

Light in the Den  
Advent 1  
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Trinity Bixby  
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Daniel 6  
Romans 13: 11-14

Growing up, my family moved around a lot. That means that a lot of my earliest memories are tied to a number of different homes – and that I confuse some of the details. For instance, I remember very clearly playing with remote controlled cars out on the deck of a house – and then running one off the deck, and causing it to lose a wheel. But there’s no way I was playing with RC cars at that home – since we moved from there before I was three. Yet, no matter how many times we moved, there were always some constants. My parents, obviously, were always there – and every home we moved to had a huge brass lamp, arcing beautifully over whatever couch or loveseat we brought with us. It had a thin metal stem, and a beautiful metal shade that was shaped like a sphere, with the bottom quarter or so cut off. Now, it was, as best I can recall, a bit flimsy – kicking its stem with my stubby kid legs would set it swaying, back and forth, moving its light over the floor and making the shadows of other furniture dance in time.

I never really questioned how it was that every house had this lamp in it – it was just sort of there, its metal stem arcing down into the floor. The golden brass color was comforting to me – it was like an old candlestick, or something out of Jules Verne. Somehow, the books that I’d read under it were filled with more imagination, as though it were a solar disk over the fantasy worlds of Velgarth, Xanth, Oz, or Narnia. No matter how bad things got in the real world for me, the eternal new kid, the strange nerd from somewhere else – I could always escape back into my books and the golden glow of that light in the den.

The mystery of that lamp was finally revealed when I was about nine years old, and we were in the midst of moving to Jakarta, Indonesia. You see, unlike every other home we’d had before, our house in Jakarta had neither wood floors, nor carpet – but wall-to-wall marble. It was pretty, but it meant that a

new means of support had to be found for that golden lamp. Clearly, you've figured out by now that, rather than seeking a home with that lamp already in it, my parents were taking the same light with us, and bolting it to the floor under the carpet. In Jakarta, it was affixed not to the floor directly, but to a slab of marble that rested on felt feet. Now, it could move from room to room. Or, more realistically, from couch to couch in a single room, depending on where I wanted to read – or where the Christmas tree had displaced it. It also... could fall over. I'd grown used to it as a fixture of home, never moving from its spot, no matter what I did to it. Well, I was older – and larger – and now managed to knock it over time and time again.

Well, that lamp made the trip back to the United States, and was set up in our next home – but it kept the marble base. Somehow, its presence was not as important to me, and I have no idea where it's ended up, now. It wasn't the magical lamp that showed up in every house, but just another piece of furniture that we took with us.

Now, the story of Daniel in the Lion's Den is probably familiar to all of you. It's an old Sunday-School staple. Daniel had been forced to leave Judah by the Babylonians – and was forcibly moved to Babylon itself. There, he and three friends proved their worth to the very king who had displaced them (and thousands of other Jewish leaders, scholars, and merchants). Through prayer and dream interpretation, Daniel was placed in a position of power over first the Babylonian empire, and then after the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Great, over Persia, too. In the story of Daniel and the Lions' Den, Daniel has to be over 80 years old – despite most depictions showing Daniel as still a young man. This old man, who has seen king after king, empire after empire, is still living in Babylon after Cyrus the Great allowed the Jews to return to Judah. He's spent his whole life there – it's comfortable to him, and the Persian leaders support him, and he supports them. Sounds like a great, cushy position for a Jewish man far from his birthplace.

Except... except that the officials, often called “governors” (or more properly, “satraps”) are trying to get ahead by removing Daniel. They try to find a way to embarrass him – and fail. Daniel is a man who is doing good in the

world by holding closely to his faith, and, it seems, cannot be tempted into doing evil by the conniving officials. Instead, they trick the king into passing a law making asking a request of anyone other than the king illegal, whether they are asking a god or a human. “making a request” is a more literal rendering of what is commonly translated “praying.” And when the conspirators return, they find Daniel praising God – not making a request of God. Still, it’s enough to make the king believe he has to throw Daniel into the pit of lions.

