

The Writing on the Wall

A Sunday Morning Message on February 8, 2026

Daniel 5:3-9; 13-16; 24-28

Rev. Ruth Shilling Hainsworth

As you may already have guessed, that well-known phrase “the writing on the wall” does have its origins in this story we read from the writings of the prophet Daniel this morning. It seems especially “prophetic” to me this weekend as I have been so reluctant all last week to acknowledge the “writing on the wall” about yesterday’s potential weather issues. Literally. The TV weather persons’ forecast walls on all the stations have been displaying that snowflake on yesterday all week and I just refused to take it seriously until I had no choice as the snow swirled yesterday morning, piling up quickly. I had trusted in those initial forecasts which promised the snow would be ending by early to midafternoon. Sure, it was going to be windy and cold after that, but honestly that’s the kind of weather you want for this kind of vigil in support of all those folks who face such storms routinely. But then those ever so gentle texts started to trickle in to me from a few of you – “it’s really snowing hard down here! Maybe we should reconsider...” I checked the weather on multiple sites once again and then I reached out to the leadership team for the Vigil – Missions, Deacons and Trustees – and was delighted to see how quickly they responded! “Yes, we need to cancel! Roads are bad down here. Who knows when our plow guy will make it to church and we have plowable snow already!”

Thus, by midmorning even I could read that handwriting on the wall and I cancelled the Vigil, very sad as I sent out emails and set up cancellation posts on Facebook. Cancelling this event was very, VERY difficult and disappointing to me especially due to weather, because the whole point of this kind of Vigil is to stand in solidarity with the folks faced with living through, surviving this weather all the time. It felt like a betrayal of sorts to that witness. Don’t get me wrong. I am not regretting cancelling. That was the absolute correct thing to do. We

have a responsibility not to put folks at any kind of risk in bad weather if we can help it. But still, this decision was not an easy one for me to make. That was handwriting on the wall I would just as soon not have to read. But that's the thing about messages from God – some of them we want to receive joyfully. Others, we'd just as soon avoid for all sorts of reasons. That's life, though, isn't it. An unending series of situations in which we have to figure out the best thing to do under the circumstances we face in the moment.

So, what's up with this story anyway? Who was Daniel and what was the point of this story? The book of Daniel appears in our Bibles as a part of the prophets but it could also be categorized alongside Esther both in time and in genre. Daniel is an example of a type of writing known as court tales as the first six chapters describe Daniel's adventures at the Babylonian court of King Nebuchadnezzar. He was one of the exiles taken to Babylon and his talents as an interpreter of dreams soon came to light, bringing him to the awareness of the king. Daniel is full of fantastic stories including the one about the fiery furnace survived by his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. And of course, we can't forget the story of Daniel in the lion's den. Both of these stories have been Sunday School staples for decades and the subject of many a work of art over the centuries. The story of the handwriting on the wall which we read this morning is also in this same mix but it's one we don't talk about that much. In all my years preaching, this will be my first sermon on this story. Nor was I ever asked to write children's curriculum for it. But I think I know why. This story has a definite creepy, otherworldly quality to it. I vividly remember the illustration of it in my Children's Bible I had as a child. It was scary!! It showed a disembodied hand just floating in front of wall, a room full of terrified people watching as it wrote on the plaster. The text says, "Then the king's face turned pale, and his thoughts terrified him. His limbs gave way and his knees knocked together."

Well of course they did! Who wouldn't when confronted by this ghostly spectacle!

But we're getting ahead of the story here. We need to understand why the hand showed up in the first place. Belshazzar was the king by this time and he decided to have a big party for all the members of his royal court. After everyone had been drinking for a while, Belshazzar had this idea that he would have his servants bring in all the gold and silver chalices and cups and pitchers which Nebuchadnezzar had looted from Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. They were brought into the hall and distributed to the guests having been filled with wine and the party roared on. At least it did until that hand showed up and scared the heck out of people as it wrote four words on the wall: MENE MENE TEKEL PARSIN. Not surprisingly, the king freaked. The guests freaked and all heck broke loose in the hall. The queen, who was apparently not at the party, came in to see what the commotion was all about and then sort of took command of the situation. She reminded Belshazzar of Daniel who had served the previous king as an interpreter of dreams and signs. She suggested he be sent for and he was.

Daniel arrived in due course and quickly sums up the situation. He begins by lecturing Belshazzar about how sinful and shameful it was for him to use these items from God's Temple in such a way. He then told Belshazzar that the hand was sent by God and that he would tell him what the words meant. He explains these were Hebrew nouns referring to particular weights. MENE is a large weight and the related verb was "to count." Thus, Daniel explained that here MENE meant that God had numbered the days of Belshazzar's kingdom until it was brought to an end. TEKEL is 1/6th the weight of one mene and its related verb meant to weigh. This meant that Belshazzar had been weighed on the scales of God and found wanting. PARSIN is the plural of peres which is a half shekel weight. Its related verb meant to divide. This meant, Daniel explained, that his kingdom would be divided between the Medes and the Persians. Interestingly, though this was

undoubtedly not good news for Belshazzar, he still rewarded Daniel and it was proclaimed that Daniel would rank third in the kingdom. All did not end well for Belshazzar as he died that very night and the kingdom was given to King Darius of the Medes.

