

Strong and Courageous

Daniel 10:2-6, 11-14, 18-21

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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²At that time I, Daniel, had been mourning for three weeks. ³I had eaten no rich food, no meat or wine had entered my mouth, and I had not anointed myself at all, for the full three weeks. ⁴On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river (that is, the Tigris), ⁵I looked up and saw a man clothed in linen, with a belt of gold from Uphaz around his waist. ⁶His body was like beryl, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude.

¹¹He said to me, 'Daniel, greatly beloved, pay attention to the words that I am going to speak to you. Stand on your feet, for I have now been sent to you.' So while he was speaking this word to me, I stood up trembling.¹² He said to me, 'Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words.¹³ But the prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me for twenty-one days. So Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, and I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia, ¹⁴and have come to help you understand what is to happen to your people at the end of days. For there is a further vision for those days.'

¹⁸Again one in human form touched me and strengthened me. ¹⁹He said, 'Do not fear, greatly beloved, you are safe. Be strong and courageous!' When he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, 'Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me.'²⁰Then he said, 'Do you know why I have come to you? Now I must return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I am through with him, the prince of Greece will come.²¹ But I am to tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth. There is no one with me who contends against these princes except Michael, your prince.' (NRSV)

I

We Mennonites should spend more time learning from the book of Daniel. More than most books of the Bible, Daniel gives us ideas for living and working in an empire. How can we be faithful to God while living in an empire that does not share our vision or our values? That is the overarching question in this book. For Daniel, the context is first the Babylonian empire and then the Persian empire. For us, the context is what some people call the American empire. We live in the strongest, wealthiest country of the world; and even though the American form of government is a democracy rather than a monarchy, this country has sometimes thrown its weight around in world much like empires did in the past. One afternoon while walking down a street in Comayagua, Honduras, I was accosted by a slightly drunk Honduran man who demanded to know if I was American. When I admitted I was, he launched into long tirade against America, complaining about all the evil things the U.S. had done to his country. Even though he

was slightly drunk, he made a lot of sense. He was merely reciting the kinds of complaints that oppressed peoples have had about empires ever since empires began.

Unlike the Honduran man on that street, most of us in this room benefit from living in the American empire. Like Daniel, we have access to the empire's world-wide economic reach. In our case, our toys and t-shirts come from China, our grapes from Chile, our flowers from Colombia, and our farm-raised fish from Thailand. Like Daniel, we sometimes also work in positions of power and influence. In terms of our access to economic resources, educational resources, and vocational resources, we have much in common with Daniel the man. In a sense Daniel symbolizes us.

Another thing we have in common with Daniel the man is that many of us are deeply critical about major aspects of empire. We do not agree with the way empires use military power and violence, because Jesus teaches us the way of peace. We are uneasy with how empires extract natural resources from other parts of the world and use them selfishly, because we believe in justice for the oppressed. We get viscerally uncomfortable with the nationalistic ideologies and idolatries of empire, because we know our true citizenship lies in heaven.

And so we live in an empire but find ourselves resisting major aspects of that empire. This is precisely the value of Daniel. Daniel the man illustrates how we can courageously resist the evils of empire without resorting to violence. Indeed, the overarching theme of this book is about nonviolent resistance against empires. We can't take the time to explore in all the forms of resistance in Daniel, but let me enumerate a handful of them. In chapter 1, Daniel resists by the kind of food he will and will not eat. In chapter 3, Daniel's friends resist by refusing to bow down and worship the king. In chapter 6, Daniel resists by refusing to put his ultimate trust in the king. Now in chapter 10 we find Daniel engaging in intercessory prayer, which is yet another form of nonviolent resistance against the empire.¹

¹ A treatment of Daniel's multiple resistances against empire is found in Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, "The Book of Daniel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VII, ed. Leander E. Keck, et al (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

II

The book of Daniel knows that intercessory prayer is a major tool in the hands of God's people for resisting empires and waging war against evil. To understand how, let's follow the story.

