

Let me set the scene of our scripture lesson.

We are in the palace in Babylon – the Israelites are living in exile there.

Belshazzar is the king of Babylon and he’s having a banquet for a thousand of his close friends – and it’s a royal party with a capital P, as the Bible says, “The wine flowed freely.”!

You might find it strange to be having a party at this time because Babylon is under siege by the armies of Cyrus the Great and his ally Darius the Mede.

But understand, the Babylonians were very confident that they were safe behind the city’s invincible wall, so why not have a party?

King Belshazzar in the cloudy haze of too much wine, remembered that some gold and silver cups had been taken from Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar.

He orders that these cups be brought to the party so that he and his guests could use them to toast their own gods – and be clear about it - a deliberate act of contempt by this pagan king...

And as they feasted at their banquet, all of a sudden, a hand appeared and began to write on the wall opposite the king.

Belshazzar had, excuse the pun, a sobering experience! The story says his knees started shaking, about to faint, and he called for the palace psychic network! But they had no idea what the words meant.

And then his mother walked in and said not to worry, there’s an Israelite named Daniel from the exile who can interpret these words. He helped Nebuchadnezzar, now he can help you.

So Belshazzar orders Daniel to make an appearance at this royal shindig that has been shaken and stirred up!

First of all, Daniel tells Belshazzar that this is a message from ‘the most High God’ – that is, this is the God whom Daniel worships, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and as Daniel points out to the king, “the God in whose power is your very breath...’ is not happy with you!

Then he tells the king what the words mean:

“Mene” – which means ‘numbered’; Belshazzar’s days were numbered; in fact, his hours were numbered because he died that night!

“Tekel” – which means ‘weighed’; the king had been weighed in the scales of God and failed the test!

“Parsin” – which means ‘divided’; King Belshazzar was told that his kingdom would be divided and given to his enemies!

“Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin” – numbered, weighed, divided - this was the message for Belshazzar.

The handwriting on the wall revealed a menu of consequences for Belshazzar’s banquet of life!

This story, in a very dramatic way, tells us that we are accountable to God; no matter who we are, we are accountable to God.

This story shows that people who exercise power are accountable to God for how they use that power and influence, what they say, what they do.

This story shows that people of faith are accountable to God for how they challenge people and practices that are unloving, untrue, unjust.

This story shows how God’s word is interpreted to the people of power by God’s agents of love, truth, and justice.

And the interpretation of that word in this story about Belshazzar and Daniel is a stark reminder that everything you do has consequences.

Johnny Cash, long before he became famous, put this story into song:

*Well, the people feasted and drank their wine  
And praised the false gods of his time  
All holy things they scorned and mocked  
But suddenly all their mocking stopped  
For on the wall, there appeared a hand  
Nothin' else, there was no man  
In blood the hand began to write  
And Belshazzar couldn't hide his fright  
For he was weighed in the balance and found wanting...  
He was weighed in the balance and found wanting...*

Belshazzar thought he was dining at a party of privilege and power, but Daniel tells him he is dining at a banquet of consequences from the actions he had taken in his life, from the choices he had made as king.

The Talmud and the Midrash emphasize Belshazzar's tyrannical oppression of his Jewish subjects. He had chosen to follow the way of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Could he have gone another way – this was not a judgment written before the world began, but a word that came because his choices had consequences.

Mattie Stepanek put it in words I understand in his poem, as he writes:

*Even though the future seems far away,  
It is actually beginning right now.  
We must ask ourselves each day  
What we are doing that may have  
An influence on the future.  
...if something we said,  
Or if something we did or did not do,  
Had an impact on a single individual,  
Or if it trickled out to touch the whole world.*

He calls this poem “Momentous Reality” and so it is – a menu from which you and I choose how to live each day's banquet of life.

I think about another table, another feast – in an upper room.

Do you think that they realized that what they were doing would have an impact on a single individual, that the words, the actions, those moments together, would more than trickle “out to touch the whole world”?

How absolutely crucial it is that we realize the words “Take eat...take drink...do this in remembrance of me” have consequences.

How absolutely crucial it is that we realize our actions have an impact on the person in front of us, behind us, all around us, and touches the whole world.

We drink from the cup of salvation, eat the bread of life. But we don't take the bread and the drink and say “Oh, all mine!”

We serve one another; we share with each other:  
**the momentous reality of dining at the banquet of communion consequences!**

And when you and I live with a sense that our words and our actions have communion consequences, we live to love people, not exploit them.

We live to protect people from being exploited by unloving people.

We live to challenge prideful and powerful people who would use us as their tools, who would incite us to act towards others in unloving, unjust ways.

When we live mindful that the love of God demands justice, and the truth of God condemns injustice, we live as people of God's love and truth.

Let's put it this way: there's the handwriting on the wall, but there is also for us the handwriting on the heart.

Before each action you take, before each word you speak, before each choice you make from the menu of the banquet of life this day, ask yourself this question: Will it truly and permanently serve and share Jesus Christ?

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.