

I

A few years ago, on a Spring Break road trip, my wife Amy and I took our three young boys on a detour to Carlsbad Caverns National Park in New Mexico.

Because it was Spring Break, the cave was crowded, and once we made it to the bottom, the novelty had already worn off for our boys, and we were all tired from hiking down the 1.25 mile trail down into the cave. There was no way that we had the energy to hike back up, so we made our way over to the elevator. There was a relatively short line waiting for the 30-second elevator ride back to the surface. Or, at least, I thought it was short, until a park ranger pointed her finger, and I looked through the dim light at a line of tired parents and kids that stretched into the empty darkness beyond.

The ranger explained that two of the four elevators were out of service, and that the wait for a 30-second elevator would be approximately 90 minutes.

And so we waited. In the cave. In the dark. For an hour and a half. With three tired and hungry kids under the age of six. With hundreds of other people. We waited, not because we wanted to. Not really through any fault of our own. But there we were, nevertheless, down there in that cave. Just waiting in the dark.

II

We've all had similar experiences, I'm sure. We've all found ourselves stuck, detoured, delayed. It wasn't our plan to get stuck, and it wasn't really our fault, but it happens to everyone sooner or later, and there we are. Just waiting.

If we've learned anything in this year of 2020, it's that our plans are tentative and subject to change. In a sense, we're all waiting at this very moment. We're waiting on the virus numbers to stop spiking. Waiting on the vaccine to be distributed. Waiting for all of the recounts and lawsuits about the election to work their way through the courts.

None of this was in our plans when the year began. None of it could reasonably be construed to be our fault. But nevertheless, here we are. With hundreds of other tired and hungry and anxious folks. Just waiting, as the days get shorter and the nights get longer. Just waiting as the trees drop the last of their leaves and the cold north wind begins to blow. Just waiting as the 24-hour holiday music station proclaims that it's once again the most wonderful time of the year, yet here we sit. Waiting.

And that brings us to our story today, a story about one of our ancestors in faith, who, though it was not his fault, nevertheless found himself quite literally in the bottom of a dark pit. Waiting.

III

When we pick up our story this morning, it's a little less than 600 years before the birth of Jesus. We'll get to Bethlehem and the inn and the manger very soon, but we're not quite there yet.

When our story opens today, it's a very dark time in the history of the people of God. The Northern Kingdom of Israel has long since been devoured by the Assyrians, and between where we left off last week in the book of Jeremiah and where we pick up today in the book of Daniel, the Babylonian Empire has utterly devastated the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The Babylonians have laid siege to the city of Jerusalem, breached the walls, and they have ripped the Temple, the very symbol of the religious and political identity of the people of God, into a pile of rubble. And once the Babylonians have devastated Jerusalem, they have deported scores of God's people back to Babylon to live as slaves in exile.

This time of year, when we sing O Come O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, this cataclysmic event in our family history is what we're calling to mind.

One of the exiles taken from Jerusalem into Babylonian captivity is a man by the name of Daniel. Daniel has a gift for interpreting dreams and visions, and when the Babylonian kings learn of his skill, they invite him to their court to interpret their dreams. Daniel quickly became the favorite of King

Darius's advisors, but his colleagues became jealous and devised a plan to be rid of him. We pick up the story at this point in Daniel, chapter 6.

So the presidents and satraps conspired and came to the king and said to him, "O King Darius, live forever! All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions. Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked." Therefore King Darius signed the document and interdict.

Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God. Then they approached the king and said concerning the interdict, "O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions?" The king answered, "The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked."

Then they responded to the king, “Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the interdict you have signed, but he is saying his prayers three times a day.”

When the king heard the charge, he was very much distressed. He was determined to save Daniel, and until the sun went down he made every effort to rescue him. Then the conspirators came to the king and said to him, “Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no interdict or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed.”

Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, “May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!” A stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, so that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no food was brought to him, and slept from him.

Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, “O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?” Daniel then said to the king, “O king, live forever! 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.” Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. The king gave a command, and those who had accused Daniel were brought and thrown into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. Before they reached the bottom of the den the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces.

Then King Darius wrote to all peoples and nations of every language throughout the whole world: “May you have abundant prosperity! I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people 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.”

Daniel in the den of lions. It’s a Sunday School favorite. The text lifts up Daniel like a folk hero. He’s blameless. He’s brave. Daniel is the faithful, fearless Israelite, while King Darius is the one who is so upset he cannot eat or

sleep and who runs around hither and yon.

