

Series: Joy in the Journey

Today: Daniel—Resolve, Obey, Trust

Text: Daniel 1:1-21

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

On our journey of faith this morning we are stopping by to visit Daniel. Daniel's prophecy was written during the period known as the Babylonian captivity. This is a time when Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, declared war on Judah and besieged the city of Jerusalem. He looted the palace and the temple. According to II Kings, *"he also took ten thousand captives from Jerusalem, including all the princes and the best of the soldiers, craftsmen, and smiths. So only the poorest people were left in the land (II Kings 24:14)."* Daniel was among those who were captured and taken away from his homeland to be indoctrinated into the customs and traditions of his captors.

The events in the prophecy of Daniel occur about 600 years before Jesus. In the beginning Daniel is a teenager, approximately 15 years old. When the book closes, he is about 90 years old. During his long life God allowed him to serve under a succession of Babylonian and Persian rulers. From being an imported hostage, he becomes a trusted prime minister and counselor to some of the mightiest rulers in world history.

His prophecy is written to encourage the Jews in captivity not to give up their Jewish customs and traditions. It is written to a people who are a long way from home and who wonder if they will ever return to their native land. They are given Babylonian names, fed Babylonian food, schooled in Babylonian history, culture, and religion. If they refuse to worship the Babylonian Gods and adopt the Babylonian customs and traditions, they risk losing their lives to

some rather dramatic forms of torture and death. The most familiar stories we know from Daniel are about the fiery furnace and the lion's den. These were normal methods used to get the attention of the Jews and to force them accept foreign religions, customs and traditions.

In Eugene Peterson's preface to Daniel, he sets the context of his prophecy to its relevance to our times. Peterson writes: "*Obedience to God in the pressures and stresses of day to day living and trust in God's ways in the large sweep of history are always at risk, but especially in times of suffering and persecution. Obedience to God is difficult when we are bullied into compliance to the God ignoring culture out of sheer survival. Trust in God is likewise at risk of being abandoned in favor of the glamorous seductions of might and size.*" (The Message, p. 1579)

This is where the circumstances in which we find ourselves intersect with Daniel. To be a follower of Jesus Christ in the time and place in which we live is akin to being a captive in a foreign land. We are called to be a people of hope, and yet in these days of uncertainty—economically, internationally, politically—being a people of hope is not an easy calling. How can we be faithful to a God who calls us to be true to what the Gospel teaches about trusting God and living generous lives when the culture would seduce us into believing that our security is in our economic well being; the stability of our country in the world; or our allegiance to a particular political ideology? How can we be faithful when our security is being tested?

I received a story the other day from a friend about a Catholic priest, a Presbyterian pastor, and a Pentecostal minister who were in the midst of a discussion on prayer, when a telephone repairman came to the door asking if he could check out a problem that seemed to be going on inside of the church office.

The clergy continued their discussion while the telephone repairman worked nearby. The priest said, "Kneeling is definitely the best way to pray." "No," said the minister. "I get the best results standing with my hands outstretched to Heaven." "You're both wrong," the Pentecostal pastor said. "The most effective prayer position is lying down on the floor."

The repairman could contain himself no longer. "Hey, fellas," he interrupted. "The best prayin' I ever did was when I was hangin' upside down from a telephone pole."

Well that's the way a lot of people feel right now; like they are hanging upside down from a telephone pole and under a great deal of stress. Perhaps this is a time which is inviting us to discover a deeper trust in the God who has created us, redeemed us and promises to sustain us no matter what the circumstances of our lives. And I believe there are three lessons from the life of Daniel and our text for this morning which can help us: 1) Resolve; 2) Obey; and 3) Trust.

RESOLVE

The first lesson we learn is resolve. It is right there in verse 8: *But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself....* It's not that his circumstances were harsh. He was living in the court of the King. He had food to eat, shelter over his head, and the best that Babylon could offer in terms of education and culture. However, he wanted to maintain his Jewish roots, so he made a decision that it was more important to him to be true to those roots than to break the Jewish dietary laws.

Resolving to do something is stronger than just making a decision to do something. It has to do with our character. It is expressing in our lives the values and beliefs which have been shaped by our faith; that when we say we are going to do something, our word can be trusted and our word is our bond.

Yesterday morning we honored a member of this congregation who has been a witness to this kind of character. John Jarvis was a member of this church for 44 years. He and his wife, Sally, raised their children on Charlotte Street, and he was the Head Master of Lancaster Country Day School for 25 years until his retirement in 1990.

Over and over again this week I have heard the stories of a man whose life was so consistent that all of us who knew him knew exactly what others were saying. John's resolve was one of inclusion. He was more than just an administrator of a school. He was a role model for his students, and in our community he was more than just a resident. He was a leader.

