



THE WRITING ON THE WALL

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There are a lot of odd sayings in the English language, phrases that mean something other than what a straightforward interpretation of their words might give us. And a lot of these expressions are really old! For example, “don’t count your chickens before they hatch” – it’s good advice aimed to keep us from assuming too much and getting ahead of ourselves. I’ll bet you didn’t know it came from a sonnet written in 1570 by Thomas Howell. “Don’t toss the baby out with the bathwater” is another good one, about not accidentally discarding something valuable along with something we don’t want. It’s from a German satire, written in 1512. William Shakespeare is another good source for our uniquely English sayings: killing someone with kindness, dead as a doornail, all that glitters is not gold...all from Shakespeare’s plays.

The Bible is another unrecognised source of a lot of the colourful, evocative expressions and images we use. A leopard cannot change its spots – that’s from Jeremiah; like a lamb to the slaughter – that’s from Isaiah. A sign of the times – Jesus used that himself, to talk about people’s inability to see him for who he was. Another saying that draws on the Bible is one that comes from our Scripture reading today: the writing on the wall. In fact, the whole idea of a disembodied hand and a finger writing on the wall has been taken up by all sorts of people, from an 11th century Persian poem, the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám and Agatha Christie’s 20th century novel, *The Moving Finger*, to a whole slew of horror films and suspenseful TV shows that use writing on the wall to scare their main characters. Mysterious, ominous writing, fading into view on a wall, has entered into popular culture as one of the most terrifying things that can happen. I wonder if all those screenwriters and scary-novel writers know that it’s from the Bible!

Apart from all that, though, the saying, “the writing is on the wall” is used to mean that something is coming to an abrupt and inevitable end. Whatever is going to happen will happen; the die is cast – there’s another expression for you! Julius Caesar, 49BCE – the writing on the wall means that the end will come, and the future will be what it will be.

In the book of Daniel, the writing on the wall has abrupt and significant consequences for a king who is about to lose his kingdom and his life.

The story starts in the sixth century BCE, when King Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian empire take over the kingdoms of God's people – Israel and Judah – destroying the Temple and all the larger cities and towns, and taking most of the people into exile, far away in Babylon. Daniel was a young man then, and was taken into exile along with so many others. He and his three friends were brought to the palace to serve the king and his household; their Jewish names were taken from them and they received Babylonian names instead. But that didn't stop them from resisting the corrupting influence of this foreign culture and its false religion where it counted. If you're looking for some good stories and excellent advice on how to live peaceably for God in a hostile culture, the first couple of chapters of Daniel is the place to go!

Eventually, Daniel gained the king's favour by exercising a particular gift God gave him: the ability to interpret dreams. The king had a regular staff for that kind of thing, but, when all of them failed, Daniel stepped up. And he ends up promoted, given ruling authority over a province in Babylon. The king even goes so far as to recognise that God's spirit is upon Daniel, and he comes to respect and honour God, too.

Years later, and we have another king, Belshazzar, in Babylon. The kingdom has changed hands a few times, most likely, between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. The scene we read together this morning shows us that any respect or honouring of God has long since passed from the royal family.

Picture it in your mind: a great banqueting hall, high arching ceilings, stone pillars and walls richly decorated, palms and plants, torchlight pushing back the shadows of evening, and an array of guests, richly dressed and being served a feast by their king.

As the evening goes on, and the king and his guests get drunk, Belshazzar calls for some of the spoils of conquest: the gold and silver goblets, meant for use in the Temple at Jerusalem, looted by Nebuchadnezzar when the city of God's people fell. Belshazzar and his guests use the goblets from the Temple to toast their own gods of metal and wood and stone. Then, suddenly, the fingers of a human hand emerged and began writing on the plaster of the wall right in front of the king.

Talk about creepy! No person, not even an arm, just a disembodied hand and a writing finger. Imagine how you would respond if that started happening on a wall in front of you! This is classic supernatural thriller movie stuff.

The king is terrified. He goes pale, his knees go out from under him, and he starts yelling for any wiseman or magician in the palace to come and read the writing on the wall. His terror only grew as, one after the other, each wiseman failed to understand what the message meant. The queen, who was not at the party, hears the commotion and proves herself to be the only truly wise person in the palace that night. In a moment of satisfying irony, she says, “O king, live forever!” Call on Daniel – since the days of Nebuchadnezzar, he’s been known to have enlightenment, understanding and wisdom like the gods. Call on Daniel, and he will be able to tell you what it means.

And he does – and the writing on the wall spells out the bad news: the end of Babylon, and of Belshazzar the king.

So maybe popular culture has the right idea – writing on the wall is a frightening event and the phrase ominous, because the writing on the wall signalled an abrupt and inevitable end for Belshazzar and Babylon.

But if we leave behind the king, and shift our perspective to Daniel, the writing on the wall takes on a very different tone. Instead of standing by the king, watching a moving finger write upon the wall in front of us, let’s walk into that banquet room with Daniel.

