

Sermon for Sunday, Dec. 1, 2024—First Sunday in Advent

Daniel 6:6-27

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The Bible is filled with stories that illustrate the relationship between God and humans. Some of these stories are factually true. Some of these stories are fiction: stories created out of the imagination of people. That's not to say they are unimportant. They are actually VERY important because whether these stories are fact or fiction, they were crafted to describe the relationship between God and humans so that deep spiritual truths would be imparted to other people. They were written to encourage the faith of those people that live in the future.

Which brings me to the story of Daniel in the lion's den. Some of you may believe that it is factually true and that it actually happened. Others may believe that it is a fictional story. Whether it is fact or fiction, it still serves the fundamental purpose I noted earlier: it illustrates a relationship between God and one particular human: Daniel. Or perhaps I should turn it in the other direction: a relationship between Daniel and God because this story is as much about Daniel and the choices he made as it is about God's ability to save him.

Let's dig into the Scripture lesson now and consider how it might speak to us. As an aside: in the OT God the Father is referred to as YHWH and I will continue with that practice during today's sermon.

Daniel was aware of the law that King Darius had signed. He knew that if he continued his current religious practice of praying to God openly three times daily he was going to "get busted." We cannot explain the rationale for the political elite's actions against him. There is no indication that Daniel is mis-managing his government responsibilities. Our best guess is that the political elite are new to power and want to oust anyone affiliated with the previous regime.

Daniel prays anyway. He has always prayed openly in the past and he has no intention of stopping that practice. Please note: his prayer practice is relatively private. It includes going to an upper room *in his home*. He does not force anyone else to pray with him nor does he attempt to force others to convert to following YHWH. This was his personal devotional practice...a practice that worked

for him. He did not find it important to force this practice on anyone else.

This part of the story might lead us to consider whether we would have the fortitude to continue our religious practices under similar circumstances. The decree was only for 30 days. We can imagine shrugging it off and saying something like, "God will be fine without my prayers for 30 days. I'll return to my prayer practice after the time is up." But what's really going on here: this decree was really a loyalty test. The new political elite wanted to force Daniel to choose between King Darius and YHWH. If the political elite set up this 30 day decree once, what will prevent them from doing it again and perhaps for longer, or even forever? To whom does your loyalty lie?

When the king approaches the lion's den the next morning he discovers that Daniel has survived. As Daniel explains it, "the Lord closed the mouths of the lions." How many of us have faced lions; lions that were circling around us threatening our very lives? The apostle Peter wrote in his first letter in chapter 5:8-10 "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." Now Peter saw the adversary as one who would craft and promote challenges to maintaining faith in Jesus. And that is a fair appraisal, but I would expand his thought because it's not just about the temptation to return to a sinful way of living nor is it about "keeping your eyes on Jesus." At this moment we have a very long prayer list. Many of the names on that list have figurative lions circling around them and those lions might just take their lives. They have called upon us to pray with and for them to help keep the lions at bay. Lions can be the physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual challenges that we face in this world.

Returning to the passage from Daniel. His response to King Darius is, "My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him;" *Because I was found blameless before him*. Those are important words. Daniel describes himself as blameless. As we consider whether we could live up to Daniel's example we must remember that we don't need to. What do I mean? I mean simply that in our baptisms we are washed clean. In God's eyes we are already blameless. And this is not our own doing it is a gift from God. We do not need to be as strong as Daniel or live up to his example in order to prove our faithfulness.

Now being blameless in God's eyes does not mean that we have the freedom to act in any way that we want. No, we are called to a higher standard; a standard exemplified by Daniel. Daniel was not living in Jerusalem. He was living in a foreign land and mixing with people of many different faiths. He had to figure out how to live as a follower of YHWH and still survive in Babylon. The same is true for us. We are followers of Jesus. Our call is to figure out how to live as a follower of him and still survive in this world.

Figuring out how to "survive" may present challenges. From the larger story of Daniel we learn that he had established certain faith practice boundaries that he would not cross. In an earlier story (one that we didn't read today) we learn that he chose to adhere to Jewish dietary restrictions. From today's story we learn that he was determined to continue his prayer practices. In both cases he was threatened with harm. But through it all he remained utterly focused on YHWH. This focus is perhaps the most important lesson we can take from today's Scripture reading. When the lions circle around us our most important task is to keep our eyes on God or perhaps better to say, keep our eyes on Jesus.

The apostle Peter understood the challenge of living in a world opposed to faith in Jesus. I'm going to read a slightly larger portion of Peter's words now. "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you." (1 Peter 5:8-10)

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<sup>i</sup> Charleston, Rev. Steven, *Ladder to the Light*, Broadleaf Books, Mpls. Page 37.

You may ask, how then shall we live? How do we resist the adversary, and remain steadfast in faith? I found something in *Ladder to the Light* a book written by retired bishop Steven Charleston that may provide some guidance. "Let your love be your strength. You do not need anger or judgment, for they are mirrors of the soul that say more about you than others. You do not need righteousness or correctness, for these pretenses are always transparent. You do not need superiority or power, for they will always betray you to false pride. When you feel called to stand for what you believe, take up love as your witness. Love will shine through with the clear message you wish to convey. It will withstand any pressure to compromise your truth or bend to deny that truth. Love will unite your friends in struggle and speak to the hardest heart with whom you contend. *Let love be your strength and you can stand before lions and never fear.* <sup>i</sup> (Pause and repeat) When you feel called to stand for what you believe, take up love as your witness. Allow the Holy Spirit to work within you and *let love be your strength.*

Let us pray, O God, as we too wait for Jesus' return, help us to keep our hearts always in you. Even amid the social pressures and opposition we face, give us the courage to stand firm in our faith. Continue to guide and direct our ways in you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.<sup>ii</sup>

<sup>ii</sup> Haugerud, Rev. Barb, Advent prayer published by Luther Seminary's *God Pause*, November 27, 2024