Fascinating story, right? Simple and straight forward. Sort of. The basic message is a simple and often repeated one throughout the Old Testament – God is always watching you and weighing your sins on God’s scales. Disrespecting God is a grave sin and anyone engaging in such unholy behavior will pay for it. This is a lesson often forgotten by God’s people and the Bible’s pages are filled with examples of this, the most basic of commandments being set aside as humans pursue their own narrow range of selfish interests. This story today is a dramatic example of precisely this sin as a reckless ruler disrespects God and God’s people by using their sacred items in a silly party that got out of control and then the king who led the people astray paid with his life. And another point worth noting here is that the people were more than willing to be led astray by the king. If any of these people had stopped to think about what they were actually doing – whether there was a ghostly hand writing on the wall or not – they might just have saved themselves by recognizing their own willful recklessness. But they didn’t. Or they couldn’t. Or they just didn’t want to. It’s never clear which is which in these stories and therein lies a message for us.

Just what is that message, though? Is it to watch for handwriting appearing on walls? Possibly helpful but not going to happen. God is never that easy, or that direct. Perhaps the message is to consider more carefully what we say and do before we do it instead of needing to worry about fixing problems that result from unkind words and/or hasty actions afterward. Or maybe, just maybe, God would like us to invest our time and energies in getting to know God better. Maybe God would like us to invest in forming and nurturing a relationship with God, a friendship with Jesus, a partnership with the Holy Spirit so that when we are in those situations requiring us to respond in word or

deed, we are better prepared. We've invested in our relationship with God so we can be more confident that we are able to respond as God would have us respond. In other words, we need to get much more comfortable inviting God into our decision processes, into the living of our lives each day, into becoming who God knows we are capable of being.

As prophets go, Daniel is, as you might be able to guess, big on punishment. He likes to tell these fantastic stories about how people with strong faith in God, strong relationships with God, can survive the unthinkable – like the lion's den and the fiery furnace. But those who disrespect and disregard God are called to task by floating hands and dire predictions coming true. Pretty stark contrast between those who have faith and those who don't. What Daniel doesn't take into account is how difficult this kind of faith, this kind of relationship with God is to develop and nurture. Daniel's is a black and white kind of thinking – a binary choice between two starkly contrasting options. But all due respect to Daniel, that has never been my experience of faith. For me, faith is not something to be achieved. It is something to be sought after, the pursuit of which takes a lifetime. Faith takes time and energy and a willingness to pursue something you will never be able to physically see or touch or hear or taste or smell. Not really for the simple reason that faith is not tangible. Well, not in the traditional sense anyway. But, we can and we must use all of our senses available to us in our pursuit to know God better. Let me explain.

The smell of the sea or the fragrance of the woods as we walk can be received by us as the scent of heaven. So can any other scent that touches someplace in our souls even, perhaps especially, if we can't explain why. The same is true for things we hear that for reasons unknown touch a chord deep in our souls when a glorious birdsong on a quiet morning becomes transcendent. The taste of the Communion elements can transport us to that long ago upper room, if we are open to that experience. So too can the fleeting glimpse of something

magical bring us into a unique awareness that God is in this place where we are too. And touch. That one is most amazing and least appreciated. If you want to feel the touch of God on your skin and in your heart, just reach out and hug someone – especially someone who really needs a hug in that moment. We are often times so reserved that we forget how important touch can be. We forget how good it feels to receive a hug and how good it feels to give one.

Frankly, we just need to get over ourselves in this regard. That's true in general in our quest to get to know God better. We often times have to do and allow ourselves to experience the things we are sometimes the most reluctant to do. Like offering a hug when clearly it is needed. That impulse to hug is coming from God although hugs can only be given if the “hugg-e” wants one! That breathtaking moment when you crest a hill or witness the sea crashing against the rocks – that's God reminding you, “Hey you. I'm right here.” That magnificent bird song calling you to stop and just listen – that is quite literally the music of the cosmos, God's universe. Savoring every bite of a wonderful meal with someone dear to you, that is straight up a gift of God worthy of your thanksgiving to God in the moment.

Dear ones, allow me to suggest that if we are longing to deepen our relationship with God, to live our lives as God would want us to, then we need to be paying attention to God all around us. We need to stop waiting for a hand to write on the wall something like: “God here. This is what I want you to do...” That dear ones, is not going to happen. What will happen though is this – if you look for God you will find God, if you seek God with all your heart. All the time. Every day. Not just when you're afraid. Not just when you need something. Seek after God, seek after following in the footsteps of Jesus every day. I promise you that if you seek, you will find for the simple reason that God is already out there looking for you. Amen.