

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Daniel 9:1-6, “Because of Your Great Mercy”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/12/2017**

Last week we began the season of Lent,  
but I had so much to talk about in Daniel chapter 7  
that I didn’t really give much space to help us with  
what this season is about.

There’s a lot to cover this week as well,  
but we can’t skip over an introduction to Lent.  
No matter how many times I think about it,  
it’s always helpful to consider what this season is about.

The season of Lent is a figurative desert journey patterned after  
Jesus’ own desert journey,  
which itself was patterned after the journey of Israel.

While Israel was unfaithful and wandered in the desert for 40 years  
because they would not believe God,  
Jesus wandered for 40 days and emerged proven as a faithful servant.  
And so each year we take 40 days of fasting  
(broken up by six days of feasting),  
to put ourselves in this time of testing,  
and preparation, which ultimately leads us to repentance.

**A preliminary word on fasting:**

**Great list from Facebook:**

Fast from judgment, Feast on compassion  
Fast from greed, Feast on sharing  
Fast from fear, Feast on peace  
Fast from lies, Feast on truth  
Fast from anxiety, Feast on patience...

That’s a beautiful list, but it *completely* confuses fasting with repentance.

**1) Don't fast from something you already know is bad for you.**

Rather, restrict yourself from something *good*.

Spiritual discipline is placing ourselves in a desert,  
intentionally deprived of good gifts

so that when life brings along a true desert experience, we will be prepared.

Fasting is when you stop doing something good  
for a little while to grow in character.

Repentance is what you do with regard to things like  
judgment, greed, fear, gossip, anxiety, and hatred.

If you need to repent, then repent – that's a wonderful thing to do during Lent,  
and then to keep walking in when Lent is over.

But if don't call your repentance fasting,  
because they serve different purposes.

**2) Don't forget that Sunday is a feast day.**

*Lent* is actually 46 days long for this very reason.

You have 40 fasting days and 6 feasting days from today until Easter  
(which would be like the seventh feasting day).

**3) Don't quit fasting simply because you become grumpy or irritable.**

When we're in the desert our true character is exposed,  
and we likely won't be happy with what we find.

But this is normal and leads us to understand God's grace.

**4) Don't fast because you think Jesus will like you better.**

Jesus already really, really likes you.

Fasting will not improve on "being made in the image of God."

Okay. That should help us out a little bit.

Now that you know the difference between fasting and repentance,  
we're going to turn our attention to Daniel 9 which begins with a key aspect  
of repentance, namely confession.

The reality is that no matter how long we've been at this Christianity thing,  
we all need to repent. It's not a one time deal.

Daniel enters into a very deep confession in chapter 9 verses 4-19.  
Why does he feel such a need?

Daniel has been reading his Bible, in particular Jeremiah.  
In terms of what is said here we are led to think of Jer. 25:8-14, 29:10-14.

If we're to understand what's happening in Daniel,  
we should read these passages as well.

Jer. 25 – Israel will suffer under the Babylonians,  
but in the long term the Babylonians will be held to account,  
and the time set for that to be completed is 70 years.

Jer. 29 – I know the plans I have for you, plans to give you a hope and a future.  
I will bring you back out of captivity  
and return you to the place you lived before exile.

So it's hardly surprising that we find Daniel  
after the Babylonian kings have completed their reign,  
being concerned about this prophecy.

“Now is supposed to be the time,” he's thinking.  
But Jerusalem is still a ruin, it is desolate.

The exile continues to some extent, and so Daniel turns to God in v. 3.

We read the first section of the prayer just a few moments ago.

Daniel begins by naming the scope of the sin that the people and leadership  
have engaged in, including rebelling against God's laws  
and not listening to God's prophets.

The second section, in vv. 7-11 continues these themes,  
but expands them to include residents of Judah, Jerusalem, all Israel,  
*and* Israelites who have been scattered into foreign countries  
like those who are in exile with Daniel.

In the third section, vv. 11-14, Daniel suggests that nothing like  
the disaster that has fallen on Jerusalem has ever happened before.

But despite that, Daniel says,  
“we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God  
by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth.”

The fourth section then seeks a remedy for all of this, vv. 15-19.

Daniel recalls that Yahweh is the one who brought Israel out of Egypt – therefore we know that God has the power to save and redeem out of even the worst of situations.

Twice in this section, the word “desolation” is used to describe both the temple and the city.

Vv. 17-18, “look with favor on your desolate sanctuary... open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your name.”

This refers back to Daniel 8:13, which we have not looked at in our series, “Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, ‘How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled—the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, the surrender of the sanctuary and the trampling underfoot of the Lord’s people?’”

This rebellion – or abomination – that causes desolation is commonly understood to refer to the acts of the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes the 4<sup>th</sup>.

