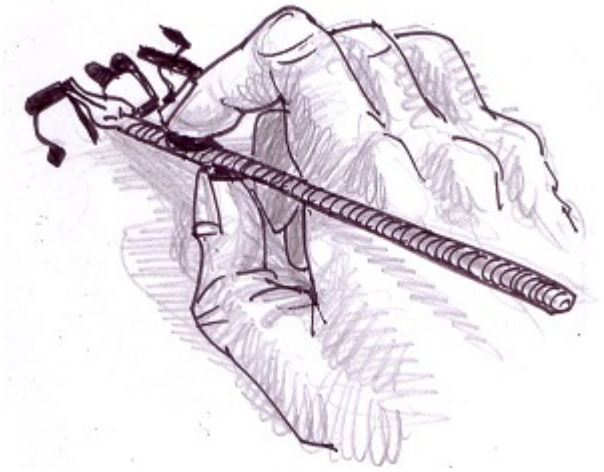
Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





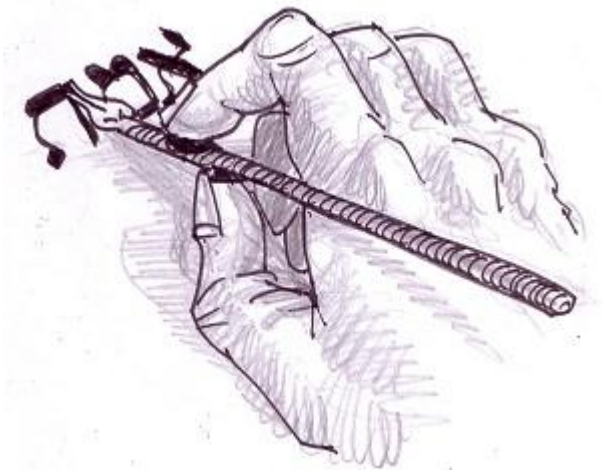
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“By your perseverance you will save your lives” (Luke 21:19).

Dn 5:1-6, 13-14, 16-17, 23-28; Luke 21:12-19

In yesterday's reading from the Book of Daniel, we learned the origin of the expression “feet of clay,” a way of saying that someone otherwise revered has a fundamental flaw or weakness. In today’s reading we find another familiar saying, “The handwriting is on the wall,” which means that something bad is about to happen.

Unfortunately for King Belshazzar, son of King Nebuchadnezzar, the mysterious handwriting on the wall of the palace dining hall, where he and his court are drinking wine from the sacred vessels stolen from the temple in Jerusalem, means that he has been judged by God for his idolatry and that his kingdom in about to come to an end. In a made-for-Hollywood scene of drunken pagans desecrating liturgical vessels, the ghostly handwriting on the wall demonstrates for us why these fantastic tales were so popular among the Jews.

The same Jewish exile Daniel who interpreted the father’s dream of the giant statue is still around a generation later to decipher the message spelled out for the son. Something bad is about to happen because Babylon has not learned the earlier lesson, that all power is in the hands of the supreme Lord who controls history and the fate of every nation. Just as Israel was once delivered into exile for its own idolatry, so God will soon rescue his chosen people by placing on the throne a benevolent Cyrus the Persian

Jesus grew up hearing these stories in the synagogue at Nazareth, and he would draw on another key figure in Daniel called the “Son of Man” to describe his own mission as the ultimate victory of God’s purpose in history. His death and resurrection were the handwriting on the wall that passed judgment on a sinful world, even as it announced the Good News of mercy for those who turn to God.

Luke quotes Jesus to reassure his church under persecution a generation later. Even if they are thrown into prison or brought before kings and governors because of their faith in him, they will speak with the wisdom of Daniel. Even if they are turned over to the authorities by their own families and friends, and even if some of them are put to death, their testimony will confound their adversaries. The same God who brought Israel back from exile and restored them to life is watching over the church.

It would not be hard to list many of the ominous events and failures we are witnessing today in our world and place them under the headline “The handwriting is on the wall.” Some people see inevitability in the swing of the political pendulum to nationalism over international cooperation or democracy replaced by demagoguery and fear-driven populism. Others bemoan the inevitability of climate disasters because the world has done too little too late to overcome its dependence on fossil fuels and its mindless habits of consumption.

Jesus ends today’s Gospel by challenging us to persist in the face of adversity and to deepen our faith in Providence. The dangers before us are real and will not be solved by magical thinking or simple piety. Believers must commit to the hard work of dying to self in order to live for the community, to build bridges to reconcile rather than walls to exclude and spite others. Fear is useless and leads to paralysis when what is needed is courage and confidence that every step we take to preempt the doomsayers with the Good News will be blessed and multiplied.

The handwriting on the wall does not get the last word. If we hear the Word that God is speaking, we have a chance to make something good happen.

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