

A Bearable Society

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Some of you know that I've spent a lot of time studying the work of management thinker Peter Drucker. Much of what we've heard in this summer's sermons, as well as today's scripture, reminds me of Drucker's work. Witness to the rise of National Socialism in Germany, Drucker believed that a society comprised of well-managed institutions was the ticket to preserving both individual freedom and a sense of meaningful membership in a community.

My current work on Drucker emphasizes his religious and theological influences, which led him to believe that we could only hope to create a society that was, in his words, "bearable." The idea of a "bearable" society bothers many people; I'm reminded of Jack Nicholson's character Melvyn Udall, the obsessive-compulsive writer who asks a room full of depressed psychiatric patients, "What if this is as good as it gets?"

Historians have noted the peculiar combination of pessimism and cheery optimism that runs through the American character. Americans in particular, seem to enjoy envisioning two extremes of society: utopias and dystopias. You're probably more familiar with utopias than dystopias. The term utopia comes from Sir Thomas More's 1516 book by the same title, in which he describes a perfect civilization of peace and equality. Of course, More was not the first to envision a perfect world. Our own Bible contains numerous odes to God's perfection incarnate in the natural world; God promises Moses that he will deliver the Israelites out of Egypt to "a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:8). The idea of a "promised land" is highly utopian. As Heather said a few weeks ago, land was the "grace space" of Joshua's time, as the temple became the "grace space" of Jesus's era. Social Gospel Protestants used to talk about bringing the Kingdom of God to earth through direct action; enough reform would eradicate poverty and other evils. Given our track record of eliminating poverty, it's probably not surprising that popular culture tends to depict utopia as heaven, not heaven on earth. In Chris Rock's *Down to Earth* (a very bad movie), heaven is a night club with a bouncer in place of St. Peter. In the 1991 movie *Defending Your Life*, Meryl Streep and Albert Brooks occupy a heaven of perfect weather (filmed in Orange County, of course) and endless gastronomic

pleasures – which they can eat without fear of gaining weight. Disneyland is a commercialized utopia; I find it amusing that the park still has the original 1955 "Autopia" ride; only to a child could the automobile still have any utopian promise in overcrowded Southern California.

Dystopia, in contrast, refers to the opposite of utopia – a society where things have gone horribly wrong. If utopian societies are free from repression, war, and inequality, then – well, you have a picture of a dystopian society. Dystopia is the realm of science fiction, where modern writers love to point out what they see as the greatest flaws of their contemporary societies. The movie *Blade Runner* is one of my favorite dystopian depictions. It portrays a multi-cultural, diverse Los Angeles as a dirty, commercial world of crime and disorder that is redeemed through human connections. Although the idea of a dystopia is a modern convention, a product of industrialization and technological advancement, we see its seeds in the Bible. Last week, Laura McKinnon shared the Valley of the Bones with us, Ezekiel's imagery for the Babylonian captivity and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. And for a while there, before Jesus spoke up, perhaps for the Pharisees and certainly for the adulterous woman, the grace space Heather talked about looked a lot more like just one more example of a world gone wrong, where, in spite of our best intentions, people keep making lousy choices and the laws we so carefully concoct don't do a bit of good.

But, of course, the real world is neither a dystopia nor a utopia. It occupies that space in the middle, the place in between. And much of the work of living as human beings involves negotiating that space, making it "bearable." It doesn't feel very bearable at times, at least for me. Why can't we have a bearable life free from broken transmissions, crashing hard drives, screaming children, arthritic hips, cancer, and telemarketing calls? If only we could be in charge....

Which takes us to our scripture. Because who is in charge is at the core of the message. The book of Daniel opens during the Babylonian captivity, the context of Laura's sermon and Ezekiel's scripture we heard last week. Scholars believe Daniel was written during the 2nd century

BC, when the Seleucid Empire outlawed traditional Jewish practices in an attempt to assimilate the empire's subjects. Daniel's setting in the time of the Babylonian captivity and later Persian rule was intended to remind Jews of their history of previous subjugation, and to rally the troops to overcome their latest dictatorial power.