Daniel is a much older man now, in his early eighties. Called from his home at night, he is most likely not in his finest, feasting clothes; this plainly-dressed, composed and calm elderly Jew must have stood out among all these Babylonians, richly dressed, full of food and wine and fear. Daniel sees, no doubt, the gold and silver goblets that once served a much holier purpose in the Temple of his youth, flung disrespectfully here and there in the chaos that followed the writing on the wall. The king promises rewards and gifts to Daniel if he can tell the king what the message means. It is easy to imagine the withering look on Daniel’s face as he tells Belshazzar to keep his gifts and give his rewards to someone else.

What follows is a fine example of what God's prophets have always done. He reminds the king of the way Nebuchadnezzar's pride and arrogance had brought on God's judgement, humbling the king for many years until he was able to see God truly as the Most High God, and offer praise and honour to God – professing a true belief in him. This humbling and subsequent belief in God espoused by Nebuchadnezzar apparently had no impact on future kings of Babylon. Daniel launches into an indictment of Belshazzar for desecrating the Temple goblets, but more broadly for failing to acknowledge God: "You have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know; [Daniel proclaims] but the God in whose power is your very breath, and to whom belong all your ways, you have not honored."

Daniel tells the king why this terrifying thing has happened, and then he tells him what the outcome will be, making God's power and presence startlingly clear: God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; and your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

Belshazzar thought he could operate independently of God...or more likely, he did not think about the one true God at all. Belshazzar had numbered his own days as king, well ahead into his old age; he had weighed his power and wealth upon the scales and found them to be immense and unending; he examined his empire and saw it unified and strong and unassailable. Belshazzar was wrong.

As Daniel finished speaking, we can imagine sounds in the distance, at the walls and gates of the city. Crashing and shouting, the thud of spears, the clash of sword against shield, the whipping noise of arrows. As the sounds grew closer to the palace, Belshazzar's terror must have returned, ten-fold. Because the date of this fateful feast is October 6, 539BC: the day that Darius the Mede invades the city and kills the king, ending the long-fought war between Babylon and Persia, and taking Belshazzar's empire for himself.

But in the midst of all this, there is Daniel. And for Daniel, the writing on the wall is good news. Because while Babylon took God's people into exile, Persia will set them free. It's a few years away, still; but it will happen, the king of Persia will even fund and equip the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple. The writing on the wall was a disaster for Babylon, and did indeed signify its end. But that same writing was a promise fulfilled and the beginning of freedom for Daniel and God's people.

So – don't judge a book by its cover! The writing on the wall was scary and ominous for Babylon and that terror and sense of doom has been picked up by popular culture. But the writing on the wall is not scary for us; not after Daniel explained what it meant and identified God's hand at work – and if that counts as a pun, it was absolutely intended. And although this is a brilliant story of God's hand at work in Babylon for his people then, there's some good news in it for us today, too.

We can trust God with the unfolding of history, even as we're living through it. And when you're living through history, it's called the news. There has always been a Babylon, and Babylon always falls. That is written clearly across human history: empires rise, and empires fall, by another empire or simply by collapsing into themselves, in the end.

In our Christian faith and practice, we are all of us accustomed to trusting God within our own lives and with the lives of those we love and worry over. Even when that faith and trust wobbles, at the intimate, personal scale of a life...we experience God's Holy Spirit undergirding that faith and trust, and we see Jesus, God in Christ, present and gracious...and trust grows, even as we struggle.

But it's easy to lose that certainty when we look at the world and its events, a chaotic maelstrom swirling us around, sometimes terrifying, often inexplicable, always painful to see and live through. If that sounds a little grim, well, I am sure we have all watched the news this past week or month or year, and observed a world that seems to be operating independently of God, for the most part.

Forest fires in some places, and flooding in others; families and whole communities fleeing from these things, from warfare, from political persecution. Watching the provinces and cities of Afghanistan fall to the Taliban after decades and lives spent by our military, and an earthquake in Haiti, eruptions of interpersonal violence closer to home in Canadian towns and cities. Damaging politics in countries the world over make life more difficult and painful than it needs to be, instead of governments that put all people ahead of their political interests; a merciless culture of outrage and public shaming, instead of justice and reconciliation. And of course, the pandemic: 4.5 million dead worldwide so far, months of isolation and fear, arguments and tension over everything from masks to vaccinations to the measures we take to keep one another safe.

Where is God in all of this?

Right where he's always been, hand firmly upon the unfolding of history, tending to his people and acting through humanity for the benefit of all. Because – and this is the rest of the good news in this story for us – Babylon did not fall without Persia, and the writing on the wall was unreadable without Daniel.

God works through humanity, whether they're on-board with him or not, to get things done. There is a back-and-forth between God's sovereignty and God giving us stewardship over creation. Yes, God is in charge; but God made us in God's own image, and then also put us in charge, too, or at least he's looped us in to participating in his work in the world.

Daniel's willingness to participate in God's plan – to proclaim God's word and God's will in the very heart of Babylon – that's a powerful image for us to take away from this story, and something to think about for our own lives today, in our own world. At a turning point in the history of his people, God signalled his power and presence as he prepared to act...but faithful, courageous Daniel was needed to identify God's hand in the writing on the wall as a promise fulfilled and hope for a new beginning. Thanks be to God! Amen.