

Too Dangerous for Anything but Truth...

From Daniel 9

Among all the creative, beautiful, funny quips racing around the Internet in these days when people have way too much time on their hands, this has been one of my favorites:

**“Kinda feeling like the Earth just sent us all to our rooms
to think about what we’ve done.”**

I do not believe that God sends plagues down on the earth, or sickness on any of us individually, to punish us for what we have done. I don’t think the God who decided to come live in the big messy middle of human life is now fed up with us.

And yet, I can’t help wondering if there isn’t a message for us in this time of enforced staying at home and doing less running around than we’re accustomed to. It *feels* to me like someone—God maybe?—has said, “Stop. Stop, you people. You are killing yourselves and you are killing each other, with your moving too fast and not resting. With your relentless cycle of producing and consuming and competing and achieving. With your not stopping long enough to care for the earth, or enjoy stillness, or really see the people you are closest to. Just STOP.”

It is way too early for us to pretend we know what the long term consequences of this coronavirus pause will be; what lessons we will carry with us for more than a few weeks after life returns to something we recognize as normal. Two weeks in to the closure of schools and workplaces and churches and stores and restaurants, we are still just figuring out new routines, the things that will fill our days, help us feel useful. In this community, I think lots of us have not yet felt the full truth of this time: that many people are losing their homes and their jobs; that many people will get sick; that some will die.

And still, already, we are looking for meaning in this experience. Whenever this is over, I want to be able to say something more than “Well, we got through it.” I think that’s the power that comes with our humanity: to make meaning out of what happens to us. Our Jewish siblings believe that’s what God gave us when we were created in God’s image: the power to make meaning, to declare that some thing or place or experience in this world is holy, sacred, worthy of marking and setting aside because it contains a glimpse of God, something to be remembered with reverence.

That ability to make meaning of things is a wonderful gift. You might even call it a super-power. But it comes with a necessary shadow, a responsibility that also is part of being human. It comes with our capacity to reflect on ourselves, to see where we have misplaced our reflection of God; how we have not lived as well or as fully, as lovingly, as we might have, or even as we wanted and intended to. That too is part of what it means to be human.

In our story, the people of God have always found their strength, found God, found their way forward, by telling the truth—even the hard truth—about themselves. Richard Rohr says this is the singular trait that made the Jewish tradition a huge impact on the development of human civilization: its pattern of self-reflection, self-criticism.

That's what we see in that prayer from the Book of Daniel that Sam read a few minutes ago. The people of Israel were going through a terrible time. Their country had been conquered, taken over, by an outside force they had no control over. Their attacker had an insidious way of eliminating its enemies: it took away everything that was familiar to them. They calculated that if the vanquished people forgot who they were, they would just ease into cooperation, become assets for a different power. So the Jewish people were taken into captivity. Marched, involuntarily, into a time and a place that we still call the Exile. They were, literally, exiled from their normal, regular, familiar life. Not just for a few weeks, but for years.

One of the heroes who arose in that time of exile was Daniel. If you grew up going to Sunday School, you probably remember the story of Daniel in the lion's den. Daniel who refused to pledge allegiance to the Babylonian king over than the one true God his people had always believed in. And so, that pagan king named Nebuchadnezzar threw Daniel into a cave filled with hungry lions. It was a death sentence. Only, when the king went to check on the results of this execution the next morning, he found that those lions hadn't mauled or eaten Daniel. Daniel came out of the lion's den unscratched. Everybody could see that Daniel's faith had been rewarded, that he had been saved by God. Even King Nebuchadnezzar could see it. Daniel was a hero, a model of faithfulness. He had distinguished himself, in a time when most of the Jews around him had forgotten who they were, and they were slowly letting go of the faith that had once held them.

It was sometime after that miraculous lion escape, that confirmation that he was on the right track, that Daniel spoke the prayer we heard this morning. Why? Why did *Daniel* feel the need to pray that deep, soul-emptying confession? *We have sinned against you*, Daniel prayed. *We've rebelled. We haven't listened. We have turned away from you and refused to obey. We have not paid attention to what is true.*

Why did *Daniel* pray like that? *He* hadn't had any moral lapses. *His* behavior had been exemplary, faithful through and through. Why in his prayer would Daniel clump himself together with all that *un*-faithfulness? Why would he think *he* should confess wrongs that he wasn't personally responsible for?

Confessing—apologizing—for a wrong we did not do ourselves does not come naturally to us, does it? We're used to taking responsibility for ourselves alone. When we see something wrong in the world—an injustice, a stubbornly bad judgment call—often our first reaction is to distance ourselves from it. Don't lump me in with those people who are choosing to act out of bad values. "They" are not "me". I know better.

But Daniel's prayer suggests a practice of faithfulness that is entirely different. He might have been blameless himself, but Daniel places himself squarely in the middle of a people who have sinned. His confession puts no daylight in between his personal responsibility and the failings of the people he is part of.

That's what prophets do. People who speak for God don't just pronounce judgment on other people's offenses. They stand in solidarity with people who cannot speak for themselves. And sometimes they stand in solidarity with people who cannot even see for themselves what has gone wrong.

We don't much use the language of sin around here. Sometimes that's helpful; sometimes it's not. But no matter what language we use, I think Daniel's prayer can help us make meaning of this time. This weird, separating, disorienting time when we are more conscious than usual of what we have lost, and that the world really is too dangerous for anything but truth. What if this is a time that calls people of faith to the hard work of truth-telling? What if our prayer, not only for ourselves but for our neighbors, for all the people who inhabit this place with us, is something like this:

We got lost, God. We wanted so much to be productive and successful and first. To make ourselves well, and strong, and self-sufficient. To show that we could keep going, no matter what. And along the way, we forgot who we are. We forgot that our relationships, the quality of our love for one another—even for our families—is more important than what we accomplish. We forgot that we—all of us, in every place, rich and poor, strong and weak—we are mostly the same. We tried to exceed the simplicity of your call to us: to live doing small acts of justice, loving kindness, walking humbly. We forgot that you are God and we are not; that it is your goodness, not ours, your dream for this world, not ours, that can make for peace, for flourishing. Forgive us. Come and find us. All of us. We need you—more than we knew.

What's the point of confession? Why focus on what has gone wrong? I think we confess our sins not because God demands it of us, but because our own souls require it. Because only after we have judged ourselves are we able to take in all the ways God reaches toward us without judgment.

My companion these days has been Walter Brueggemann's book of prayers called *Prayers for a Privileged People*. This is his prayer. But maybe it can be our prayer today too.

You invite us to your presence, God—
to the table of your feast,
to your walk of companionship,
to your mission of well-being.

Every time we take timid steps toward home, we are welcomed.

Now, in this hour of free-fall,

meet us as you do—not according to our flaw
but through your eyes of self-giving love.

Be our Christmas, and start the world again;

Be our Easter, and draw us from death to new life;

Be our Pentecost, and breathe on us to begin again;

Be your full, generous self toward us;

so that we might find ourselves in obedience,
so that we might dare to live in the simplicity of your way,
so that we might begin again in wonder, love, and joy.

Amen