

A few years ago when Jacob, Martha and Sarah Kirkegaard were in confirmation, I had them choose from a group of photos and write meditations on the one they chose. One of them selected a photo of an Egyptian woman standing in the middle of the street between a bulldozer and a wounded man lying in the street. She's holding up her hand, as if to stop the bulldozer. I don't have a copy of what that student wrote, but it was as you might expect an affirmation of the woman's courage and a reflection on the necessity of protecting those who are vulnerable, and it was quite wonderful.

This year I offered some of the same photos, including that one, to my students and asked them to write their reflections. The group that got this photo wrote about how hopeless and foolish it was for the woman to stand there in the street, as if she could really hold off a bulldozer. She was wasting her time, they said; she should just accept that she could not prevail.

If you want to know what a radical and countercultural thing we are doing here by being church, that's all you need to know. Our kids, in their early teens, already understood that brute force is not the greatest kind of power. They already understood that love is stronger than machinery. And those are not obvious or intuitive concepts. That is not what the world teaches, and that is not what our society respects. Therefore as we begin Advent, we need to realize how radical it is to proclaim that our salvation comes enfleshed as an infant. Radical, but not new, because the book of Daniel also proclaims that the greatest strength comes paradoxically through weakness.

The back story for today's reading, which is fiction set during the Exile, is that

a gifted young Jewish man, Daniel, has shown his talents and become a courtier to King Darius. Jealous of Daniel's closeness with the king, the other officials set a trap for him. They manipulate the king into decreeing death for anyone who doesn't worship *him*, and then they confront him with proof that indeed, Daniel worships only the God of the Jews. The king must put Daniel to death by lion.

It's interesting and oh-so-realistic that the king doesn't actually have as much power as you'd think, or doesn't know how to exercise his power, because there are so many self-interested officials whom he must placate in order to retain his prestige. He serves at their pleasure, and if he were to break the frame they'd put him in, they'd find a way to dethrone him. Darius is as trapped as Daniel—more so, actually.

Because what he finds in the morning, of course, is that Daniel is safe and sound. God had shut the mouths of the lions, and “no kind of harm was found on him.” Darius, perhaps displaying some previously hidden anger issues, has the accusers and their families thrown to the lions, where they are eaten, and I can't say this speaks well of him, but after all he was an Ancient Near Eastern potentate and acted in character. The point is that Daniel had not adjusted his behavior out of fear of the hostile officials. They were dangerous men, serious about doing him harm in a world where that could mean getting thrown to hungry lions, and Daniel might plausibly have decided to do his praying less conspicuously, at the very least. But he was a Jewish man, and even being in a foreign court did not put him farther away from God; God was supreme over King Darius too. So Daniel just decided not to be controlled by fear. This story is a metaphor for the faithful confronting the powers

of the world and trusting that they will survive that confrontation even though everyone around them is guided by a different set of values.

As Advent begins, we hang on to the promise that what is fundamentally most trustworthy in all times and places is the power embodied in a newborn infant far from home. It's counterintuitive and countercultural, to assert that love is stronger than anything else, but that's pretty much the core of our identity as church. That doesn't mean that we don't act. Love isn't a feeling or a concept; it's a power. So it becomes real when we put it into action, which we must do and do intelligently.

When Krista Tippett spoke a couple weeks ago, she reminded us about the serious and disciplined way that civil rights activists in the 50s and 60s prepared their campaigns. They worked hard. In role plays, people practiced loving the person who was beating them, imagining them as a baby, imagining what awful things must have happened to this person to make them want to do such violence in the moment. Preparation for demonstrations was a spiritual exercise, designed not only to achieve strategic goals but also to prevent hate and anger from taking root in their hearts. Meanwhile, those trying to preserve the power structure were lured into showing their inherent violence, an ugliness that eventually tipped public opinion.

Srdja Popovic, one of the leaders of the Otpor movement in Serbia that eventually led to the ouster of Slobodan Milosevic, now teaches people how to organize for their rights. He says it's a myth that nonviolence is useless against a brutal dictator; in fact, he says, it's the strategic choice. "My biggest objection to

violence is the fact that it simply doesn't work," Popovic writes. Violence is what every dictator does best. If you're going to compete with David Beckham, Popovic says, why choose the soccer field? Better to choose the chessboard." Otpor provoked Milosevic's regime into overreach, and intelligently won over the police, the old people, and other important constituencies.

http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/13/a-military-manual-for-nonviolent-war/?_r=0

It's no accident that the storyteller shows Daniel's resistance as taking the form of prayer. They could have written the story with Daniel publicly refusing to fall down and worship the king, but instead they have Daniel affirmatively worshipping God. Prayer is where we re-ground ourselves in reality. Praying to God, Daniel acknowledged that there *is* a reality greater than the king and a power greater than force, and he even named it. The point was not lost on Darius either, who at the end of the story explicitly acknowledges the God of Daniel: "he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end. . . . for he has saved Daniel from the power of the lions."

Buddhists famously say that the obstacle is the path. The obstacle is the path. That is, all the stuff getting in the way of me being loving and kind *is* exactly what I have to deal with in order to be loving and kind and have the heart of Jesus. The obstacle for Daniel was fear and hatred of the Persian officials, so he let them do their worst as long as he could keep praying, keep re-grounding himself in the Source of life. The obstacles for us are whatever tempt us away from protecting the powerless; we must engage with those obstacles without letting them change our values or our faith in the power of love. For that, we need to return over and over

again to our Source, the God who delivered Daniel, and also be delivered. Let us pray.

God of all hopefulness, revive our hope, revive our faith, revive our spirits.

Let us rise up with strength and courage to stand tall and proud, to face injustice head on, to speak up for the voiceless,

to bring release to the captives, to reclaim this time of Advent as a time of preparation, of waiting and re-turning to our God.

May we use these weeks of Advent to focus on you. May we seek you out in quiet moments, in silent seconds, in places where we may not have imagined to meet you.

May we be bearers of the light to all who feel darkness overtaking them. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers. Amen.