

Message for August 21, 2022

Daniel 6:10-16

1 John 3:21-24

It was two hundred years before the birth of Jesus and once again God's people were ruled by foreigners. This time they had fallen under the rule of a man named Antiochus Epiphanes and his great goal in life was to turn all of his subjects including the Jews into Greeks. Amongst other things, this meant worshipping Zeus and the other gods of ancient Greece. All sorts of pressure was brought to bear on God's people to agree to this and, inevitably, some people converted reasoning that it was easier to switch than fight; what did it really matter what god a person worshiped? This was the situation when someone sought to encourage God's people to remain faithful. He did this by telling a story about the prophet Daniel who had lived about 300 years earlier.

It was during the time of the Babylonian Exile and the Babylonian king was a man named Darius. Unlike Antiochus centuries later, Darius had no interest in converting people to his own religion. Darius in fact didn't even care whether a person was a Babylonian or not; all that mattered to him was that a person did their job and did it well. One of his greatest servants was a Jew named Daniel and Darius planned to reward him by putting him in charge of the entire kingdom. Not surprisingly perhaps, this aroused a great deal of discontent and jealousy amongst some of the other civil servants because Daniel wasn't even a Babylonian! They decided that they would put a stop to this, and they came up with a most clever plan.

What they did was convince the king to pass a law that required everyone in the empire to worship him, and only him, for a period of one month. Anyone who was caught worshipping another god during that time was to be punished by being cast into a den of lions. What the plotters were gambling on of course was Daniel's integrity and that he would remain faithful to God no matter what. The king agreed to the proposal and the plotters were not disappointed either. Daniel heard about the new law but decided that in good conscience he could not obey it. He continued to openly worship God as he had always done and sure enough, the plotters caught him. They went to the king and told him that Daniel had broken the law and that there was only one thing to be done; Daniel had to be fed to the lions! The king saw the trap, but it was too late and there

was no escape. The king spent the entire day trying to find a way to save Daniel, but it was to no avail. Daniel had knowingly defied the law and had to be punished.

Daniel was thrown into the lion's pit and it was sealed shut. The king returned to his palace, but he could neither eat nor sleep. He was up all night long and when daybreak finally came, he rushed to the pit. When he got there he discovered, much to his amazement, that Daniel was still alive. Joyfully the king ordered that Daniel be removed but then, with the greatest of anger, he had Daniel's accusers thrown into the pit where they quickly perished.

This then is the famed story of Daniel in the lion's den. This is a story about many things but perhaps above all, it is a story about remaining true to God and holding on to one's convictions no matter what the cost may be. This of course is why this story has long appealed to God's people. Indeed this is why this story was even included in the Bible. The nobility of being true and faithful to God no matter what the circumstances appeals to what is best in all of us. In the words of the old hymn inspired by today's passage, "Dare to be a Daniel! Dare to stand alone! Dare to have a purpose firm! Dare to make it known!"

When we think about it though, it takes a lot of daring to be a Daniel doesn't it? In all honesty, how many of us would have acted as Daniel did? How many of us would have defied the law and continued to openly worship God, even at the risk of our very lives?

In past sermons and messages, I have made mention of my high school trip to Russia or the Soviet Union as it was then called. One Sunday morning found me outside of a church in Moscow. The worshipers entering it were elderly women for the most part and the authorities made no secret of the fact that they were watching them. While worship was allowed, it was most certainly frowned upon because the Soviet Union was officially an atheist state. Those women certainly weren't doing themselves any favours by quietly defying the authorities. I wondered that morning as I have often wondered since; what would I ever do if I were in their shoes? Suppose there were police officers standing outside the doors of this church every Sunday morning taking note of who was coming in. Would I have the courage of my convictions and keep on worshiping? Or would I hide my faith, justifying or rationalizing my behaviour? What would you do in such circumstances?

