar asks Daniel the question of the hour:

“Are you able to make known to me the dream which I have seen, and the interpretation thereof?”

In my proposal, another way of translating this question is as follows:

“Are you able to make “One” (entity) of my dream, the various parts integrated into a single idea with a clear meaning?” (Or, are you able to make an atonement of my dream?)” Daniel 2:26, 47.

In making this proposal, I now need to step back and provide more detail from the story of Daniel, and in that story, make my case for walking in the way of insight, the way of the prophet Daniel. The prophet Daniel declares that “those who have **insight**, those who lead the many to righteousness, will shine brightly like the ‘starry’ expansion of the heavens, forever and ever (Dan. 12:3). It is not unlike God’s promise to Abraham, “Your descendants will be as countless as the stars in the sky,” a promise, by the way, that God also gives equally to Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 16:10, 21:13, 26:4).

The story of Daniel is connected to the story of the magi seeking the wisdom displayed in the stars, a divine Wisdom that knows what is in the darkness and “reveals the secrets inside the dream. (Dan 2:22, 47).” We sometimes translate “magi” as wise men, or wise women, sometimes as kings or priests, referring to those the ancient historian Herodotus calls a religious order in the land of the Medes (pre-Persia). They are advisors, dream interpreters, soothsayers; their role, sometimes under the threat of death, is to “interpret the mystery inside the dream.” Their role is not unlike those of a king or ruler, of which the author of the Book of Daniel writes: God “removes kings and sets up kings ... the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.” (Dan. 2:21; 4:17) Proverbs states: “By me, kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me rulers, rule, and nobles, all who govern

rightly.” Prov 8:15-16. So, be very careful, those who dare to enter this space, tread lightly, on what you interpret and how you interpret it.

And, this story of Daniel is further connected to the Joseph tradition. You may remember at the end of the Joseph story, Joseph makes an atonement in weeping with his brothers, honoring his father’s wishes to “forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.” Joseph names his first son with a word that means to “forget,” indicating that he has perhaps forgotten more that he has forgiven, time healing all wounds, but knowing that, in weeping with his brothers, he proclaims a truth that trust is difficult and must be earned each day.

One of the most ancient descriptions of God is as the “seeing God,” the one who sees through us and knows every part of us. [אל ראי (*El ro'i*) “God of seeing” (Gen. 16:13).] Dr. Fred Craddock, the great Disciple preacher, once stated that we do NOT “interpret” the Word of God as much as the Word of God interprets us. Stated differently, the Bible sheds light on our obscurity and reveals us in the light of self-understanding. The Word of God is revelatory and not just revelation. So, be careful! The verse you read, the story you tell, from the Bible may change your life forever!

The setting for the story of Daniel is “Shinar,” literally meaning a “country of two rivers.” Those two rivers being the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers as they make their way from the northern Taurus Mountains of Eastern Turkey, directly south of the Black Sea and directly west of the Caspian Sea, flowing toward the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. It is a land often referred to as the cradle of civilization where great literature began in cuneiform, producing works such as the Epic of Gilgamesh 2150 BCE and the Enuma Elish 1120 BCE. Some of us perhaps **read** these epic poems in High School; the Iliad and the Odyssey, are the some of the oldest literature we have, written around the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Shinar is also referred to as the Fertile Crescent, a land where almost anything can be grown, where the combination of the various rivers has blessed the region with excellent and constant crops. Oklahoma has such a region it calls the “three rivers” area of the state, where the Arkansas, the Verdigris, and the Neosho Rivers meet, which is also a very blessed area we call “Green Country.” The Fertile Crescent and Cradle of Civilization—Genesis refers to this area as “Eden,” out of which flow four rivers, the Pishon, the Gihon, the Tigris and Euphrates. In Genesis 11:2, Shinar is the plain that became the site of the Tower of Babel after the Great Flood and is later known as Chaldea or Babylon. The time period of the Daniel story is somewhere between the time of Habakkuk and the time of Ezekiel, between the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and that of King Cyrus of Persia. Habakkuk writes of this time:

“Look, a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told, I am rousing the Chaldeans that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own. Dread and fearsome are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more menacing than wolves at dusk, ... Their horsemen come from far away; they fly like an eagle swift to devour, they all come for violence. With faces pressing forward they gather captives like sand, they laugh at every fortress and sweep like the wind ... their own might is their god.” (Habakkuk 1:5-11)

Daniel and his friends are part of a group of people, prized possessions, taken from the land of Judah, along with expensive vessels (furniture, jewels, etc.) taken from the Temple in Jerusalem, prized souvenirs of the exploits of Nebuchanezzar's army. Daniel, and three of his friends that we know by their "captive" names, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, but whose Hebrew names are Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, are prized possessions, taken from royalty and nobility in Judah, "young men without physical defect, handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight," the brightest of their young scholars, the best of their athletes, and now they are to reside in a foreign land, as slaves to a conquering emperor. Their lives will be dedicated, no longer to Yahweh, Jerusalem and Judah, but now to the culture, literature, wisdom and language of the Chaldeans, and, theoretically, to other gods.

