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Greetings in the name of the Lord! Our scripture focus is on the Book of Daniel.

Last week I watched a show on PBS about China's surveillance technology and their elimination of the cultures and languages of those who are not Han or speak Mandarin. In this story, Chinese authorities targeted two ethnic Muslim groups who have been living in the border areas for over a thousand years. That territory was invaded around 250 years ago and brought under Chinese control. Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, and has invested a lot of energy through technology to establish greater controls over speech, in Xinjiang, China's largest region.

Through a point system given to individuals, the government realized that the number of unsafe people was quite large. So they built around 1200 detention centers that hold an estimated 2 million Muslims. Experts have described this as the largest mass incarceration of an ethnic group since the Holocaust.

The Chinese government initially denied these camps, but satellite imagery reveals enormous prisonlike structures. Drone footage from Xinjiang appears to show large numbers of shackled prisoners; and thousands of Uyghurs Muslims living abroad suddenly lost contact with their relatives in China.

Cameras have been installed everywhere, with tremendous psychological effects. People don't feel free. They think they will be taken away at any moment, and therefore are fearful. They are mentally exhausted because they are always scared. If they walk down the street and don't have a particular look on their face, are not the party's nationality, or walk by a surveillance camera too fast, they can be tagged as dangerous and sent off to a training facility, to be fully indoctrinated to the current regime's way of life for years and worse.

Dr. Darren Byler, an anthropologist of Xinjiang at the University of Colorado, shared that in 2017 the Chinese state began a data collection process. They asked all people in that border province to go to their local police station and submit data, which ranged from DNA collection, blood and fingerprints, to speaking into a microphone to get a unique voice signature for each person, along with a facial scan.

Many of the Muslim's houses are marked with digital barcodes. Police officers come on a regular basis to scan the code, which pulls up a file on their smartphone, and then they make sure that only those people registered for that house are in the house. Uyghurs and other Muslims are required to install an app on their phones to monitor all content the government deems suspicious.

We can all be shocked by this, however, Christians throughout China have experienced much worse and for generations. There have been numerous stories of Christians having boiling liquids poured down their throats and other tortures. As a result, the Christians have been underground for decades. So, how does this affect us? For those who have a smart phone, you have likely hit 'ok' for a variety of apps on your phone. Most of those apps are from China. Some open our phones through facial or eye recognition. Some of us can hit the microphone and ask a question or request, also in our homes and cars. Some of these apps companies are listed in Xinjiang, where China's largest technology companies are located.

In human history, invading groups would generally kill the men and take the women and children as slaves or indoctrinate them into their culture. Often in biblical history, when a conquering country won the war, they would take the gods of that country and place them in the conqueror's treasury, demonstrating their god was more powerful than the conquered. When Assyrians were ready to invade the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the kingdom surrendered so no blood would be shed. As a result, the Assyrians absorbed the Jews into their culture and intermarried, resulting later in the Samaritans.

In today's scripture, a couple hundred years later, Nebuchadnezzar's armies invaded the Southern Kingdom. They killed many warriors and took the rest of the men, women, and children back to Babylon, leaving only a remnant of peasants to farm the land outside the destroyed city of Jerusalem. The rest were chained together, and walked to Babylonian towns to learn the new ways, language, & customs. Thankfully they were able to worship God and teach their faith in the outlying towns. This is when the synagogues were established.

In our scripture today, those of the royal family and nobility, who were good looking and without blemish, were brought together to learn the language and indoctrinate these young men to the culture of Babylon. To erase their cultural identity, these young men were given Babylonian names Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. During the 3 years of training, God gave Daniel, and his three friends, knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning, plus Daniel was given the ability to understand dreams and visions. At the end of three years, the king interviewed all those who were indoctrinated into the new

culture and found Daniel and his 3 friends 10 times better than all the other intellectuals of his kingdom, which sets up the other chapters, which I encourage you to read.

In chapter 3 we find the story of the Fiery Furnace, a question on Jeopardy Thursday evening. Because Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would not bow down to the golden image of the king when the trumpets sounded, they were brought before Nebuchadnezzar. He was furious with them and insisted they bow down or be thrown into the fiery furnace. They replied, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand O king. But even if he doesn't, we want you to know that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." As you can image, the king was furious and sentenced them to death.

He ordered the furnace be 7 times hotter than usual, and his strongest soldiers threw the 3 in. Then the king jumped up and said, "I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed. The 4<sup>th</sup> one looks like a son of the gods." The king came closer to the opening of the furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" They were not harmed and their clothes did not smell like smoke.

Nebuchadnezzar proclaimed, "Praise be to their God, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God." Then the three were promoted in Babylon.