But I wonder what was really going through Daniel's mind when he found himself in the bottom of a dark pit? Sealed up with the king's own ring. And it wasn't the sound of the dripping water from the stalactites that filled the pit – it was the breathing of lions. And there he sat. Waiting in the dark.

IV

My friend, I don't know what you're going through in this holiday season. Maybe there's an empty chair at your holiday table this year, and you finding yourself waiting in a pit called grief.

Maybe all of the economic upheaval of this year has brought financial burdens, and you're discovering that there seems to be more month than money, and you're finding yourself in a pit called fear.

Maybe all of the noise about the election and the erosion of trust in our public institutions and the erosion of trust in your neighbors has left you disillusioned, and you're finding yourself in pit called despair.

Maybe for you, this year especially, despite all the lights and the tinsel and the ho-ho-hos, you just don't find this to be the most wonderful time of the year, and you just find yourself in the pits.

Here's the gospel news, my friend. Daniel wasn't alone down there

in the dark with the lions. And neither are you.

Because God does some of his best work in the dark.

Almost every week, in our worship service, we say The Apostles' Creed, and there's a phrase in it that sometimes people wonder about. We say, Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell.

As you might imagine theologians and biblical scholars and church historians have spilled vats of ink writing about and debating that phrase. But here's what it means for me, and here's why I think it's good news for both of us.

There is no pit that Jesus hasn't been in himself. There's no pit so foreboding, no lion so fierce, no darkness so deep, that Jesus cannot reach.

We can have a conversation some other day about whether or not hell is a literal hot place at the center of the earth. But I've been a pastor long enough that I've seen that for some folks, they'd gladly trade eternal pitchforks and torches for the hell they're living through in their daily lives in the here and now.

But the good news of the gospel, the gospel news in this story in the Book of Daniel, is that no pit is too deep, no king is too powerful, no politicians are too conniving, to keep out the power of God.

God does some of the best work in the dark.

Right now, at this very moment, the flowers that will form a riot of colors along the front of my house late next spring are in total darkness under the soil.

In a few weeks, we'll read a story about a young woman, a girl, really, who will be visited by an angel who will announce to her that she will conceive and bear a son who will quite literally change all of human history. But that story doesn't begin with his birth in Bethlehem. It begins in the complete and total darkness of her womb.

The powers and principalities of this fallen world will decide that they've had quite enough of this Jesus and all the ways in which he keeps challenging their power and the social order, and so they'll have him tried and convicted for blasphemy and sedition and then they'll have him put to death by the state. They'll put him in a tomb, seal it with a stone, and post guards to seal it up tight.

But there in the darkness, there in the silent pit of the grave, God will do his best work.

God does some of his best work in the dark, my friend. I don't know what sort of pit you find yourself in this morning. But I bet you didn't mean to be there. I bet it wasn't your fault that you're in there. But there you are. Just waiting in the dark.

It's not a fun place to be. But you have a job to do while you wait. Your

job is to pray. Pray when you feel like it. And pray when you don't feel like it. Pray when you have the words. And if you can't find any words, grab a bible and pray your way through the psalms. Or just sit and focus and meditate on God, for as the Apostle Paul reminds us, sometimes we don't know how to pray, but if our heart is in the right place, the Holy Spirit will intercede with us, even with sighs too deep for words.

And never forget, my friend. Because God does some of his best work in the dark. Daniel was not alone in the pit, and neither are you.

V

And don't forget that God has knit us together into this thing we call the church.

You may have noticed that when we say the Apostles' Creed together, it's written in the first person singular. We say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty." And that's good, because faith is a deeply personal thing.

But it's also something that we do together. And I'm so glad that even though the Apostles' Creed is written in the first person singular, nevertheless, we say it together. Because I like to think that I have a pretty strong faith. But there are some Sundays, even some months, heck, even some seasons, when for whatever reason, I might just not be feeling as strong or as faithful as I usually do. And I need you. I need y'all to carry me, to be the church, to remind me what we believe and why it matters.

And I bet that there are some weeks that maybe you've been down in a pit fighting off the lions, and you're just plum worn out, and you're wondering if God even exists, much less has been down there with you. And I'm hoping that when it's been like that for you, we can carry you, we can be the church, that we can remind you what we believe and why it matters.

For the God whom we worship and serve does his best work in the dark. He is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.