

Daniel – Faithful Servant

Sunday August 17, 2014

©Rev. Heike Werder

The Congregational Church of Needham

(I made it my challenge to preach from an outline for part of the sermon that Sunday. That is why it looks a little different than my usual sermon manuscript.)

The story of Daniel

1. Introduction: Daniel listed under the prophets (major and minor prophet not a ranking thing, but it is about the length of story/writing); Daniel is counted among the major prophets
2. The most familiar story about Daniel told in Sunday School – Daniel in the lions’ den; beyond that we don’t know much about this prophet or the content of the message
3. Honestly – he is not your usual prophet; did not hold a prophetic office
4. Who heard this story first? Israelite Captives in Babylon or were facing one of the other challenges that followed their return to Judah. Life was difficult. The enemies were big. The fields had been fallow for 70 plus years. There were a lot of questions about how they could trust God after all he had sent them into foreign exile for all those years. The message of the book of Daniel is a response to these doubts and to these difficult times.

Daniel’s story

- 605 BCE; kingdom of Judah besieged by Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar; Jerusalem and temple were destroyed and the elite (kings’ family, wise men, prophets, priests, young strong people) was taken into exile
- Daniel and his friends (young kids of 10 to 11) taken to the king’s court, educated for three years, and then put into king’s service – not so bad, really!
- Very early on, Daniel and his friends show great character and faithfulness; refuse to eat from the king’s kitchen (unclean, not kosher!) but asks for vegetables and water (instead of meat and wine – not knowing where the stuff might come from)
- asked to be compared with the rest of the people to see if they would lose strength because of their diet; turns out they did better and that put an end to the food dispute
- D. and his three friends fared well – smart, strong, wise – stationed in the king’s court at the epicenter of power.
- Daniel distinguishes himself by being gifted in the interpreting of dreams; D. successfully helped Nebuchadnezzar understand his dreams which earned him a special

place in the kings' court; he was so successful that every following king held D. in high regards for that gift

- Still: so far so good!
- Sometime later, the king gave order to build a golden statue – the one he dreamt about representing himself – and that this statue should be worshiped and prayed to. Everybody did so except D. friends – Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego – they refused because they prayed to their own God and would not bow to idols; D. is not mentioned in this incident. Did he compromise?
- King got mad, condemns them to be burnt in the furnace; the three were confident that their God would keep them safe. “We have nothing to fear.”
- And they were right. God protected them. And because of that, the Jews were allowed to pray to their own God for good. They were given honor and privilege and good positions in the kingdom.
- All the kings that followed Nebuchadnezzar were impressed with Daniel, and for all of his life he remained at the different kings' courts. Darius the Mede was the last in the line of five kings that Daniel served.
- D. place of honor created jealousy among other servants; tried to find fault with D. but came up empty.
- Hedged a plan: got Darius to issue a ruling that for 30 days that no one should pray to nay god but to Darius along. King thought this would be fun...those disobeying would be thrown into the lion's den.
- D. heard about this decree but continued to pray to his own God and therefore got himself into trouble.
- King could not take back his orders, even though his favorite broke them.
- D. was to be thrown into the den but king hoped that his God, like he had done before, would protect Daniel.
- The lions did not touch D.; God had sealed their jaws.
- King happy that D. was okay when he was released the next morning; happy in fact.
- Instead the conspirators were arrested with their whole household and fed to the lions.
- Daniel never returned to his homeland. He remained in Babylon until the end of his days.

That is the first part of the book of Daniel, ch. 1-7. Ch. 8 – 12 are more like what we might expect from a prophet – a record of his visions. They are apocalyptic in nature. It talks about the end of time and interestingly, talks about the resurrection of the Dead. Pretty scary stuff! I am not going to deal with the scary stuff today but only with the first part of the story, ch. 1-7. I am going to pick up the scary stuff on August 31, 2014.

Inspirational take-away: What can we take away from the Daniel story? I have two points.

1. How about some serious diet advice! You think I am kidding?

That is exactly what the Saddleback Church did, that megachurch led by Rick Warren.

(Info taken from the website: www.danielplan.com) Warren noticed something about his parishioner and himself: many were overweight. One pm Warren baptized over 800 people and added up the average weight of American, he had lifted a whopping 145,000 pound into and out of the water.

Running a big church I am sure is fun for the good pastor Warren, but he also realized that he has taken not such good care of himself. Adding up all the disparaging health news about the growing epidemics of obesity, diabetes and heart disease in America and around the world, Pastor Rick decided to do something about it.

He stood before his congregation the next Sunday and confessed he had been a poor steward of his health and asked for forgiveness. He admitted that he had only gained 2-3 pounds a year, but he had been the pastor for 30 years. He asked the congregation if anyone would like to join him and get healthy. Only expecting a couple hundred people would respond and join him on his quest to get healthy, he was overwhelmed when over 12,000 people signed up on that very day.

