

Dealing with the Lion Dens of Life

A tale of Integrity through Passive Resistance

Daniel 6:1-28
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Today we're going to explore the story of a person who was willing to face persecution, even death, rather than deny his religious convictions and his spiritual practices. And he did it in such a way, as we will see, that can inform our own response to injustice and even laws we consider to be unjust. This is the familiar Old Testament tale known as Daniel in the Lions' Den.

[Read Scripture]

Hollywood couldn't have written a story any more fascinating. One packed with jealousy and political intrigue, scheming and deception, entrapment, and almost certain death, complete with a miraculous rescue, and a happy ending for our hero along with the demise of those who conspired against him. And yes, it includes lions!

How many of you grew up understanding this story to be a literal historical account, believing that God, by divine intervention, literally kept those hungry lions from devouring Daniel. I did. Most biblical scholars today, however, do not see it that way. Instead, they look at this story metaphorically instead of literally. Even 50 years ago *The Interpreter's Bible* commentary declared, "To treat it literally is both foolish and blind." (That seems a bit judgmental.) They continue: "The details are not important, but the great ideas are." That's why we, as progressives, approach scripture more with an eye, ear, mind, and spirit open to the "great ideas," rather than getting bogged down in arguments over literalness.

Just over a decade ago that particular series of biblical commentaries was completely replaced with more recent scholarship, published under the name *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary. We have a full set in our church library. Not surprisingly, it makes the similar conclusion, "The lions' den experience, then, is to be read as both folktale and a symbol of the exile itself."

Now, I won't often go into this much historical detail, but I want to share the overall setting that led to a story of how Daniel found himself thrown into the lion's den in the first place. It has everything to do with the Babylonian Exile. This event, along with the Exodus, is one of the overarching themes in the Old Testament, and in Judaism to this day. Here's the story.

The Book of Daniel doesn't give us much information as to this person's early life, except to mention that Daniel grew up in the city of Jerusalem, which at that time in history was part of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The Northern Kingdom, called Israel, had previously been conquered by the Assyrian Empire, beginning around 740 BCE. To put that into perspective King David lived around 1000 BCE. Daniel was just a boy, or a young man, when about 150 years after the Northern Kingdom's demise, the

Babylonian Empire invaded and destroyed Jerusalem (around 597 BCE). That event included the destruction of the Temple that King Solomon (the son of King David) built 350 years earlier.

Daniel, along with the elite of the nation's royal court, leadership, and upper class, were carried off as captives by King Nebuchadnezzar to the Gentile city of Babylon. The remains of that ancient and powerful city lie about 50 miles south of Bagdad in modern-day Iraq. This entire biblical event is what is referred to when you hear the term, The Exile.

Daniel was taken and trained for service in the royal court of the king. He quickly established a reputation for his intelligence and for absolute faithfulness to his God. He became well known for interpreting the dreams of King Nebuchadnezzar, and for the king's successor, Belshazzar. Many years later, about 50 years, Babylon was itself conquered by Cyrus the Great of the Persian Empire (in modern-day Iran), and King Belshazzar was killed. Darius the Mede, actually a Persian, takes over as ruler of Babylon and that's where we pick up the story in Chapter 6.

The change of imperial dynasty meant overhauling the government by appointing new officials (still a common practice today). The expanded Persian Empire is then divided into 120 provinces (or states), each having its own governor, which the Bible calls satraps. Over the governors were appointed three presidents, Daniel being one of them. In fact, Daniel was put in charge of the other two presidents as well because "an excellent spirit was in him." This brought forth the inevitable jealousy from the other two presidents and the 120 governing officials.

These political enemies sought Daniel's downfall. But they were so infuriated when they couldn't find any fault or blame with Daniel's integrity (in connection with his public duties) that they began to probe into his private life. That, too, has become a common practice to this very day. In fact, in our current age of polarization and divisiveness, that's now basically standard procedure in elections at most any level, especially for president. As a last resort, those jealous of Daniel turned to find something to fault "in connection with the law of his God," In other words, Daniel's religious convictions and spiritual practices. So, they concoct a conspiracy to entrap Daniel by persuading King Darius to pass an unchangeable decree forbidding prayer or worship for 30 days to any god or person but to the king, under penalty of being cast into the lions' den.

When Daniel heard of the plot made against him, he remained quite unaffected. He simply carried on, as he was accustomed to do, with his private devotions and spiritual practices. **Though he knew he was breaking the law of the land, as decreed by the king, there was a law of the heart and the spirit that was greater still.** We can find countless parallel responses in use in our own day an age. For example, this was the approach taken by this congregation and other progressives within the Presbyterian Church (USA), who collectively fought for 40 years to overturn the exclusionary church laws forbidding the ordination of LGBTQ persons of faith. Similarly, this law of the heart and the spirit is what Daniel refused to break. So, he continued to pray three times a day, while facing Jerusalem.

All of this background information is getting to this next point. And this is what I love about thorough biblical study and interpretation, and that's why I've gone into so much detail this morning. **Many biblical scholars have picked up on a simple and often overlooked element in the tale on which they believe the original meaning of the story**

pivots. Did you notice as I read this story that when Daniel went up to his room to pray, **the windows were open?**

The New Interpreter's Bible asks, "What is not clear is the meaning of his opening the windows. **Had Daniel always opened the windows, or was it an act of intentional civil disobedience,**" knowing that those who schemed against him would see him **disobey the king's decree?** Biblical scholars are indeed concluding that **Daniel was openly declaring his disobedience by throwing open, or at least keeping his windows open.**

As we know, civil disobedience is a tactic dear to the hearts of many who have tried to speak truth to power, including the efforts to overturn discriminatory laws. Think of the never-ending laws seeking to prevent a woman's right to choose her own health care options. Historically, think of Jim Crow laws leading to segregation. Think of Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat and move to the back of the bus. Think of the social ministry coordinated by Martin Luther King, Jr. to protest racial injustice. Think of the Black Lives Matter movement today, protesting continued racial injustice, including that engrained in our law enforcement and judicial systems.

Could it be that the real meaning behind the story of Daniel in the lions' den isn't just about having hope of being saved while in the midst of the oppression and obstacles in life, which is the traditional interpretation of this story, but in the tactic of Daniel's example of nonviolent passive resistance? This biblical story had a profound personal impact on India's Mahatma Gandhi, who declared Daniel to be 'one of the greatest passive resisters that ever lived.' We learn that to **follow the "law of one's conscious" requires courage, faith, and sometimes risk.** Leaders in the struggle against injustice, from Daniel to Jesus to Gandhi to King to Parks (and countless other men and women of conviction) possessed these traits. Perhaps most importantly, they and others fought the fight against oppression through non-violent resistance, always keeping an eye as to how God would have us treat one another.

Daniel's story, therefore, has a lot to say to each one of us, as individuals and as a congregation.

- **It's imperative that we hold true to our deepest convictions, whatever those might be. But in particular, convictions about righting the wrongs of social injustice.**
- **It's imperative that we listen to our own conscience, and follow through with our own spiritual practices and disciplines that help us to connect with the Sacred Presence of God.**

Ultimately, this story of Daniel in the lions' den reveals the importance of **balancing a contemplative spiritual life with an active spiritual life, one that may indeed include acts of civil disobedience and non-violent resistance in order to counter social injustice.** Finding that balance between contemplation and action makes for a good mission statement that can provide guidance for the way forward in both your personal life and our church life.

Amen.