

Lent
March 24, 2021
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Daniel 6:16-23
The Road to Redemption: Seal to Seal

Dear Friends in Christ,

Have you ever agreed to something that seemed like a good idea at the time but turned out to be a really bad idea? If so, you can relate to King Darius. His advisers encouraged him to have everyone pray to Darius for 30 days. Of course, the punishment for praying to someone other than the king was to be thrown into the lions' den. But Darius did not concern himself with those details. Everyone will unite around him. Everyone will praise him. And only his enemies would dare to refuse. He would not be upset if a few of his enemies were fed to the lions. Sounded like a good idea, until Daniel prayed to the Lord his God as he always did. Daniel was a trusted official for Darius. Daniel was loyal and a wonderful administrator. But Daniel would not pray to the king. And now it was a bad idea because Darius could not change his royal decree and could not appear to be weak before his people. This is what happened next according to Daniel 6:

"So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, 'May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!' A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep." (Daniel 6:16-18)

Tonight we focus on the word "seal" on the road to redemption. King Darius and other nobles sealed the den after Daniel was thrown to the lions. This sealing does not physically lock the door or entrance. It symbolically locked the door. The king presses his ring into something soft like wax and the impression of his ring is on the entrance. Anyone who opens the door without permission of the one who sealed it will face serious consequences. Unauthorized breaking of the seal could result in death.

If this was an action movie, Daniel's three friends would make a daring attempt to rescue him from the lions. Shadrach would be the brains. Meshach would be the muscle to break open the door and Abednego would sneak them past the guards. But this is real life and Daniel's friends had no chance of unsealing the lions' den to save Daniel from certain death.

Daniel himself was a very wise man. Perhaps he could come up with a way to save himself. But he is also in his 70s or 80s by this time. He is dropped into an enclosure with starving lions. He would have had no weapons to defend himself. Once they closed the door and sealed it, there would have been little light inside. And once the sun went down, he would have been in complete darkness not knowing where any of the lions were. He would have only heard their breathing and perhaps some low growls and hungry stomachs. No quick thinking or strength would save Daniel from certain death. The lions' den had become a sealed tomb for Daniel.

But could the most powerful man in that part of the world help? No. King Darius could not change his royal decree. The leader of the government and the rest of the government officials could not and would not change anything. Daniel's fate was sealed by their signet rings. King Darius did not want Daniel to die. He spent a sleepless night worrying about Daniel but the king would not rescue Daniel from his own decree.

His friends could not help. Daniel could not save himself. Even the king was powerless to save him. But you know the rest of the story. The seal on the den does not stop the Lord from saving

Daniel.

At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" Daniel answered, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king." The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. (Daniel 6:19-23)

Daniel's fate was sealed but the Lord rescued him anyway. From the seal on the lions' den, we now move forward to the seal on Christ's tomb. After Jesus died on Good Friday, his enemies remembered that Christ promised to rise from the dead on the third day. They asked Pilate for help in making sure Jesus stayed dead in the tomb.

"Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard. (Matthew 27:65-66)

Jesus is sealed in the tomb just as Daniel was sealed in the lions' den. No one could break the seal without the authority of the Roman governor. Roman guards were stationed to make sure no one tried. But no one was going to try.

Again, if this was an action movie, Jesus' friends would have made a daring attempt to save him. But they had run away in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested. Peter denied Jesus three times that night in the courtyard of the high priest. John was there at Golgatha to witness the crucifixion but we don't hear about the others. Later the disciples locked themselves in a room to hide from the Jewish leaders. The disciples were a mess. They had not saved Jesus from death and they were in no condition to try and open the seal on the tomb.

Pilate was the government authority in the region. He just wanted this whole situation to end. For a while he tried to keep Jesus from crucifixion. Pilate knew Jesus had done nothing worthy of death. Pilate even made a big show of washing his hands in front of the Jews to show that he was not taking responsibility for the death of Jesus. However, he still ordered the crucifixion. The earthly king of the Jews, Herod, only wanted Jesus for entertainment, to see some miracles. Herod was not going to prevent Jesus' death or unseal the tomb after death. Jesus' situation is very much like Daniel's. Both were sealed in a tomb with no help from friends and no help from the government authorities.

However, no official seal of a Roman governor was going to keep Jesus in a tomb. A handful of Roman soldiers could not keep Jesus from rising to life. The disciples, the women, the Pharisees, the chief priests and the Romans all thought the matter was settled. Jesus was dead, sealed in a tomb forever. But God raised his Son to life again. The angels broke the seal and rolled the stone away to show that the tomb was empty. While Daniel escaped without a wound on him, Jesus rose to life with the marks of his sacrifice for our sins still showing. His hands and feet and side showed how he paid for our sins. Instead of showing defeat, his wounds showed victory over sin and death on Easter.

From the seal on the lions' den to the seal on Jesus' tomb, we see the victory of our God. So what is the seal on your life? This is where some popular preachers in American Christianity would talk about how God can help you break free of the seal of poverty or break the seal of poor health or break the seal on broken relationships. That is really small and shallow thinking. God did not raise Jesus from the dead to show you how to get more money and live longer on this earth.

We were under a seal of death. Daniel, though a sinner, did not do anything against God to be thrown into the lions' den. Jesus did not do anything to deserve crucifixion for he did not sin at all. But the rest of us have sinned and the wages of sin is death. God told Adam and Eve that if they ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would die. There is nothing you can do to prevent death. Your friends cannot stop death from coming. No government official is going to save you from eventually dying. Death is sealed to us because of sin. And that is not the worst of it. Daniel was thrown into the lions' den and had to spend a night in the dark with hungry lions. Sinners whose lives end on this earth face the unending darkness of eternal death.

Our good intentions to do better do not remove this seal of eternal death from us. Our attempts at doing good for others do not remove this from our future. Surrounding ourselves with good friends does not remove the seal on our eternal tombs. And no governmental power in this world has the authority to break you out of hell.

Praise the Lord our God that when the seal was broken on Christ's tomb, our eternal home was changed from hell to heaven. This is a lot better than getting more money or a long life on earth. This is eternal joy in heaven! For God alone has the authority to free us from eternal death. Jesus alone paid the price to free us. The seal of death is broken forever by Christ.

Amen.