In everything he did he sought to draw people together into dialogue that would allow people of differing opinions to have their opinions honored, but he went further than that. He sought common ground which would move his school, his neighborhood, this church, and the Lancaster community forward toward becoming a community where all were welcomed and respected; regardless of their race, the color of their skin, or their sexual orientation.

John was the son of a pastor in the Church of Scotland. His father was once the Moderator of that denomination. From his childhood he learned the lessons of faith, and his faith was the motivating influence in seeking to bring people together. His brother said that they learned from their home life that everyone who came to the door, whether they had come in a Rolls Royce or shoeless, was to be treated with the same respect and dignity they would receive from God. He believed that we were all created in the image of God and after the likeness of God, and his resolve was to treat everyone as if they were part of the family of God. In everything he did he gave witness to this primary belief. His faith was integrated into his witness to community, and we shall miss him terribly.

Daniel resolved that he would not defile the faith that had shaped his life. When we share our faith as part of our character; when people can see in our lives what we say we believe, it is a powerful witness.

OBEY

After Daniel had resolved to hold fast to the practice of his Jewish faith, he obeyed the dietary laws of Judaism. The king had ordered the best food for his future advisors, but Daniel refused to eat meat so he could observe a kosher diet. Orthodox Jews to this day are not allowed to eat certain common meats such as pork or rabbit, and other meats had to be drained of blood. The king's rich bill of fare would have meant that he would have to break those laws. So he made a deal with the guard who was appointed to guard him and his friends to allow them to be vegetarians for ten days. If at the end of the ten days their appearance was worse than those who were eating the king's food, they would eat what the king provided the others. The guard agreed, and at the end of ten days they looked better than those who had eaten the king's rations.

There is a take-home message for us in Daniel's obedience. If we are faithful in the small things; if we honor the disciplines of our faith, God will honor our obedience when it comes to the big things in life. If we practice regular worship; a daily time of devotions which includes reading the Word of God; involvement in a small group which balances study, prayer, and service; and practice generosity in our lives measured by the tithe, God can use those disciplines to deepen our faith. When we learn those lessons well, we will be ready to face the crises which will come to all of us at one time or another. If we are faithful in small things, God will give us the resources to handle the big things in our lives.

John Wooden is a Hall of Fame coach in college basketball, coaching for UCLA. He was known for the fundamentals of the game; so much so that first year players were no doubt

perplexed by the initial lesson imparted by their Hall of Fame coach: He taught them how to put on a pair of socks. He did not teach this lesson only once, but before every game and practice.

Wooden discovered many players didn't properly smooth out wrinkles in the socks around their heels and little toes. If left uncorrected, these wrinkles could cause blisters that could hamper their performance at crucial times during games. [*source: espn.go.com/page2/s/questions/wooden*]

In the fast-paced world in which we live, it is easy to forget about paying attention to the simple things we can do to help our faith stay fresh. However, when we fail to do these simple things, we the risk of developing painful spiritual blisters that can hurt us as we run our race.

TRUST

Daniel resolves not to defile himself. He obeys the dietary laws of Judaism. Finally, he trusts the outcome of his faithful actions to God. Trust in God's sovereign power is a theme in Daniel. He trusts God with his health when he eats only vegetables instead of the rich foods from the king's table. He trusts God with the life of his friends as the king throws them into a furnace. He trusts God with his own life when he is thrown into a lion's den. He trusts God, and his life is spared to be used by God for a greater good.

I received an email last night from a young woman whom I baptized 23 years ago. Her life has not been easy, and she has made a lot of bad choices which landed her in a drug rehabilitation program in Southern California. Her mother had called me to ask if I would reach out to her, and I did with a letter.

Now I haven't seen this young woman since she was 8 years old, but in my letter I had reminded her that when she was a baby I had placed water on her forehead and claimed her for God and that I believed God had not given up on her yet. I urged her to do what millions had

done before her: To admit that she was powerless in the face of drugs and that her life had become unmanageable; to believe that God could restore her life through the grace offered her in Jesus Christ; and to make a decision to turn her life and her will over to the care of the One who had claimed her in the waters of baptism.

She is living in a half way house right now, sober for about 45 days, and this is what she said: *“While I was in rehab, with the help of a chaplain there, I made the decision you asked me to make. I am trusting God with my life and my future, and for the first time in my life I am not afraid. Thank you for reminding me who I am, and that I belong to God.”*

Friends, this is the hope we find in Daniel. He makes his resolve. He is obedient. He trusts in God, and he is saved.