Daniel worked his way up the food chain to a very powerful position. As a Jewish captive during the Babylonian exile, he made himself indispensable to two Babylonian kings, Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, by interpreting dreams. By the time the Persians conquered Babylonia in 539 B.C.E., Daniel was well-established in the palace court as a wise man and trusted advisor to the ruling elites.

Darius was the new Persian king; there is a lot of scholarly debate about who Darius is in the scripture, but most scholars believe that he is actually Cyrus, the man who conquered Babylonia. Cyrus the Great is a towering figure in ancient history. In 538, he issued a decree allowing the Jewish temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem and any exiles to return to Judah if they so wished. Cyrus was a remarkably liberal ruler, who permitted Jews to openly practice their faith throughout the Persian Empire. The fact that Jews could observe Jewish laws without threat of punishment marked an important point in history; many stayed in Babylon, as they had adapted to life there, and, as Laura pointed out, had begun to think of themselves as Jews without the temple. Cyrus, therefore, not only paved the way for the temple reconstruction, but for an expanded diaspora identity. He was lauded by the Jewish people for his important place in their history; Isaiah refers to him as "the Lord's anointed" (45:1) and the Lord's shepherd (44:28), and the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the rebuilding of the temple following his decree. All in all, Jewish life under the reign of this Persian king was a virtual utopia.

Cyrus/Darius (I'll refer to him as Darius) was renowned for the vast bureaucracy he developed to administer his expansive empire. Darius' administration consisted of 120 satraps, vassal kings or governor-like figures who were responsible for overseeing provinces of the Persian Empire. The king also had three presidents, also known as "eyes of the king," who kept an eye on the satraps. Daniel was one of these three highly-powerful men, and the king was so smitten with him that he was about to appoint Daniel to be the big boss over everyone else. That's a lot of power for a conquered foreigner. Not surprisingly, the others became jealous, and decided that the only way

they could bring Daniel down was by his own faith. Isn't it ironic that they saw his faith as a point of vulnerability, when in fact it was Daniel's real source of power.

So they set the trap, and convince Darius to issue the decree declaring himself the object of worship for thirty days. This is another ironic moment, for, after all, the fact that Daniel could have worshiped openly was the result of the king's own earlier decree. Why did Darius agree to such a thing? The story seems designed to show us a character flaw in Darius: his lust for power. There is a parallel story in Daniel Chapter 3, involving the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. In both cases, the kings establish laws making themselves the objects of worship. And, in both cases, faithful Jews brazenly violate those laws.

However, unlike Nebuchadnezzar in the earlier chapter, Darius is distraught; he makes every effort to save Daniel, but the conspirators convince him that he cannot change the law. What does this say? Is Darius's edict more powerful than he? Is the law a higher authority than the man who made the law? Darius gets caught in his own web of will to power; the fawning bureaucrats convince him that he's created something more powerful than himself.

In essence, then, much of this story is about the nature of authority and from where it derives. Darius' edict has taken on a life of its own, like some Frankenstein monster. So Daniel is put in the lion's den, the den is sealed, and so is Daniel's fate, it seems. Yet Darius, the creator of the law, calls upon an even higher authority, albeit in an abstract, removed way, as he prays for Daniel: "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" Darius acknowledges not only Daniel's faithfulness to his Jewish religion, but also, on some level, the existence and power of God. The presidents and satraps were busy assuring Darius of his power, but Darius believes that, in this situation, he has no authority. The very law that he signed becomes more powerful than him, in his eyes. If he were truly the powerful "O King," he could, of course, reverse the order. But the law becomes king, and Darius its servant in this tale. Now Darius, too, must call on God's power to deliver, as he sees himself as powerless.

