

“Daniel in the King’s Court”

Daniel 1:1-21

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Opening Prayer

After a month of time spent looking at Jesus’s birth throughout Advent, this morning we go back to where we were at in the fall. We are going to go back to looking at those tried and true, famous stories from scripture that many of us learned about in Sunday School. Even if you never learned about these stories as a youth, there is a high likelihood that you have heard at least something referencing them before. Previously we worked our way through Genesis and Exodus, looking at creation and the patriarchs and Moses. Today we jump way ahead in time to look at Daniel. Daniel 1:8 sets the mood for this entire book and today’s sermon in particular. “But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king’s choice of food or with wine which he drank; so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself.” The key for understanding the entire book of Daniel, including this particular account, is knowing that all of Israel was under foreign control in the nation of Babylon. It was a time in Jewish history known as the Exile, and it was a time of great crying out to the Lord for deliverance. In the foreign land, there was a significant struggle to keep oneself from being defiled, from turning away from God. It is into this difficult scene that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were thrust. Daniel, the writer of the book and the most prominent protagonist in it, has a name that is appropriate. Daniel means “God is my judge.” He lived up to that name Beloved, and left his fate in the Lord’s hands more than once.

The four young men were deportees from Israel, likely teenagers, who were of high birth. Being nobility, and being distinguished by their good looks and intelligence, were brought into the king’s court to be brainwashed. Taken from their burned out home of Jerusalem in chains, they were going to be a part of a plan to subject the Jews completely. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had a program to control conquered nations by brainwashing their young nobility and using them to further Babylon’s interests. It is no different than the systemic brainwashing that took place behind the Iron Curtain just a few decades ago, and it is no different from various similar programs that exist today. The goal is always to twist and bend and manipulate until the conquered one becomes a part of the conquerors. To become a part of the Babylonian empire meant foregoing all of one’s heritage as a Jew, and even more egregiously, it meant defiling oneself religiously. Defilement in the religious sense is all about idolatry, worshipping someone or something other than the Lord. Daniel and his friends in chapter one were trying to keep from being defiled by the food and drink of the king. The food and drink, namely choice meats and cheeses and wines and other delicacies, were all dedicated to Babylonian idols. In essence, to eat and drink of the king’s choice food was to worship the false idols of the empire. Daniel and his three friends, despite their young age and the ease of life promised to them, decided to reject the delicacies of the empire.

It may seem a small thing to us, to refuse the king's food, but to do so was to invite death. This was a part of these three years of "education" and it was meant to turn them into followers of Babylon. It was bribery, and it was to make them complicit and motivated in continuing the subjugation. If you want a good comparison, this is exactly the same as the mobster telling the young cop to take the money or suffer horrifically. All options are taken away, it is either a life of ease and pleasure, or a life that is forfeited. These four men have, from the outside, no other options. Everything has been taken from them. They are far from home, they have been removed from their families, and they have been given new names. Those names, a part of the brainwashing, are meant to move them from thinking about being Hebrews to instead incorporate them even more fully into the Babylonian empire.

Daniel, which means "God is my judge", is renamed Belteshazzar, which means "Bel protect the king." Hananiah means "The Lord is gracious." He was renamed Shadrach, "Command of Aku." Mishael means "Who is like the Lord?" He was renamed Meshach, "Who is what Aku is?" Finally, Azariah means "The Lord is my Helper." He was renamed Abed-Nego, which means "Servant of Nego." Under extreme pressure, admirably, these four teenage men do not break, but instead take a stand in the only way they can. They cannot rename themselves, they cannot simply walk home to Jerusalem, they cannot walk out of their forced studies, but they can refuse the king's bribery and idolatry laden meals. At great danger to themselves, they go to Ashpenaz (the king's overseer) and request to be fed only water and vegetables. Verse nine shows how God worked to keep them safe. "Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials..." God, as always, made a way for His faithful servants.

"And the commander of the officials said to Daniel, 'I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king.' But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 'Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be observed in your presence and the appearance of the youth who are eating the king's choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see.'" After a ten day test where Ashpenaz gave them only water and vegetables, Daniel and his three friends begin to excel in every way over their fellow young men. Seeing them do well, they are allowed to continue on with their own special diet. In time, when they are presented before the King of Babylon, they are found to be wiser and more gifted than all the other youths. They are brought into Nebuchadnezzar's personal service, and they were ten times better than all the other advisers in the kingdom. Beloved, God not only protected these four young men, but also advanced them forward and used them for the benefit of all. They would, as we will read over the next few weeks, go on to be used mightily by the Lord for decades. Daniel himself would continue to serve as an advisor until his mid-late 80's, until the time where the Lord would bring His people back from exile.