The chapters continue with Daniel, renamed Belteshazzar, interpreting dreams and explaining God's hand writing on the wall. Daniel is promoted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest position in Babylon. He wears purple and has a gold chain around his neck. That night the Medes and Persians invade the city through underground tunnels, killing the king. Darius, the Mede, becomes the king and appoints 120 persons to rule the kingdom with 3 high administrators, one of them Daniel.

Very quickly the Babylonian leaders conspire against Daniel, a Jew, yet they can find no fault with him. Finally they talk the King into signing an edict that says for the next 30 days, no one can pray to any god or man except for the king. Darius thinks it's an excellent idea. When Daniel hears of it, he goes home and prays upstairs with the windows open towards Jerusalem, like he always had, three times a day, giving thanks to God.

The conspirators go to the king, first confirming the edict that said anyone disobeying would be thrown into the lions' den. The king answered, "The decree stands." Then they report Daniel's disregard to the order because he was caught praying to his God three times/day.

The king was deeply distressed and planned to rescue Daniel somehow. The men told the king he couldn't change his mind according to the law of the Medes and Persians, so Daniel was brought before the king. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" Daniel was placed in the den, a stone placed over the mouth, and the king sealed it with his signet ring. (like a wax stamp)

The king returned to his palace, fasted and did not have visitors or sleep. At dawn, the king went to the den and called out, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" Daniel replied, "O king, live forever! My God sent an 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 against you, O king."

The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out. Then the men, who accused Daniel, and their families were thrown in and consumed. Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius the Mede and the reign of Cyrus the Persian. I invite you to read the entire Book of Daniel. You will find many familiar scriptures and stories like the dream of the 4 beasts, the vision of a man, and the end times. The Book of Daniel ends with God's blessing, "As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days, you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance." So Daniel's and his 3 friend's very bad decades end with a wonderful promise of eternal life.

Six hundred years before Christ, Daniel and his fellow Jews stayed true to the God of Israel, despite being enslaved in Babylon. They likely struggled to find hope and joy during their times of despair, in a foreign land. This year seems as if we have been in a foreign land, with a new language and culture - far from all we have known. In these past 8 months, we have felt overwhelmed, despair, frustration, and endured grief on many levels, yet each morning we arise and begin a new day.

Those struggling with cancer and other chronic illnesses live this way day in and day out. Yet they find solace as they worship God and serve others. They look forward to the future with confidence and anticipation, trusting that the Lord is actively involved in their lives, working for healing, wholeness, restoration and peace, even the ultimate healing.

In the worst trials and tribulations, scripture reminds us that the Lord is with us and reigns over all, no matter what. Psalm 34 begins, "I will bless the Lord at all times." Then verse 18 says, "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and save those who are crushed in spirit."

Psalms 63 & 89 has verses which remind us that God is with us and will never forsake us. We never walk alone.

I love the new Christian song, with a country influence, by Zach Williams & Dolly Parton, *There Was Jesus*.

*Every time I try to make it on my own, Every time I try to stand, I start to fall,  
And all those lonely roads that I have traveled on, There was Jesus.  
When the life I built came crashing to the ground.  
When the friends I had were nowhere to be found.  
I couldn't see it then but I can see it now, There was Jesus*

*In the waiting, in the searching, In the healing, in the hurting,  
Like a blessing buried in the broken pieces;  
Every minute, every moment, Where I've been or where I'm going  
Even when I didn't know it, Or couldn't see it; There was Jesus . . .*

*On the mountains in the valleys there was Jesus, In the shadows of the alleys there was Jesus  
In the fire, in the flood there was Jesus. Always is and always was, oh - No, I never walk alone.*

*You're always there in the waiting, in the searching, in the healing, in the hurting, like a  
blessing buried in the broken pieces. Every minute, every moment, Where I've been or where  
I'm going Even when I didn't know it, Or couldn't see it; There was Jesus.* [Source: [LyricFind](#) -

Songwriters: Casey Beathard / Jonathan Smith / Zach Williams, There Was Jesus lyrics © Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd.]

As we continue to journey through this Covid 19 wilderness filled with loss and sacrifice, it is comforting to know that the God draws us very close in times like these. When Israel felt forsaken, in those years of exile, God drew close saying, "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." (Isaiah 41:10)

The God of the Bible draws close to those who have lost the life they knew through disaster, unexpected illness, the untimely death of a loved one, job loss, breakdown of a marriage, and violence to name a few. No matter how bad your day, days, or years are, God is with you, and will never forsake you. You may have a different outcome than you expect. You may find that a very difficult situation will never change however, God can and will work in your heart, mind, and soul to bring about a peace that passes understanding, and *There Was Jesus*.

*Have a blessed week! Pastor Debbie*