

Pentecost 13 August 18, 2024 Daniel 6:6-27
Daniel in the Lions' Den

Daniel and the Lion's Den is probably the most well-known of all the Danielic narratives, due in part to its popularity as a children's tale. The story begins in the period of the Persian Empire. The Persian Empire replaced the Babylonian empire as the power, beginning in 539 BCE.

Empires come and empires go. Empires change but they always need trained experts. We had Joseph the Hebrew serving the Egyptian Pharaoh. Daniel, like his predecessor Joseph, was a wise courtier among the Gentiles during the reign of the Persian king Darius.

Last week we learned that Daniel was a displaced person. He was an alien, a stranger in a strange land. The Babylonian Empire had overpowered the Assyrians and now was trying to take over the world. The Babylonian king commanded his palace master to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, four young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. They were to be educated for three years, so that, at the end of that time, they could be stationed at the king's court.

Imagine what that must have been like. Daniel was a teenager when ripped from his home and forced to learn Babylonian or Chaldean and become one of them - not that different from the indigenous children ripped from their families and placed in residential schools, although Daniel's life and outcome turned out to be much more fortunate. However, Daniel was still displaced.

Yet, Daniel was faithful in his displacement. It didn't take him long to distinguish himself above all the other governors and prefects. Just because Daniel was an alien in Babylon, didn't mean he couldn't fully engage in the culture and thrive in it, just like Joseph did in Egypt. In fact, Daniel became so influential with the Babylonians, that he convinced the king to release the Israelites from their captivity and allow them to return to Jerusalem.

Today's story comes after the other three Hebrews - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego - endure the fiery furnace, and there's a change in power at the top. The Babylonian Empire is done, the Mede-Persian Empire has replaced it. Darius is the new king, but he hasn't learned from his predecessor not to mess with the power of the God of Israel.

Darius may have been new at ruling an empire, but he was far from naive. To establish himself and his rule over the former Babylonian territory, he appoints 120 satraps, each responsible for a certain geographical region. Darius' major concern was corruption. He knew that political power presented an opportunity not only for oppression, but for corruption. Darius was afraid that he would not be able to adequately supervise the satraps with such a large kingdom, and they would enrich themselves at his expense. So he appointed three governors over the 120 satraps. He wanted to create a system of accountability which would prevent him from suffering loss.

It seems unusual for the Hebrew who had been so intimately associated with the Babylonian kingdom that Darius had just overthrown to rise so quickly to a position of power under this Mede. We can assume that, as before, God gave Daniel favour in the sight of this king.

Daniel's rise to power under Darius was not the result of his remarkable accomplishments under the Babylonians. Daniel "began distinguishing himself among the commissioners and satraps", because of the "extraordinary spirit" he possessed. Darius recognized not only Daniel's wisdom, but his integrity and faithfulness. We are no longer looking at the teenage Daniel working in the royal court. Daniel was around seventy when the Babylonian Empire fell. Here was a man Darius could trust in a leadership position who would not cause him to "suffer loss". Recognizing his unique abilities - Darius planned to promote Daniel, placing him in charge of all the commissioners, prefects and satraps.

News of the king's plan soon spread to the regional leaders. This was a crisis. The common view is that Daniel's peers were jealous. But for them, it was more serious. His ability, and especially his honesty, threatened them. The king was thrilled to have a man of ability and honesty - but not so for the corrupt leaders -

Daniel threatened their corruption. They could neither corrupt nor deceive Daniel. If he were to rise above them, they could not continue their corruptive ways. Of course not every satrap and commissioner was corrupt.

Exploiting King Darius' vanity, a conspiracy is born. Keeping Daniel from rising above them and ruling over them would be no easy task. To accomplish their goal to discredit Daniel and do away with him against the king's will, the conspirators must deceive the king. The group represented itself as spokesmen for the entire number of prefects, satraps, commissioners, officials and governors. Their deception led the king to conclude that Daniel agreed with their proposal. Daniel's faithfulness to the king was flawless. His obedience to the laws of the land forced his enemies to pass a new law directed exclusively at him and his destruction. The only fault they found with Daniel was that he was too godly.

These sly courtiers propose a decree stating, "Give orders that for the next thirty days any person who prays to anyone, divine or human — except to you, Your Majesty — will be thrown into the den of lions." After all, their proposal, on the surface, seemed to be in the king's best interest - helping to establish his rule over the former kingdom of Babylon.

By requiring all prayers or petitions be made to Darius, he would be acknowledged as the source of every blessing. The law was for a limited time - 30 days - plenty of time to discredit Daniel. The conspirators insisted the decree be made a law so it could not be revoked. Darius signed the law - unaware of where it would lead. Despite the decree, Daniel continued to pray, as is his custom, leading to his discovery and the king's reluctant decision to cast him into the den of lions.