How embarrassing it must have been to un-learn everything they received growing up in Judah, all their customs and theology and science, and literature, the holy scriptures, and re-learn all these things from their captors, relearning theology and history from a different perspective, with your captors systematically destroying all of what remains of who you were and giving you a new identity in a foreign land, no longer serving your country, but now serving your enemy. The basic facts that they learned as children will be replaced with new facts from Shinar and Babylon, some directly opposed to the facts they thought they knew were true. Yes, in many ways that we can barely understand, Daniel and his friends are encountering a post-truth society in which half-truths have become truth and falsehood is the new truth. Yes, Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, are at a disadvantage from the very beginning, thinking in one way and speaking in another. Still, with all these pressures to assimilate, Daniel has not forgotten who he is, and to whom he belongs!

Truly, I must believe what Hebrews 10:39 states about such people:

"We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls."

Daniel and his friends are transplanted agents of hope and compassion in God's service. They appeal to a different way of eating and caring for their bodies to give them more strength and a greater capacity to learn and to think, to compete well in the knowledge struggle of competing ideologies. The Bible says that they are so successful in caring for their bodies and minds that they are able to do 10 times what the others are able to do, 10 times better than all the magicians and enchanters in the whole empire.

As Daniel describes his own ability to interpret dreams, it is "faith seeking guidance," the Hebrew word is "Teshubah." It is not wisdom and intelligence Daniel has acquired that makes his ability great, but it is his faith in God, in Yahweh. It is not the extent and content of knowledge that makes one great. When Daniel's faith allows God to use him for a divine purpose, that is the purity of greatness. And so, Daniel and his friends are excellent Chaldean students winning many graduate awards and accolades, but the source of their power is not their acquired knowledge, but God's ability to use their full, unassimilated, knowledge to accomplish love and compassion in a foreign land.

So, in the great contest with the local Chaldean wise-men, Daniel takes a back seat to those pretending to have wisdom, based on examining the liver and entrails of animals they have cut open to reveal the truths of life and to foretell future events. Others examine a combination of numbers, amulets, and charms, rolling the dice to find the truth of the day that will make the emperor Nebuchadnezzar happy for a moment or two. But, Daniel desires more than just a temporary pleasure, but something much more profound. Daniel is not a double agent, giving different versions of the truth in differing situations. Daniel wants to reveal the heart of the inner core of truth itself. The Medes and the Persians have their chance. When Daniel gets his chance, he is prepared to go beyond what the others can do. He is ready not only to tell of the emperor's dream and the details of that dream, but also to show the emperor the meaning of each detail, revealing the mystery behind the dream.

Perhaps the emperor wants to eliminate those who have no clue about the dream or its meaning. And so, Daniel says: "Oh, king, your thoughts came into my mind while I laid upon my bed." My God has unlocked and opened up your dream to me, to lay out the future of your kingdom." But, note that Daniel does NOT desire the death of the other wise-men who compete with him. Daniel tells Arioch, the chief executioner of Nebuchadnezzar NOT to carry out the killing of the failed wise-men, but instead to give them more time and allow their fate to be with his fate, their salvation with his salvation, at correctly interpreting the meaning and the dream. **Daniel smartly places himself in the breach to take the success or failure for everyone.** This is the very meaning of atonement in the Christian sense as well, that our atoning savior places himself in the breach on our behalf.

The at-one-ment of dreams in the story of Daniel is not unrelated to the recovery of identity for the people who have been brought to Shinar as slaves. It is also an atonement of liberation for everyone: "Let it be known, O king (Nebuchadnezzar), that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up (Dan. 3:18)." So, the response comes from all three, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, newly appointed by the king to manage the affairs of Babylon province under Daniel at his request. Daniel had won the heart of the king through his interpretation of the king's dreams, with an acknowledgment that Daniel's God was the God of all gods and Lord of all kings, the greatest revealer of all mysteries. So, I have laid out my proposal; you are free to disagree, or respond, or disengage. I am hoping this deconstruction and reconstruction of the story of Daniel will help give us a new theory of serving Christ as those who stand in the breach when the going gets rough to heal the nation and the world!

Daniel leaves us with this blessing:

"Blessed be the name of God from age to age, for wisdom and power are [God's]. God changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings, gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. God reveals deep and hidden things, [and] knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with [our God]."

And Jesus cites Daniel, as recorded in Matthew 13:43: "The wise, the righteous, will shine like the brightness of the day (**shine like the sun**); and those who lead many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever." (Dan 12:3)