Around 168 BC, a mini-revolt took place in Jerusalem while Antiochus was away. In response, Antiochus decided to press the Greek world-view on the Jewish population in very harsh ways. He banned keeping of the laws of Moses, and commanded the books of the law to be burned.

The most extreme aspect of this desolation took place when an altar to Zeus was set up in the temple and asked people to sacrifice pigs there.

This is very likely the situation that Daniel is praying with regard to, whether with prophetic insight about the future, or as a later person writing in the tradition of Daniel’s earlier work.

You see, the time had come for restoration – the 70 years had passed and the Babylonian kings were finished.

But instead of restoration of Yahweh's law, the people had experienced  
the most shocking and shameful sacrilege at the hands of foreign rulers.

As a result, the final verses of the prayer in chapter 9 is a desperate cry for help,  
"We do not make requests of you because we are righteous,  
but because of your great mercy. Lord, listen! Lord, forgive!  
Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay,  
because your city and your people bear your name."

Taken altogether, Daniel provides us with a master-class on communal confession.  
He doesn't let anybody in his community rationalize their situation.

He doesn't say, "Well, you've had it so hard  
that you really don't need to confess."

He doesn't say, "Well, you did your best as a leader,  
so who can blame you?"

He doesn't say, "This is all the fault of these foreigners  
who are taking over our country, we don't have to apologize."

No, in all things, he squarely faces the reality  
that the people of God had turned away time and again,  
and now they must turn back to God with their whole selves.

Lent is a time for us to return to this kind of collective confession model.

It's a time for us to humble ourselves as a local church,  
as part of the body of Christ in McMinnville,  
as part of the church in the United States,  
and even around the world.

We need to look at the fruit of our individual and collective lives,  
and recognize that we fall short of fully expressing the Kingdom of God.  
There is great value in coming to God without excuses,  
without rationalization, and simply admitting that we have  
failed and need to be rescued.

The value is seen in the second half of Daniel 9, where Daniel receives a vision  
of total redemption, forgiveness, atonement for sin,  
and the end of all the shame and misery that Israel has endured.

But this vision doesn't come after a sharp break with Daniel's confession – it arises smack in the midst of it.

9:20-21, **“While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel... while I was still in prayer, Gabriel...came to me.”**

While he was still in prayer and confession.

The connection between confessing sin and receiving the vision of coming salvation is not coincidental.

If we want to know the saving power of God, to understand where our hope for the future really comes from, we need to begin with honest, bare, unhindered confession.

It would have been easy for Daniel to point fingers and blame others, but he didn't. And the angel Gabriel comes to him with a message.

Now I wish that the message Gabriel came with was straight forward, but it really isn't. There are way too many options and details to get into here, so I'll just kind of present what I find to be the most plausible approach, okay?

Verses 20-27 characterize the remainder of human history that lay ahead of Daniel as a time in which certain things will happen:

- Transgression that appalls will be ended
- Everlasting righteousness will be brought in
- Jerusalem will be rebuilt
- God will bring an end to all sin
- Vision and prophecy will either come to pass or pass away
- A Messiah will come who will be involved in atoning for sin

These are the events of the end times.

The schedule provided for these events is stated to be “70 sevens” from the time the word goes out to rebuild Jerusalem.

This is usually understood of 70 weeks of years, which is to say, 490 years.

There is a lot of effort made to place these 490 years from a known decree to rebuild Jerusalem,  
but they all run into various problems.

It seems most helpful to understand them as meaning, “A long time,”  
and to recognize the symbolic framework that these numbers had to the Jewish people.

You see, every 7 years, Israel was to give a Sabbath day to the land.  
But after 7 rounds of these 7 years, they would celebrate the Jubilee.  
What happens when the Jubilee comes?  
That is when debt is forgiven and justice is done.  
Lev. 25:10-11, “Consecrate the 50<sup>th</sup> year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.”

It’s most plausible to me that the message Daniel received was describing a pattern 10 times more significant than the usual year of Jubilee:  
490 years (figuratively speaking – a long time)  
followed by a special era of blessing and forgiveness that will be ushered in  
by the Messiah, the Kingdom of God.  
That’s how we understand things to have actually happened, isn’t it?

In Galatians 4:4-7, the Apostle Paul summarizes the same story from the perspective we have after the arrival of Jesus:

“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba, Father.*”  
So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.”

None of this happened because of our righteousness, because we deserved it, because we had gotten our priorities straight.

It happened because of God’s great mercy.

So this Lent, let us confess boldly, plainly, without reservation.

Let’s throw ourselves at God’s feet, and trust in the great mercy offered to us through Jesus Christ, the Anointed One.