Hearing about the law - what options did Daniel have? Obey? Appeal to the king to repeal the law? Cease praying for thirty days? Limit prayers to praise and thanksgiving, setting aside petitions for thirty days? Simply continue to pray privately?

Daniel chose none of these options. He could not redirect his prayers to the king. He could not appeal to the king to revoke the law. Daniel knew his needs were daily needs and that he should petition God for those needs. Petitions could not

be delayed. Daniel did not want to break God's law in order to obey man's law.

With all the plotting and scheming around him, Daniel had an enviable steadfastness in his faith. He is aware of the new law that was passed to trap him, but he continues to pray on his regular schedule, in a visible place. He doesn't construct his faith to fit anyone around him.

Why did Daniel not just pray out of sight? Is prayer not a personal matter? Later, does Jesus not advocate private prayer and express disdain for public prayer? Jesus was not denouncing public prayer but was teaching his disciples that we should not try to appear pious in order to gain the praise of others. Prayer is not for show. So, what compelled Daniel to pray publicly knowing the outcome - being thrown to the lions?

The issue was a matter of law and of public policy and practice, so its violation must be public. His opponents expected him to disobey the law publicly - and he didn't want to be a hypocrite. Daniel had a life-long habit of praying toward Jerusalem three times a day - for all the seventy plus years of his sojourn in Babylon.

Many of these prayers of petition were for the blessing of the king and kingdom of Babylonia as confirmed in the Book of Jeremiah. The conspirators' law intended to prevent the very prayers which brought God's blessings on this nation and its people. The Jewish captives brought the blessings of God on the kingdom of their captors. Jerusalem not only symbolized the hopes of the Jews, but it was the place their God met with them and heard their prayers. God chose to mediate his blessings through his chosen people, the Jews, and through his chosen place - Jerusalem.

Poor Darius simply didn't get what he had done with the new law. This law - brought forward by the conspirators, in effect, made Darius the mediator between all "gods" and his subjects. The king was not declaring himself to be a "god". Neither did he put himself above "all gods". His injunction did make him the link between his citizens and any "god".

The conflict between Daniel's faith and the injunction was unresolvable. According to the Old Testament scriptures, the God of Israel is God alone and those who would be blessed will be blessed through his people, Israel. There is no way Daniel could redirect his petitions to the king, rather than to God, and not face Jerusalem.

This meant Daniel's window would be open and he would be visible when he prayed. We can almost see the conspirators deciding how they will catch Daniel breaking the law. His prayer life was so consistent, they could pick the time to gather outside his window to catch him in prayer, and they did.

Accusing a man favoured by the king was dangerous, the conspirators had to be sneaky. They began by asking the king about the law. He acknowledged that the penalty for breaking this law was to be cast into the lion's den. Only at this point did the conspirators shock the king with the announcement that Daniel has been found violating this very law. Their accusation was meant to impress upon the king that Daniel had not merely broken the law once, he was persisting in violating this law, showing in their minds complete disregard for the king and his authority. Darius was greatly distressed and spent the remaining daylight hours trying to find a way to deliver Daniel from the lion's den.

Reluctantly, the king gave the order for Daniel to be brought in and thrown into the lion's den. Darius speaks words of encouragement to Daniel. He assures Daniel that His God would most certainly deliver him. Having spoken words of faith and hope to Daniel, he had Daniel lowered into the lion's den, the stone cover put in place and sealed. No man dared tamper with the stone to deliver Daniel.

In his anguish about Daniel, the king is sleepless and unable to eat, until he rushes to the lions' den in the morning. He calls out to Daniel to see whether God has saved him, and it seems that he's expecting Daniel to be fine. The nervous king doesn't peek in. He calls out to Daniel, with the expectation of an answer. "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you constantly serve, been able to deliver you from the lions?" Seeing Daniel alive and well prompts the king to acknowledge the God of Israel. All through the story, his words have been hesitant and conflicted. Now he speaks with clarity and purpose, praising God by saying:

“For he is the living God, and he will endure forever. His kingdom will never be destroyed, and his rule will never end.”

With great pleasure, the king gave orders to remove Daniel from the lion's den. With great indignation, the king also gave orders to arrest those who had maliciously accused Daniel, along with their families, and had them cast into the den of lions.

In the world of Daniel, prayer is not a polite remembrance around the dinner table. In the world of Daniel, prayer is not a tool for getting what you want from God or making you feel better.

In the world of Daniel, prayer is not a pious navel-gazing that isolates or protects the praying one from trouble.

In the world of Daniel, prayer is a dangerous and powerful act of resistance against the principalities and powers that disorder God's good world and oppress God's beloved people.