Throughout the entire ordeal, Daniel proclaims his innocence. The king, though, feels that there’s nothing that can be done other than follow the law. Daniel is thrown into the pit – and there, the narration switches over to the King. How the king feels, wrestling with his decision, turning down his evening entertainment (horror of horrors!), and getting up early, since he wasn’t able to sleep very well. But what about Daniel? What is he experiencing, in the pit of lions, sealed up with a stone? The Bible is silent, except for Daniel’s speech to the king later.

Did you notice that Daniel doesn’t speak at all in this story until AFTER he’s thrown into the pit? Even though this story is usually called Daniel in the Lion’s Den, it’s really more about Darius than it is Daniel. We, the hearers of the story, are left as much in the dark as Daniel is. Maybe, like with Daniel, there are lions prowling around us even now. Here, in the beginning of Advent, that darkness can feel especially strong and fearful. Where is the light in the den of lions? What protection do we have from the real threats of violence, from fear, and from temptation?

Daniel found protection in his faith in God, and in God’s messenger, who famously “shut the jaws of the lions.” Paul, writing centuries later, gives us advice when facing the evils and temptations of the world: “Put away the works of darkness, and let us clothe ourselves with the armor of light.” That is, the world is already dark enough. Stop doing things that make that darkness worse, and instead, help to light the way through your actions. Paul goes on to say, “Wrap yourself with Jesus Christ, as you would wrap yourself in a cloak, and stop living in such a way that you think first of gratifying your own, Christ-less desires.” You see, putting on someone’s robe in the ancient world was a way of

saying that you stood with them, that you had inherited some of their mission, their power. That's what the deal is with the "mantle" passed between the prophet Elijah and Elisha. Paul is taking that understanding a step further – now, don't just put on the robe of Christ, but wear Christ himself. By acting outwardly like the Messiah, you will be changed into a bearer of the light of God.

Paul speaks against particular practices that block you from wrapping yourself in God's light. While I could go on at length about all of them, it's probably best if I talk about what they have in common: abandoning control of yourself, whether through mob mentality, inebriation, lust, anger, or envy. Paul is saying that it's important to bring all of your mind and heart into bearing the light of God to the world. Don't claim Godliness and hurt others – that way lies pain and destruction for you and everyone else around you.

Instead, be like Daniel. Pray – and when you pray, don't just ask for things, but praise God and listen for where God is leading you. Even when that is the bottom of a pit, filled with lions – God's there, and you can trust God. Indeed, one of the Jewish commentaries on this passage from Daniel suggests that even in the Lion's Den, Daniel found himself among friends, because Daniel is descended from the tribe of Judah, described in Genesis as "cub of lions." God shut the lion's mouths, according to this ancient source, because the lions wouldn't devour their own!

Now, when I think back on the brass lamp in the den from my childhood, I see a lot of similarities to the light of God. It's constant – moving with you wherever you are. God's light offers comfort, and encourages you to use your imagination to see possibilities of goodness in the world where before, you could only see shadows. And God's light sets those shadows dancing, since the holy Trinity is always moving and never still. But unlike the brass lamp, God's light doesn't only shine from outside us – but from us, too. And God's light never fails, or shuffles off into a storage room, to be lost.

As advent continues, I encourage you to use the time of darkness to take stock of what you can put aside that will make wrapping yourself in God's light easier. When you wrap yourself in the light of God, you can be a light in the den, rooted in faith no matter where you are exiled. Like the brass lamp, be rooted in

faith, but arc out into the world. Like Daniel, keep doing good no matter how the world changes around you, or persecutes you. And like Paul, wrap Christ around you and shine in the dark. Should you have power – like king Darius – use it for the good of others. Should you be at the mercy of corruption, stay firm in your belief, and keep doing all the good that you can do. After all, you may find that the pit that you fear is filled not with enemies, but with allies, who need the light of God that you bear.

May God's light shine from you. May Christ lead you to do good for all you encounter. And may the shadows that surround you dance in the light of the Holy Spirit moving through you in the world. Amen.