The truth is that while we would like to be Daniels, the reality is that precious few of us really are. And the fact that so few of his people were Daniels is what moved Saint John to write this morning's second scripture passage.

This passage was written by Saint John for the members of his congregation. They were not being persecuted at the time but even so, they were in just as much danger as Daniel had ever been. They were threatened, not from without but rather from within. They were tired of trying to be faithful and trying to figure out right from wrong. In fact many of them had lost their confidence in God and were on the verge of giving up on Christianity altogether. And what was John's advice to these sad, tired, and discouraged people?

Cling to the basics, the basics quite simply being that they believe in Jesus and love one another. Belief and love; these are the basics and the core of the Christian faith. At those times when our prayers haven't been answered the way that we hoped for, and at those times when life and its struggles seem to be just a little too much for us to bear, we should cling to the basics as best we can. We should continue, as best we can, to believe in Jesus and love our neighbours. We should note though exactly what John said. He said that we must believe **in** Jesus and not just **about** him, and there is a difference between the two.

Believing **in** Jesus implies having a vital, living relationship with him. Believing **about** Jesus on the other hand implies believing in a set of ideas or intellectual propositions about Jesus such as that he is the Son of God, died for our sins, and was raised from the dead. These beliefs are important because what we believe does matter. When we are struggling though we need more than a set of beliefs about Jesus, we need Jesus himself; the knowledge and even the experience that he is with us sharing our joys and heartaches.

As St. John also said though, when we are sad, tired, and discouraged it is not enough just to have faith in Jesus, we must also do something more. We must look beyond ourselves and continue to try and love others helping them with their needs, worries and concerns. We must try and focus on them rather than ourselves.

Now this of course is far easier said than done. When we feel sad, tired, lost, and discouraged it is hard to look beyond ourselves. So often when we feel

this way we want to withdraw into our own little shell and shut the world out. While this is perfectly understandable, this is probably the last thing that we should do. Focusing on others and their needs may help us get our minds off our own troubles. Focusing on others won't make our troubles go away but it may help us put our own troubles in perspective. Being involved in the lives of others and seeing God's presence and involvement with them, may help restore some of our own lost faith and confidence. Truly the times when we may feel the most like withdrawing into our own little world may be the times when we most need to get out there and be involved in the larger world around us.

Dare to be a Daniel; that is the message of today's first scripture passage, but it can be very hard to be a Daniel. It can be especially hard when it seems as if the lions are prowling around us and that they will surely devour us. But when we feel like we are anything but Daniels, we should remember John's advice to cling to the basics; to believe in Jesus and love our neighbours. Our relationship with Christ and others won't necessarily make all of our troubles magically disappear, but they will help see us through.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we once again come to you in prayer this summer morning.

There is so much that we can and should be thankful for but above all, we thank you for calling us to be your Son's disciples. We may pride ourselves on our faith and commitment and think that we are Daniels, when in reality we are anything but. So often our actions don't live up to our brave words but even so, you still love us and use us to fulfill your will; for this we give you thanks. Help us and your people everywhere, to live up to our calling. To this end we pray for the ministry of your church which truly is your Son's body here on earth.

We pray this day for this good earth on which we live. We pray for all those who are suffering because of the droughts and dry conditions. We pray for all the places devastated by the wildfires, and also for all those striving to cope with heat and high temperatures that they have rarely, if ever, experienced before.

We pray for healing in the lives of all those who are ill, and for comfort in the lives of all who grieve; we especially pray for the sake of those who we know who are ill and grieving.

This past week was the first anniversary of the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban and we pray for the people of that unhappy land as they face the prospect of hunger and economic collapse. We pray for the women and children who've lost their right to education and have seen their hopes of a better future taken away.

We pray this day not only for Afghanistan, but Ukraine as well as the war there grinds on. Help us to learn from the past; that contrary to what some people like to think, war and violence are not the answer.

We ask these things in the name of your Son who truly is the Prince of Peace. Amen