

Daniel and the Lions

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend Rebecca Kirkpatrick

August 28, 2016

Daniel 6:10-18, 6:19-24

¹⁰Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.

¹¹The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God. ¹²Then they approached the king and said concerning the interdict, “O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions?” The king answered, “The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked.” ¹³Then they responded to the king, “Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the interdict you have signed, but he is saying his prayers three times a day.” ¹⁴When the king heard the charge, he was very much distressed. He was determined to save Daniel, and until the sun went down he made every effort to rescue him. ¹⁵Then the conspirators came to the king and said to him, “Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no interdict or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed.” ¹⁶Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was

brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, “May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!” ¹⁷A stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, so that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel.

¹⁸Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no food was brought to him, and sleep fled from him. ¹⁹Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions.

²⁰When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, “O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?” ²¹Daniel then said to the king, “O king, live forever! ²²My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong.” ²³Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

²⁴The king gave a command, and those who had accused Daniel were brought and thrown into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. Before they reached the bottom of the den the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces.

A little over three years ago our family was in the final preparations to leave the United States to move overseas serving as Mission Co-Workers for the Presbyterian Church in Cairo Egypt. Now I know that I have shared in sermons before about our time in Egypt AND I know I only have a few more times within an invisible grace period that you have given me before you grow tired of hearing about our lives in Egypt.

But as I have sat with Daniel in the Lions Den this summer, looking for a word of Good News to proclaim, I couldn't stop remembering that first Summer we spent in Egypt. In fact it was our experiences living through the Summer 2013 Egyptian Revolution or Coup as some might refer to it (though not too many Egyptians) that most people want to talk to us about when they hear that we lived in Egypt during that time.

We arrived in Egypt in on June 25th. It was a Tuesday. We spent most of Wednesday sleeping and recovering from our jet lag and most of Thursday shopping with friends for groceries and other necessities including cell phones and such. Because we knew that by Friday we would need to be able to stay in our apartment for several days in a row. Sunday June 30th marked the one year anniversary of the inauguration of Mohamed Morsi, the elected Muslim Brotherhood president who took over after the removal of long time president Hosni Mubarak.

In the days before we left, we were told that protests were planned, but ever since the 2011 January revolution, this had become common place for those living in Egypt. We would just stay out of the fray and by the next week, life would return to normal.

If you were following the international news that summer, you will remember that things did not return to normal. The protests did not abate, and by Wednesday of the next week. A full week after we arrived, Morsi was removed from office.

For sure our family and friends and our partner congregations in the United States were following the news closely and many were convinced that we were in grave danger. We would receive emails on Fridays and Saturdays as pastors and

church leaders were getting ready for Sunday worship so that they could share what was happening with us and so that they could remember us in prayer.

It wasn't until we moved home to the US last summer and we started visiting with the congregations who supported us through that time, that I really understood how many people had been praying for us. I can remember visiting in a small congregation in rural Indiana and having the pastor tell me that one of his elders almost always asked the congregation to pray for our safety on Sunday mornings when prayer concerns were offered.

To be perfectly honest, we never felt like we were in danger. We never worried that we would get swept up in the crowds of demonstrators that we would watch for hours marching down the street in front of the school where we lived. I am sure even today you all might find that hard to believe - so did my mother who expected to hear from me at least once every day for most of the time we were there.

Our partners in Egypt were as cautious as they could be when it came to our safety. All of the Egyptian Faculty at the seminary where we worked felt called to be at the demonstrations in Tahir square during that time - speaking out on behalf of values of human rights, education, free speech, and freedom of religion. We stayed home, but they took to the streets.

Even in the days later that summer when demonstrators were forcibly removed from neighborhoods in Cairo and pro-Morsi activists attacked and burned Christian churches around the country - even then we were kept out of harm's way. What was more of a concern for us were the seminary students interning in some of those congregations, and other innocent lives lost in the midst of so many acts of violence.

I had brought with me to Egypt a piece I clipped from the bulletin of the final worship service we attended at Joshua's Mennonite congregation in Indiana before traveling to Egypt. I had it taped to my desk in our apartment, and it is now on my bulletin board in my office here at Bryn Mawr.

On it are the words of the benediction that was said at the end of that service: Go in love - for love alone endures; Go in peace - for it is the gift of God. Go in safety - for we cannot go where God is not.

We cannot go where God is not. This is the message that we teach children about Daniel in that pit of Lions. That even in the midst of chaos and violence, God did not abandon him.

Here we are at the penultimate week of our summer preaching series centered on the stories that we are teaching the youngest of our children here at Bryn Mawr. My guess is that for the first time in a while, we are talking about a story that we all consider to be a standard for children's Sunday school. I am sure that you can conjure up an image fit for a illustrated Children's Bible of Daniel sitting in the midst of a pride of lions, who in any other moment might be depicted as ferocious and deadly, are peacefully resting at Daniel's feet, subdued by the power of God keeping Daniel safe in the midst of such an outrageous punishment.

This is the message that we teach children, when we tell them the story of Daniel. We cannot go where God is not. There is no place so dark or unsafe that God cannot meet us there. Even in a pit of savage beasts God can work a miracle.

