

Sermon, 2-4-18

*The Path* Ch. 14

Good morning. Today, we heard a story from chapter 14 of *The Path*. The focus of the whole chapter is the story of Daniel and his friends during their time in exile in Babylon. Some of the stories, including what we heard read this morning, are well known and beloved stories from our childhood memories in Sunday school: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace; and Daniel in the Lions' Den.

These stories are amazing, even fanciful. How could they possibly happen? The point of them is not necessarily the veracity of every detail, but the deeper meaning in the story-- **learning to trust in God and live with integrity no matter what we may face in our public and personal lives.** It is the type of story that the Jewish people have had to rely on throughout their history. It is one that many Christians-- and even people of other faiths-- have found powerful when faced with the dangers posed by a corrupt and powerful public system that opposes God's best for the world.

The gist of Daniel's story is that he and his friends are exiles. They had been taken away from their homeland by the military conqueror of their nation, the Babylonian empire. The strategy of this empire after it conquered a country was to take away the king and the nobility, the military leaders, the religious leaders, and the artisans-- anyone that might possibly lead a revolt against Babylon. So the people remaining in Judah after its conquest were the regular folks who were less likely to offer resistance.

Yet the Babylonian king did not want these talented foreigners to be wasted. He had them put to work in different capacities in his administration. We're told that Daniel and his friends rose quickly in the ranks of public leadership. Because of their success, they had to learn to navigate a difficult path-- how to be good public servants while maintaining their faith and integrity. Not an easy task in any time and place.

At the beginning of the book of Daniel, in a part we did not read in *The Path*, we're told how this journey started for them. Daniel stood up to his captors in order to keep a simple, kosher diet instead of the extravagant, rich food that the king's people offered. The diet from the king was probably well intended. The Babylonians sincerely believed it would make the Hebrews stronger. It also might have been an attempt at culinary seduction, letting these young Jewish men experience the bounty from the king's table. Daniel and his friends resisted this temptation and stayed loyal to God and the common food of God's people.

In another story, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faced a more dramatic test-- would they be loyal to God even at the threat of death? Or would they compromise and worship a foreign idol? We're told they made the difficult but right choice to stay loyal to God alone. The Babylonian king reacted to their resistance with rage. He not only wanted to kill them-- he

wanted to destroy them publically, burning them alive in a furnace. History teaches us that the powerful kill people in this way to intimidate those that remain.

But the three men exhibited bravery much greater than the king's attempted intimidation. They said to him,

"If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up." (Daniel 3:17-18)

So their resistance made the king even more enraged. He had his people heat the furnace seven times hotter than normal—so hot that the guards who threw the three men into the furnace were killed by the heat. Yet we're told the three men survived, protected by a mysterious fourth figure who was in the furnace with them and had the appearance of a god.

These two stories set up the story we heard today—Daniel in the Lion's Den. So many of us have heard this story in Sunday school; or had it read to us by a parent at bedtime. It is one of the most famous in the entire Bible. Like other stories from Daniel, we understand it at one level as a really good tale. Yet with further prayer, study, and reflection, we learn what's beneath the surface of the story: **Daniel and his friends offer an example of faithful, non-violent resistance to the unjust and the powerful that resist the plans of God.**

Remember Daniel was part of the elite of the Jewish people. They had been taken as exiles to Babylon, the capital of the empire that had conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem, including the Jewish Temple. Like the story of Joseph in Egypt, Daniel's extraordinary gifts and accomplishments were recognized by the Babylonian king. The king is about to promote Daniel to the most senior position in the empire. This prospect provokes jealousy among Daniel's peers who do not want a foreigner promoted over them.

So they come up with a plan to bring him down. Since they cannot find any dirt on Daniel, they manipulate the king to make an unjust law that they know will discriminate against Daniel and his fellow Jews by requiring them to worship the king. Daniel knew about the unjust law—and he knew that he needed to resist it. He knew that following an unjust law would make him a participant in injustice. Daniel knew he needed to remain true to God's law instead.

So Daniel continued to pray to God alone. He prayed three times a day as was his practice as a faithful Jewish man. He prayed at home in private; but he prayed with his windows open so that the public could see what he was doing. Some scholars have said this was the first act of civil disobedience in the Bible. He was breaking the law openly so he would be caught and be able to stand as witness against injustice. Gandhi loved this story and Daniel's act of civil disobedience. It inspired him as he came to resist unjust British laws in South Africa and India.

Now we know the rest of the story about Daniel in the lions' den. God intervened. Angels closed the mouths of the lion so that Daniel is saved. We're told that the king is actually

relieved that the unjust law that he had been talked into signing did not destroy Daniel. The king is glad with how things came out.

Quite a tale. For us today, what does Daniel's story say to us? I'll be honest, it is hard for most Americans to get the deeper meaning because we have not been exiles. Our land has not been conquered. Except for POWs, we have not been forced to go to another land where our captors tell us what to do. For us to fully appreciate Daniel's story, we need to sit and listen to people who have had those experiences. People like Native Americans in our land and refugees from other lands. They would see things in Daniel that are hard for us to see.

Yet even though we do not share Daniel's experience as an exile, we can still learn from his story and be inspired, too. The Holy Spirit can breathe through the words we read and hear, and transform them into words that touch our hearts and minds and change us. There are at least two ways his story can do that for us.

First, reading Daniel's story with an open heart and an attentive mind can help us to develop **empathy**. Our world today is filled with Daniels. People who have been displaced from war torn countries. Exiles and refugees who have had to flee their homeland due to hardship, and violence, and the threat of death. Our Just Faith group visited Stewart Detention Center last year and heard from some modern day Daniels.

These are the stories of real people in today's world. Listening to them, we understand that Daniel is more than a good story. Daniel is a brave witness against unjust power. Daniel teaches us that exiles and refugees and those condemned to death deserve our empathy—and our respect for their courage and endurance. Their stories call us to come alongside them with compassion and solidarity.

Second, even though we are not exiles or refugees or people condemned to death, Daniel's story gives us an example of how we can **stand with** those who are; and stand against those who would make the lives of exiles and refugees and the condemned even more difficult. Daniel practiced civil disobedience against an unjust law by praying. He broke that law as a witness against it. For us in our world today, there are unjust laws and practices that we can resist, too.

A simple way I do that is to stand vigil at the prison in Jackson whenever our state is about to execute a person. What I am doing is not against the law—put it is a way to stand against a law that is unjust. Whatever we choose to stand against, the unifying point for us as people of faith is working for God's best for all people; and joining together to resist humanity's worse, even when it is cloaked in the law.

For all of us, Daniel's story bears witness for all time. In the second half of the book of Daniel—which is not in *The Path*—Daniel points to a figure called “the Son of Man.” Daniel prophecies that the Son of Man will come one day to set things right in the world. Jesus used this title of himself more than any other. Christians believe that Jesus did set things right

through his death and resurrection and began a process of reconciliation that will eventually be completed when Jesus returns again. Until that day, our job is to live with faith and integrity and in witness to God's best for humanity—God's universal reign of justice and love. Amen.