

“But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

Thank you for joining us for our last Advent Midweek service as we conclude talking about the four major prophets who line the top row of our stained glass windows. We continue in chronological order as well as from right to left in order of our windows. Daniel rounds off the series, and his window is of two lions which alludes to the incident in which King Darius threw him into the lions pit for worshipping the true God.

Daniel’s prophecy is set in the same timeline as Ezekiel. Before the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonians took away some of the Israelites as exiles among whom were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, we know the last three best as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

These four men, like many of their peers, had a hard time adjusting to life in Babylon. What did it mean to be a faithful Jew in a culture that was hostile to worship of the true God? The refusal of these four men to worship idols landed them in hot water. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace for not worshipping the golden image Nebuchadnezzar erected, but the Lord kept them safe by sending the Son of God to protect them from lethal fire.

Daniel, in a similar fashion, was thrown into the lion’s den for worshipping the true God rather than Darius. The Lord had sent his angel to keep the mouths of the lions shut in time that Daniel was down there among the man-eating predators.

A self-defense instructor gave the advice that if an assailant puts a gun to your head in a Wal-mart parking lot, it is best to fight back then and there rather than get into his van because a worse fate could be waiting for you. It is better to put up a fight in public and die trying because other onlookers have the chance to come to your aid. It helps nothing to acquiesce as inaction will only make success in fighting harder.

In the same vein, author and journalist Rod Dreher in his book *Live Not by Lies* interviews many individuals in former soviet countries and asks them how they let the communists take control in their country. They all said it started out slowly, and they went along to get along buying into little lies which eventually became big ones. Before they knew it, the communists had established a totalitarian regime gulags and all.

Martin Niemöller was a famous Lutheran pastor in Nazi Germany who was arrested by the Nazis. He wrote famous poem: “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Daniel and his peers provide us an example of how to live in a society that is becoming increasingly hostile to the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Daniel fought back. He didn't live by lies. He was willing to die rather than blend in and compromise his beliefs because buying into small lies would give way to larger ones. Daniel and his faithful peers were blessed to be delivered by the Lord in this life, and it gave a powerful witness to the Babylonian leaders. Now, there is no way to confirm this, but some scholars believe that the Magi who visited Jesus at His birth knew to do so in part because of the faithful witness of Jews like Daniel who taught of the coming Messiah even in exile.

Our appointed text helps focus us as to why Daniel would sacrifice his own life for the sake of faithfulness to Yahweh. The dream of Nebuchadnezzar reminds us of the big picture and for what we are fighting as Christians.

Nebuchadnezzar had magicians in his court. They are called various things, but it is interesting to read that the same word for Wise man in Matthew's Gospel is used to describe their job. Could it be the men in this chapter of Daniel would pass on knowledge of a savior to the wise men who would eventually visit Jesus? I digress, Nebuchadnezzar had a bad dream, and he asked these pagan wise men to interpret the dream, when they couldn't answer, Daniel came to the rescue to provide an interpretation rather than them being destroyed.

The statue represents a succession of kingdoms. Gold represents Babylon, silver Persia, bronze Greece, and the iron—both the pure iron and the iron mixed with clay—represents Rome. The stone represents the kingdom of God. To quote our text directly, **“As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.”**

Empires come and go. Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome. Their buildings survive, but they're under new management. The Dutch empire, the Spanish empire, and the British Empire, they're not around anymore, even though people still speak Dutch, Spanish, and English. Hitler's thousand-year Reich barely lasted a decade. The Soviet Union, as much as it is seared in our collective memories as something godless and evil, didn't even last as long as the seventy years the people of Judah were in exile. The United States of America is almost 250 years old, yet there is no promise that we will remain in our position of world power and prominence that we have once enjoyed.

This Advent midweek series has been focusing on prophecies of the better things that the Lord has to deliver to us. Isaiah foresaw a better teacher. Jeremiah

predicted a better covenant. Ezekiel had a vision of a better temple. As we join those pilgrims with our Advent journey almost nearing its end, we look to the better kingdom that has already come in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the rock. Paul writes, **“and the Rock was Christ.” “But [Jesus] looked directly at them and said, “What then is this that is written: “ ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.””**

Our Gospel text ponders the nature of Jesus’ kingship. **“Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.””** Jesus lived not by lies, and He spoke the truth as He Himself is the truth.

The message of hope we have this evening is that this kingdom will not be overthrown or defeated. In fact, what starts as a stone becomes a mountain. Peter writes, **“As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”** This growing kingdom is the Christian Church.

A pastor was giving a man a tour of the church at which he served. The man asked, “How many are worshipping at your church?” The pastor scratched his head. Well, if you count our current church rolls, we have about 200, but then he pointed out the window up the hill, but if you count them, it’s closer to 1,000. As the man looked out the window, the pastor was pointing to the cemetery.

By the grace of God, our congregation will last longer than the Soviet Union did. But even in our short lifespan, how many member funerals have we had? 200? 300? We don’t have the luxury of a church yard like in the aforementioned earlier illustration. That may be a number only the Lord knows. But we understand God’s kingdom still grows as the Saints who have gone before us are not gone, but worship with us in the heavenly realms. Even in a hostile culture, Christ’s church still grows as even death cannot shrink those who assemble at the feet of the Lamb of God.

As we prepare for another Christmas in just a few days, we can keep this big picture of an everlasting kingdom in mind. It encourages us to continue steadfast in the faith, even to the point of death, as we follow in Daniel’s example of confessing the faith even when our culture pressures us to do otherwise. We put our hope in the king of kings and lord of lords at whom the nations bow their feet. Empires come and go, but Christ’s Church will last forever. Amen!