After preaching about a man named Daniel in the Bible who refused the King's rich food in order to honor God, Rick realized that he needed a practical, scalable plan that people could easily follow. He recruited three nationally known doctors – Dr. Daniel Amen, Dr. Mark Hyman and Dr. Mehmet Oz (PBS and TV favorites) – to coach him in getting healthy and help design The Daniel Plan program for the church to follow. All three doctors generously offered their time and expertise for free because they all are passionate about transforming health in America and around the world.

Over the first year of The Daniel Plan, over 15,000 people collectively lost over 250,000 pounds; people from over 190 countries participated online.

The Daniel Plan is based on our story – Daniel and his friends asking for healthier food options than what came for the king's kitchen.

Other biblical principles are in place with the Daniel plan: faith, food, fitness, focus and friends with faith and friends being the “secret sauce.”

I always found it a bit “hokey” to make faith part of trying to lose weight. Faith based diet programs always made me cringe. Even I can be taught differently.

Think about it: All of life is better in supportive community. So why not weight loss? (Weight Watchers does the same but without the faith component, I think.) God designed us to thrive in relationships. The process of getting healthy and staying healthy relies on the support and encouragement of friends as much as it does on the right foods.

2. The second inspiration I take away from this story has to do with the power of faith

The book of Daniel is an allegory; not based on the lives of real people in history. But like any good story it does have a purpose.

The book of Daniel became the symbol of a more glorious past, a faithful Jew, who even under threat would not compromise his beliefs or deny his God.

The hidden message for all faithful Jews is heard in King Darius words to Daniel as he condemned him to certain death in the lion's den: "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" And of course God did deliver him.

By telling this representative tale of faith, truth was brought to light: God was faithful to the faithful; God had not nor would not desert God's chosen.

This is what this story meant to those who heard it then, 3000 year ago, and it still carries the same meaning.

We all have "Daniel in the Lion's Den" kind of moments in our life time: the one we love cheated on us, or worse, dies without notice; a mother of three is diagnosed with a brain tumor; your child is diagnosed to bi-polar or OCD or autism; your investment firm went bankrupt and your IRS and retirement saving are gone; you have been down- and outsized. Lots of bad stuff, really bad can happen to us in life that would make it easier to give up on faith, a loving God, hope, and mercy.

Each person of course reacts and copes differently. Some keep to themselves and try to work through their crisis alone. Others fall totally apart for some time. Some give up on faith.

And others turn to those who love and care for them for help and solace and comfort, and prayer. Some people just know how to tap into the faith of other as well as into their own faith in God. Like Daniel, they would - no matter what happened and because of their faith in God, stand among the lions and come out from the den unscathed. People like that deserve our admiration for their courage, their strength and their faith.

My lion's den might be different from yours. We all have them, and with life being what it is there will always be something that compels us to walk in faith or run in fear. Everyone endures moments of crisis, times when standing before our open windows, as Daniel did, and praying to our God, as Daniel prayed, we are driven to call upon the faithfulness of God to encourage, strengthen and increase our faith.

How we survive the lion's dens in our lives depend a lot on how and whom we turn to in our need. It also depends a lot on whom we want to be when we come up and out of the pit.

There's no question in this story of Daniel who he wanted to be when he exited the lion's den. Going in Daniel knew he was a **child of God**, knew also that he must put his faith in God. There lies his hope. He also knew that God would be faithful to him. Coming out, Daniel was whole, saved, and free. Nothing could harm him. God had promised his protection and God had fulfilled his promise. God delivered his faithful one.

But even if Daniel hadn't survived the blows of this life, he had been prepared to welcome a new hope and a new existence. His God hadn't and wouldn't abandon him to the abyss. As Christ taught us by his action on the cross, even death can be redeemed. We may not see that in the darkest moments of our lives. Perhaps Daniel didn't see it at first either, especially when he was ordered into the lion's den to die, but in the end, God's truth won out and Daniel's faith was justified.

Others may tell us that we have no cause for faith, that there is no hope in our particular circumstance; that we will not survive.

But God has told us to trust, to believe, and to lean on God's strength when we don't have much of our own.

At the time this story was written, it held a message for those whose lives were constantly in danger. It was a message of hope to a people who had almost forgotten what they ought to be hoping for. It reminded them that God's grace delivers, saves, heals, restores and redeems. So many years later, and regardless of its lack of historical validity, this story has a message for us, for all of us, reminding us that no matter what lion's den we are subjected to God's grace will heal, save, restore and redeem us too. We will come out of our particular crisis, loss, sickness, or struggle with new hope knowing that we are never alone. Whatever the outcome, we have a trustworthy companion walking with us. For certain, when we enter our lion's den, God walks in with us.

We have choices in the matter: we can try to fight the lions ourselves, we can let them eat us, or we can faithfully trust God to get us through.

My advice ... my hope for us? Let us chose, even dare, to be Daniel! Let us dare to put our lives into God's hands, no matter the circumstance or the outcome. Let us dare to have complete faith in God's love for us, and bravely dare the lions that are ever ready to rob us of peace. May we dare in a kind, loving, and saving God. Amen.