

2025 01 05 Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Epiphany at TUMC.

[Daniel 6:6-27](#) - Daniel in the Lion's Den

[Luke 23:1-5](#) - Jesus is questioned by Pilate

Who would be a king? If you've read your Bible you should know enough to stay away from being a king, or a governor, or prime minister. Kings are always being tricked, trapped, and talked into bad ideas. Kings and the people who represent them are always being told what to do, and criticised when they do it, or when they don't do it. Who would be a king?

It's easy to see how the kings in our stories are caught between a rock and a hard place. King Darius is busy trying to run the Persian Empire, a huge land area with dozens of ethnic groups and languages and religions. Although the Persian Empire was very tolerant of the religions of their subject groups, a group of politicians scheme to get Daniel in trouble with the king, trapping both Daniel and Darius. Neither of them can go back on their commitments. Daniel continues to pray to God, and Darius finds himself praying when he is forced to have Daniel thrown to the lions.

If being face to face with hungry lions is the hard place, the rock on the other side is the commitment and promise that both men have made. Even though the law is absurd and deserves no loyalty, they are caught between a rock and a hard place, and it seems like Daniel will be lion food, and king Darius will lose an advisor.

Of course, that's not how the story goes, but pause for a bit. Who would be a king? Pontius Pilate is trying to keep the peace on behalf of the Roman Empire, which means squashing any would-be kings. But all he can do is take direction from the people he is trying to rule over. Many have written critically of how the gospels depict Pilate as innocent of the death of Jesus, but they show him to be ineffectual and weak. Pilate is the only one with no power. He is caught between a rock and a hard place.

I've been thinking a lot about leadership recently. When I started working on this sermon I wasn't sure if the government of Canada would still be in place by today. Soon our US neighbours will install a new president. None of these possibilities appear to lead towards a more just and loving way of life. Whichever individuals end up leading, their courses appear to be set in stone. It is ironic that the more power a person is said to have, the fewer choices they have. Once you have power, the only way to hold onto it is to compromise anything that will threaten your power.

There are certain ways for a follower of Jesus to engage political systems that do not demand compromise. There are ways in which we can take leadership. But I maintain that most forms of political leadership are bad for your soul, and the more responsibility you take on, the harder it becomes to follow God. Daniel has to deal with two competing sets of responsibilities. Jesus is followed by a crowd who want him to be their king, but cannot accept that he will be king in a different way. In our day there are people who want to claim political power and believe that this is faithfulness to God. Christian nationalism is opposed to the teachings of Jesus. It is utter folly that ignores the Old and New Testament and the wisdom of history. The people playing with it will not be able to maintain a living faith. "What does it profit a man if he gain the world but lose his soul?" Who'd be a king?

I should pause to say that I am sharing from my own opinion, and I've been wrong before. But we can admit that anyone claiming political power in our day is between a rock and a hard place. The hard place is the demand for compromise, the threat of losing power, the temptation of funding, the easy power of outrage. The rock is the values and hopes for the future - the real needs. Between those inconsolable absolutes there is no room to breathe.

But the Holy Spirit is always able to bring life and breath into frozen places. Daniel is able to pray, and Jesus can speak back to Pilate. They are willing to let go of their safety and power. Their acts of defiance force the issue, and the apparently powerful people are shown to not be in control at all. In these situations, God's power disrupts death and brings life. Jesus leaves the grave and Daniel leaves the lion's den.

It is true that neither story is as complete as we might like it to be. When Daniel is saved, his enemies and their families are thrown to the lions. While Jesus endures and transcends the cross, we continue to see the power of death.

And disruptors are not always good news. There are plenty of people who dream about overthrowing governments, undermining systems, and breaking down the institutions in order to create something they consider better. Even as I will critique the systems of power and authority and encourage us not to identify ourselves with nationality or party allegiance, I do not want it all to burn down. However flawed the system may be, we want it to coordinate health care, food supplies, and the things we need for dignified human life.

I'm thinking about all of this at the beginning of 2025, because it seems that many of the former certainties are starting to break down, for better and for worse. Disruptors are showing us how empty the rhetoric is, and how dangerous. I'm thinking about all of this because this is the moment when we are living, and where God's Spirit is breathing in and around us, and where we are called to breathe deeply, and speak.

The accounts of Daniel and Jesus show a world of utter absurd abuse of power. While some are obsessed with using the law and systems of power to take control and exact punishment, Jesus and Daniel focus on God. There is an obsession today with the inability of the legal system to prevent bad governance. These stories show us a time when good sense and good governance have failed. What alternative power do we have to offer? Can we offer our prayers?

A church is a weekly routine of practicing living under God's imagination, creating a culture of mutual aid and respect. The community gathers each week and repeats the stories and the promises of God. We listen to each other's joys and concerns and try to support the needs we know about. We fail often, but as long as we keep meeting, the gates of possibility are open. We have a lot to learn, and a lot of places to grow to become a place where all languages and accents have equal authority and where we have no one struggling to make rent while others are rich in houses.

Peter Haresnape

This is meant to be a place for us to learn the true use of power - to learn how to yield our own self-importance and accept God's utterly affirming love.

There is a moment I have observed in the Anglican communion liturgy. The person with the incense bows to the priest and acolytes, and they bow back. They waft the incense over them, and then everyone bows again. Then the person with the incense goes to the choir, and they do it again, and then they come to the congregation and we all bow at each other over again. It's a profoundly silly experience - and each time I am moved that they spend time in each service showing respect and honour to one another, being decent and loving. I've never felt that way on social media, only in church. I would like us all to feel that way, because it is a gift and a challenge to the world.

In one of his essays about a century ago, TS Eliot writes: "If we take the widest and wisest view of a Cause, there is no such thing as a Lost Cause because there is no such thing as a Gained Cause. We fight for lost causes because we know that our defeat and dismay may be the preface to our successors' victory, though that victory itself will be temporary; we fight rather to keep something alive than in the expectation that anything will triumph." (T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays: 1917-1932)

That is what it means to pray. It says that I am small and silly and have my flaws, but I want to love well, and I want to give what I can give. And I'm not praying alone.

Whatever hard place we find ourselves in, we will work together to stand on the rock. The rock is the teachings of Jesus, the sacred story of his life, learning, ministry, preaching, passion, death, resurrection and ascension that point to the love of God and the responsibility of each one of us to do likewise.

With that in front of us, who would be a king?