In our own time, there are many excuses why we don't share our faith. We can easily blame the media, schools, and other organizations. But the most effective witness has always come, not from organizations, but by people of courage and conviction. The most convincing witness is YOU. When you believe and live boldly out of the faith God has given you in Jesus Christ, others will notice and the word will spread.

We need to examine the times when, like Darius, we refused to stand up for injustice and remain passive and ineffectual. And we need to look at Daniel as a model for us on suffering innocence. This chapter of Daniel calls for self-reflection on Christ. Daniel is a model for all people of faith, not sitting by and passively hoping someone else will do what he is called to do, but risking his life to live faithfully and boldly.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE - AUGUST 18, 2024

Gracious God, we pray for your Creation, for the many worldly issues that create divisions, conflict, inequalities, prejudices, hardships, and travesties that affect so many. We pray for those who need prayer today including ourselves. Along with our petitions we also bring our hopes, longings and dreams. Trusting that, in your time and according to your purposes, you will bring wholeness and well-being to all peoples and to your Creation.

We pray for your church in its glory, aware also of its wrongdoings. Help us to repent of our corporate sins, to increase our respect and love for other denominations, to live the love of Christ in our relationships, including our neighbours, and minister to the needs of the neglected and the lost. May your Spirit invigorate our spiritual lives to encourage one another in fellowship and prayer, and to live optimistically with hope, by faith and love where the secular world is prone to wring its hands in despair.

Holy Friend, even when we feel at times that our prayers seem weak and ineffective in the face of the world's enormous needs, remind us that your infinite love and patience is able to bring about your will with all the resources you have and with wisdom that reaches beyond our human understanding. May the full and inexhaustible grace of Christ, crucified and risen, keep us praying with faith and serving with humble compassion.

We pray for those who feel too harried, too broken, or too despairing to pray for themselves. We pray for many who are subject to ongoing injustices and abuse or neglect. Help restore dignity, self-worth, and a sense of belonging in their lives. Surround them with your presence and comfort them with your everlasting arms of love. Bring peace and hope into even the bleakest of situations.

We pray for all those who feed the hungry, tend the injured, stand with the oppressed, house the homeless, watch with the dying, comfort the grieving, encourage the handicapped, empower the weak, and befriend the forgotten and fearful folk. Give them resilience and compassion in serving the ongoing needs of others. Help us to widen our love to include all your children on earth.

We pray for young people who are embarking on studies this fall, or who are discerning their talents and seeking purpose and a meaningful path forward as they find jobs. Support all school administrators, teachers, support staff, students and parents as they prepare for the beginning of another school year.

We pray for young people whose education and lives are torn apart by the impact of war and conflict preventing them from growing into the persons you have made them to become. Give them hope for a better future.

Accompany refugees, displaced persons, and all who wander without home. Shelter them from all enemies. Give them safety and stability through others sent to serve them.

Bring about a quick resolution to the imminent strike and disruption of goods and services of our railways and the collapse of access to markets for fruit tree growers in the Okanagan as harvests are gathered. Increase the will of all to bring about solutions that support sustainable and just distribution of food and needed goods in our country and throughout the world.

Send your Spirit of forgiveness and renewal to all families, communities, and nations. Reconcile us to one another, as you have graciously reconciled us to you.

Gather together all people who feel removed from you because of crisis, fear, or illness. We continue to pray for healing for Bishop Kathy and Pr. Kristin Steele. Surround them with your comforting presence and peace, and embrace them with your unfailing mercy.

Invigorate the various ministries in your church and encourage new avenues of serving others, of deepening our spiritual practices including praying and proclaiming, nurturing and teaching the Good News. Bless the leaders of your church; Bishop Kathy, Bishop Susan, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers with hearts full of your love and mercy. We pray for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara. Today we lift up the congregations of Ascension Lutheran in Nelson and Mount Zion Lutheran in New Westminster.

Protect and watch over all firefighters, evacuees, and volunteers as they grapple with fires throughout the provinces and territories and in other regions of the world. Give them strength and comfort them as they deal with losses and trauma. Protect all wildlife as they flee the fires. Restore the charred lands and waters.

We pray for all people, communities and nations facing natural disasters including typhoons in Japan, hurricanes, rains and flash floods in Puerto Rico, Bermuda, and the Caribbean Islands. Keep them all safe. Provide the necessary services and materials for the hard work of recovery and rebuilding.

Accompany all who travel and are far from home; help us to welcome the visitors among us and receive from them what they have to offer.

God of mercy and healing, you who hear the cries of those in need, receive these petitions of your people. We leave this in your care, along with all else that is on our hearts, trusting that your loving presence is with us in all life's circumstances. May your will be done. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen

Gathered together let us pray as Jesus taught ...

Our Father ...