There is a ton we can learn from this account Beloved, but I would have us focus in on just a few take-aways this morning. The first is that I would have all of us recognize that we have many Daniel's in our midst. While this is true in an adult context, I would speak first to our youth. If you see a middle school or high school or college kid following Christ, know that they have given up much security to do so. Being an adolescent or young adult is never easy, but that is doubly true when one rejects the sinfulness and idolatry of the world for that which is infinitely better. Kids who don't drink, smoke, or party stick out. Kids who wait until marriage are made fun of in our society. "Goody-two-shoes" or "lame" or "boring" are their adjectives given them by the world. We often forget, Beloved, so be proud of those students. Even if you don't see them every week, when you do see them make sure to let them know how proud you are of them. They have made the eternally good choice to follow Christ, much to their own peril, and they deserve to know how appreciated they are for doing so. You youth, you are the future of the church, you are equal members in Christ with the rest of us, and we are blessed to have you here and we want to see you succeed... even if it means foregoing the king's food.

The second point of remembrance is for those of us who are a bit older. We can find ourselves in a situation similar to these four young men as well. If you have ever been asked by your boss to fudge a few numbers, or asked by someone you love to lie on their behalf, or found yourself in any other situation where the choices are doing something that is a little wrong or doing what is right but suffering for it, then you have found yourself in a Daniel situation. No matter who you are, you can expect there to be several such instances in life. Do the right thing, even if it costs you. The Lord is your judge more than anyone in this world. It is He who we are accountable to first and foremost. If that puts us at odds with a sinful world, so be it. Don't forget Daniel's example, and note how He made a way for him and his friends even in the midst of great peril. The Lord will do the same for you, as many of your fellow believers here (and maybe you yourself!) can attest to. Do the right thing Beloved, even if the threat is great, for the Lord does not leave you alone and He rewards your faithfulness.

The last point I would have you take note of this morning Beloved, is that much like Daniel and his friends, we don't have the ultimate say in everything that is happening all the time. Daniel and his friends were not responsible for the deportation of the Jews, and it was not happening because they had done anything wrong. Several of the things they found themselves embroiled in, they had no control over. They couldn't go home, they couldn't rebuild Jerusalem, they couldn't get out of the brainwashing program that was forced on them, they couldn't even change their names back. While they had no control over any of that, they did have control over whether or not they were going to defile themselves. In time though, by God's work in them and their faithfulness, indeed they did change the Babylonian world. We, like they, are called to act upon the things we have control over... we are not responsible for anything else. In God's time though, who knows what might happen?

Beloved, there are some things that you and I cannot fix alone in this world. We cannot go over to the Middle East, or Southeast Asia, or the Horn of Africa, or Ukraine, and fix the conflicts there. We can pray, and we can look for opportunities to be impactful, but that's it. We cannot

change hearts and minds in our world, country, or community to follow Christ. We can pray, we can be outreach focused, and we can look for opportunities, but that's it. You probably don't have the agency to fix corruption in your company overnight, or to solve out denominational issues, or to change our country's politics to be Christ centered, but you can still do many things. The things we have been given control over should be our focus. You and I can keep ourselves from becoming defiled. We can choose to not engage in gossiping at work, we can choose to be holy with our words to one another, we can choose to not eat the king's meat. Does it cost us? Of course. We will stick out in a world of immorality by working to be undefiled. We can choose to continue to put Christ at the forefront of our lives, and we can choose to be His hands and feet in the world as He has called us. Will we be looked at differently? Absolutely. You might be labeled a Jesus freak, or a religious nut, or just shunned by others. Is all of this worth it? 100% it is. Being different and unique and Christ-centered is the whole purpose! Who knows what God will do with your faithfulness? There is no way Daniel could have known that he would become the biggest influence of Godliness in the Babylonian kingdom for the next seven decades when he went to the official and asked to eat only vegetables... but this was the first step. Beloved, I pray that we would learn from Daniel, and take that first step ourselves, to not be defiled by the king's food. Let's pray.

Closing Prayer