

Back to Sunday School sermon series
Daniel and the Lions' Den – Daniel 6
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Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

As I was preparing this sermon for today, I realized that almost all the sermons in this “Back to Sunday School” series have dealt with the issue of fear versus faith. Moses and the Israelites trapped at the Red Sea, diminutive David facing off against the giant Goliath, Jonah being swallowed by the whale. In every story, the main character has to overcome their fears with faith.

That's no different in our story today, where Daniel must trust God to keep from being eaten by the lions. I note this because I think it's a commentary on what we face each day. All of these stories are beloved Bible tales for our youngsters, and all of them have the subtext that the world is a scary place, full of giants and lions, but that God is bigger than anything that makes us afraid. Is that only a message that kids need to hear? Are there metaphorical monsters under our adult beds, keeping us awake at night and questioning God's goodness or protection or, even, existence? What do these stories have to say to us?

Today's story about Daniel in the lions' den is one of the best-known stories, yet I believe it's one of the least understood. You know the ending of the story, but do you know why Daniel was in the lions' den in the first place? Do you know who put him there? There's a whole backstory leading up to the finale that has a lot to say to us today about the relationship between our fears and our faith.

The book opens with King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invading Jerusalem and forcing some Israelites to serve in his palace, including a young man named Daniel. From the very start, Daniel's faith in the Israelite God is challenged. Will he honor his God, even in the face of punishment from his new Babylonian boss? In several stories, Daniel chooses his God over his king, and the king is actually so impressed he keeps giving Daniel more responsibility.

So, at the start of chapter 6, the king makes Daniel his second-in-command, putting him as the boss over all the king's other servants. How do you think that sat with those folks? I remember in high school I worked at a movie theater with some of my friends, and one day I learned that one of my friends was promoted to assistant manager, meaning he was now my boss. Seriously? This guy who goofed off at school and stood around eating popcorn instead of working was promoted over me? Now, I did those exact same things, except I ate more popcorn than him. Still, I didn't think it was fair.

Here's how Daniel's contemporaries reacted, starting in verse 4: “So the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for complaint against Daniel in connection with the kingdom. But they could find no grounds for complaint or any corruption, because Daniel was faithful, and no negligence or corruption could be found in him. The men said, ‘We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.’” Daniel was such a rule-follower that his enemies knew the only way Daniel would go against the king was if he had to put his God first.

So, the enemies devise a plan. They go to the king and say, “Hey King, you're really awesome! In fact, you're so awesome that you should make a law that everyone can only worship you for the next thirty days, and if they don't you should throw them in the lion's den!” And the king, being a king, said, “Sounds good to me.” So, he signs the law.

Now, I think the king should have been skeptical of this plan for a couple reasons. First, the group started with over-the-top flattery. That should be a clue right there that someone is trying to get something from you. I try to live by the axiom that you're never as good a person as your dog thinks you are. But the king had a big ego and fell into the trap. The second reason the king should have been skeptical is that the leaders say that all got together and agreed. When have you ever known a big group of political leaders to get together and agree on something? And we know that's not true because Daniel was not included in the group. This is not a noble law; it's a trap!

So, how does Daniel respond? Does he protest to the king? Does he fire all his subordinates? Listen to verse 10: "Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously." He does what he always does, what he's done every day since being exiled in a foreign land. He prays to God. It's what he's done on good days. It's what he's done on bad days. It's what he's done on sunny days and rainy days and boring days. Doesn't matter what's going on that day, Daniel takes time to pray to God.

Aha! That's just what his enemies were hoping for! They catch Daniel bowing down to his God and run and tell the king, who's a big fan of Daniel, "Hey king, remember that law you signed?" The king said, "I sure do." The enemies say, "Well, Daniel just broke it." And the king says, "Dang it! I really like that guy." But a law is a law, and even though the king tries to find a loophole, the noose is already tightening around Daniel's neck. So, the king says to him in verse 16, "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" Daniel is thrown into the lions' den and a stone is rolled in front of the doorway to seal it.

The king spends a sleepless night fasting and worrying, and first thing in the morning, runs to the lions' den and calls out for Daniel. And Daniel responds in verse 21, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; also before you, O king, I have done no wrong." Notice that Daniel still honors the king while giving God the praise. The king was so excited that Daniel was still alive that he celebrated by taking all of Daniel's enemies, their wives, and their children, and throwing them all in the lions' den. As you can imagine, they didn't fare as well as Daniel, but that part was conveniently left out of your Sunday School lesson.

The story ends with the king, the foreign king, the king that invaded Jerusalem, issuing a decree that all people shall tremble before the God of Daniel. The king says in verse 26: "For he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end. He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth; he has saved Daniel from the power of the lions." Nice ending, huh? After this story, the book of Daniel gets into some really weird visions about beasts with four heads and a flying goat. It makes no sense to me, so Steph is going to preaching about it next week.

Although this story is well-known, Daniel not often lifted up as an example of faith. He doesn't work any miracles or part any seas. He doesn't do anything spectacular. The one thing he's known for wasn't even about him. He just sat there rubbing the lions' bellies while God did all the work. In many ways, there's nothing extraordinary about Daniel. He's greatest quality is how un-extraordinary he is.

But that's the point. Daniel is so consistent in his faith, so reliable in his integrity, that his enemies have to make up stories about him to get him into trouble. He didn't rip the tags off mattresses. He never rolled through a stop sign. If the shampoo bottle said, "wash, rinse, and

repeat,” you can bet he repeated. He was so trustworthy, so faithful, that he even prayed three times a day to God. Why? Because that’s what God asked of him.

Can we claim such obedience to anything? I know I can’t. I know that for a week after I visit the dentist, I’m brushing and flossing like a maniac. But then, as time goes on, I’m too tired to floss, I don’t brush as often as I should. Sometimes it’s hard to follow the rules, isn’t it? That’s especially true when it comes to faith, because we don’t have someone looking over our shoulder, holding us accountable. God says to worship and to pray and to serve, but we get busy, and we forget things, and before we know it, faith is just one option among many in our lives. Not for Daniel. Given the choice between not honoring God or losing his life, he chose death.

I doubt many of us will be faced with the same dilemma as Daniel. But we do face the same choice: choosing faith over fear, choosing the God of Daniel over the gods of this world, maintaining our integrity and being obedient to God, even when it’s not convenient or self-serving. Every day we are asked to choose God first. Wouldn’t it be great if we lived lives that were so full of integrity that our enemies had to make something up about us to get us in trouble?

That consistency is the lesson I take away from this story. Daniel doesn’t just pray when it’s convenient or when he’s desperate. He prays always. Three times a day. And that habit of prayer forms patterns in his soul, like a path worn from years of walking on it. Daniel was consistent in his prayer, even on days he had nothing particular to pray about, so that when he had to choose between faith in God and saving his own skin, he chose God, because he knew God was faithful.

I’m reminded of what Paul writes in Philippians. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” If we take everything to God in prayer, everything from the incredibly urgent to the yawningly mundane, then the peace of God will fill us, guarding our hearts, protecting us from the lions of anxiety, of worry, of fear, that seek to devour us in this life. Notice God doesn’t miraculously whisk Daniel out of the lions’ den. Instead, God stays with Daniel in the midst of the lions, guarding him from harm.

When we choose obedience to God over the seductions and temptations of this world, then our lives become lights, shining with integrity, so much so that our enemies have to make stuff up about us and even people who don’t believe in God take notice. For this to happen, we don’t have to be superheroes of faith. We can simply be Daniel. We are not called to be flawless, but we are called to be faithful.