Having just heard the unfiltered version of the story of Daniel and these Lions this morning, it is clear that the story and the lesson might be a little more nuanced, if not actually pretty complicated.

Again, as we were last week with Esther and Mordecai, we find ourselves in the middle of story that takes place in the Jewish diaspora. Jews living in exile in Persia. Our focus this week though is on a different King, a different group of jealous and conniving royal advisors, and a different bizarre and unnecessary royal edict enacted without the King understanding its consequences.

The book of Daniel is full of different stories of his interactions with the royal leadership and his witness of faith, as well as apocalyptic visions of the kingdom of God. Really the story of Daniel and these Lions is just a small part of the book, but one that we tend to come back to again and again.

Daniel has found favor with the Persian King Darius, and in fact has been appointed to be an advisor and local leader to the King. He is hated, though, by the other royal advisors and so they try to come up with a way to trap Daniel and only Daniel so that they can remove him from influence.

Daniel is renowned for his faithfulness and his dedication to prayer, praying in his home three times every day at an open window facing Jerusalem, praying in praise to his God, the God of Israel. So the jealous advisors approach the King and suggest that he sign a new edict declaring that no one in the entire kingdom may bow or pray to anyone divine or human besides the King. The king, flattered by the idea, agrees and signs an edict so binding that even the king himself cannot revoke it.

But the story tells us that Daniel, even though he knows the consequences, does not allow the threat of violence against him to change his behavior. Instead he continues to pray three times a day to the God of Israel in full view not just of the advisors, but the community as well.

In this moment Daniel uses prayer as an act of civil disobedience - more faithful to God than to an unjust law. The advisors arrest Daniel and take him before the King for judgment and punishment, and the King is deeply distressed. He truly cares for Daniel and is overwhelmed by this series of events, and yet resigned to them.

The story has this great moment as Daniel is thrown into the pit and the King calls down to him in deep sincerity - May your God whom you faithfully serve deliver you. The story doesn't tell us exactly what happens inside that den of lions. Scripture may have given us the beautiful prayer that Jonah prays as he sits in the belly of that whale, but not even a hint of Daniel's prayers in the middle of those lions.

But certainly he prayed. Prayers of thanksgiving and praise to his God...maybe they were the exact same prayers he had been praying three times a day in his home. At no moment going in or coming out does Daniel ever doubt the power of his God. Maybe his practices of prayer were what fed that kind of confidence in his faith.

Our second summer in Egypt we had a much different experience. Yes, there was still instability, but we had gotten out bearings, learned to know our neighbors and our community and had enough experience at that point to value working with our partners even in the face of the little inconveniences we suffered in order to make sure we were safe.

That same summer we hosted two interns from Calvin Seminary in Michigan - two young women in their early 20's. Much of the time we spent in orienting them focused on teaching them how to be smart when they were traveling around the city and what social norms they needed to be mindful of within the Egyptian culture.

One night I returned from a meeting to find one of the women waiting to talk with me to help process an experience she had waiting at the gate outside our school. No one had bothered her, she wasn't hurt in anyway, but she had an anxiety attack, suddenly realizing the risks that she had taken to come to Egypt and how vulnerable she had made herself.

She wanted to talk to me, because she wanted to hear from me the same kind of praise that we hear from Daniel - that I was confident that God would protect me in the midst of my own vulnerability and in the midst of the chaos that was Egypt.. She wanted to know how strong my faith was that God would keep me safe so that she too could express that faith in God.

But I am not sure what I told her was helpful to her at all. Because I told her that I was confident that God had called me to be there and that God was there with us, but I was not sure that this meant that God would keep me from harm. How could I ask for that when so many others needed that prayer more than we did? We weren't walking around Cairo with a protest bubble of safety around us. That is why we did so many things to make sure we were safe.

Yes, we value a story like Daniel's because it gives us hope, but we have to hold Daniel's experience up next to the stories in scripture of those who by faith risked and lost, stories in history of those who have stood up for the Gospel and not walked away unharmed, stories in the news and even in our communities of faithful people who lives were cut short despite their obvious faithfulness.

But that's why I think it is important to consider both of the moments that Daniel prays as balancing each other out. Because even though they might all have been prayers of praise to the God of Israel, they were also in one moment prayers of protest and in another moment prayers of supplication.

Through prayer Daniel puts himself at risk defying an unjust system. Through prayer Daniel puts himself in harm's way. But through prayer Daniel calls upon the living God asking that he will not be abandoned.

To be Christian doesn't mean that you will always be safe. We all know this. But to be Christian means that we are always called to be in prayer - in joy and in sorrow, in celebration and in need; when we are lost and when we are found, when we are standing up to the evils of the world, and when the evils of the world have pushed us down.

Prayers of protest and prayers of blessing; prayers of Praise and prayers of lamentation; prayers of thanksgiving and prayers of intercession.

We cannot go where God is not, and so in all places we are called to be in prayer, knowing that through the peaks and the valleys God is present there. We cannot God where God is not, and so in all places we are called to act in faith, knowing that God walks with us in the journey of faith. We cannot go where God is not, and so in all places we are called to hope in the power of God to work in ways that we cannot understand, knowing that we pray to a God of life, a God who makes a way when there is no way, a God who shuts the mouths of lions, and opens our mouths in praise. Amen.