Daniel embarks on a three-week campaign of intercessory prayer for his fellow Jews. Chapter 9 suggests what Daniel prayed (cf. 9:4-19).

Incline your ear, O my God, and hear.
Open your eyes and look at our desolation
and the city [of Jerusalem] that bears your name.
We do not present our supplication before you
on the ground of our righteousness,
but on the ground of your great mercies.
Lord, hear;
O Lord, forgive;
O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! (vv. 18-19a)

Like other biblical people, Daniel prays boldly and bluntly. And yet even though he implores God not to delay in answering his prayer, it seems as though God is delaying—because for three weeks, nothing happens as far as Daniel can tell.

We've all experienced this, haven't we? We pray for peace in the Middle East, but the fighting continues. We pray for an end to racism, but systemic white privilege persists. We pray that the church will be one, but instead we keep fracturing ourselves into new denominations and associations. We pray but it looks like nothing happens. We get discouraged. Maybe we quit praying altogether.

Then suddenly after twenty-one days of prayer, an angel visits Daniel. Based on information in chapter 9, it may be the angel Gabriel. In any case the angel has an interesting message. *Daniel*, he says, *from the very first day that you started praying, God heard your words. And from that very first day, I was sent to respond to your prayer. But I couldn't get here until now. Why? Because the angel of Persia opposed me for those twenty-one days. The only reason I finally slipped through is that Michael, the angel of Israel, came*

and took my place in the wrestling match against the angel of Persia. That allowed me to break free and come here to talk with you. As soon as we're done here, I need to get back and fight the angel of Persia some more. After that I have to fight the angel of Greece. Michael and I are doing our best to fight off these other angels, but sometimes we get delayed since the battle is so great.

III

In the worldview of the book of Daniel, each nation on earth has its own angel. Persia has one, Greece has one, and so on. The protecting angel who fights for Israel is Michael, and Gabriel is apparently more of a messenger angel who occasionally has to fight off the angels of other nations in order to deliver messages.

Let us not get tangled up in idle speculations about what angels look like, where they live, what they do, and all that stuff. The Bible doesn't spend much time discussing angels and neither should we. Nor do we have to believe in the literal existence of angels in order to understand how intercessory prayer works. Angels are an easy way for the Bible to talk about spiritual realities using concrete language. When an angel appears in a biblical story, we can simply identify it as a concrete way to talk about spiritual realities that we can't normally see. In a sense, angels are metaphors for the spiritual world.²

The main point of Daniel 10 is that from the very first moment we start praying, God hears our prayer and things in the spiritual world begin to change. Most of the time we do not see those changes because they are hidden from our eyes. We might pray for years and notice no changes. Even so, things are happening in the spiritual dimension of life. Intercessory prayer is one of the major ways for us to collaborate with God. God uses our intercessory prayer to shape forces and events in the spiritual dimension of the universe. Intercessory prayer helps God to achieve what is good and to hinder what is evil. Intercessory prayer is a tool for resisting evil without picking up a gun.

Ephesians amplifies the understanding of intercessory prayer which we find in Daniel. Ephesians 6:12 notes that the really significant things happen not in the world of

² For more on prayer and the powers, see Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Galilee, 1998), 180-198.

flesh and blood that we see with our physical eyes, but in the spiritual world of the powers and principalities.

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,
but against the rulers,
against the authorities,
against the cosmic powers of this present darkness,
against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

In intercessory prayer, we enter a cosmic struggle against evil and become co-wrestlers with God. With God, we contend against evil. With God, we strive for peace, fidelity, justice, and mercy. Intercessory prayer engages us in nonviolent resistance.

But more than that, intercessory prayer also gives us access to the strength of God. When the angel finally breaks through and reaches Daniel, the angel repeatedly touches Daniel. Each time the angel touches him, Daniel gains more strength until finally he stands once again on his own two feet, strong and courageous in the presence of God (v. 19). That is what intercessory prayer does to us. We grow strong and courageous, fit companions for a strong and courageous God.