After an agonizing night, Darius rushes to the lion's den, only to find Daniel intact. Daniel never questioned which was more powerful: God or the law. His faith, of course, was steadfast. But Darius is a new convert. Or is he? He issues a decree declaring the God of Daniel the "living

God, enduring forever.” The wording of Darius’ decree resembles Cyrus’ edict allowing the temple rebuilding and religious freedom for the Jews. The real Darius, Cyrus, was a Gentile, who worshiped Marduk, the Babylonian god. The decree is not representative of conversion; it is merely an order. It seems that Darius still places more faith in the authority of the law than in God himself. The decree establishes God’s authority, among other gods, in Darius’ eyes. He retains his own power as king, demanding that his own subjects abide by this edict. It gets even uglier, by the way. Darius orders that the conspirators and their families be punished by being thrown into the very same lion’s den Daniel occupied. There, we are told, they are torn to pieces before they hit the floor, and, once again, we have the sacrifice Heather referred to. It seems we can’t get away from the blood sacrifice, the rooting out of sin or corruption to cleanse the community. In the Old Testament, this was a righting of wrongs, perfectly respectable. But to us (at least to me), it seems dystopic – indicative of a world where Darius’ compassion for Daniel has been compromised by his vindictiveness.

As a child, I remember vaguely learning about Daniel in the lion’s den as a simple story of faith. Believe in God and He will deliver you from scary things. Faith will bring you good things, a veritable utopia. But the story isn’t that simple. Darius is a flawed leader, relishing his power but totally misunderstanding it, convinced that human laws are fixed and immutable when those laws have no foundation other than human desire for power over others. He clearly changes course on a whim; Jews can worship. Then not worship. Then worship again. Though this doesn’t fit with the history necessarily, the story tells us a lot about the nature of human existence. Darius violates the entire concept of human dignity, the foundation of Judeo-Christian values, when he places the law above the life of his trusted advisor and friend. Finally, we have the conspirators and their families torn to pieces in the lion’s den, a picture of ruthless vindictiveness and, again, the law applied without any consideration of the human beings who it affects. This is a story of abuse of power on many levels. And Daniel still has to work for this guy? Not a happy ending in my book.

It seems even the authors of the Bible understood that life on earth often manifests as a “bearable” society. I know that even when I feel like I’m aligned with God, doing what I’m supposed to do, I run into lions, and I don’t always get a six-foot five angel to help me out. We started classes last week at Cal State Fullerton. Students face increased fees and larger classes – if they

can get classes, that is. Faculty have taken a ten percent pay cut to save jobs, and we bring in even more of our own supplies these days. The bookstore has no books, and seniors are unable to graduate because they can’t get needed classes. I think the University’s theme song should be Metallica’s “Broken, Beat and Scarred.”

At the same time, there are utopian moments. I see students so appreciative to be in school – many of them the first in their family to be able to attend college, and by the way, these students often are the hardest workers and most successful. I see adult cello students who are turning to music to find meaning in their lives now that the promises of easy money have proven empty. And in this church: Bible study groups that are places of support, a congregation that doesn’t swallow predigested theology, and innovative church leaders and lay people who are always striving to make this a better faith community. Everyday people who understand that we have an obligation as Christians to make our society a little more bearable.

Peter Drucker spent his life searching for a functioning society that would give us a middle ground between extremes. He decided that such a middle ground must involve a deep understanding of human nature: that we are flawed, imperfect, and susceptible to the very influences that led Darius to make the decisions that he did. I personally identify more with Darius than Daniel. In my zeal to do the right thing, I’ve been known to create my own lion’s den and put myself in there.

Our world may look like a den of lions, a dystopia, much of the time, but we, like Daniel, need to actually take on the lions. How do we do that if we don’t have that tall angel with us all the time? Drucker’s solution is like Daniel’s: only with guidance of a higher power, and in Drucker’s case, that power was our Christian God. Even so, Drucker believed we could only occupy a “bearable society” that was in the middle ground between a utopia and dystopia. The older I get, the more time I spend in this church, the more I feel that if we all face the reality of our own foibles as well as our strengths, our Darius and Daniel qualities, we can, perhaps, stop trying to create a utopia that can’t be, or settle for a dystopia that only exists in our minds. We can, in fact, work toward a world that is a little more than bearable.