

June 15th message

I have to admit this morning in my preparation for our day of Bible school, how I needed to reexamine the book of Daniel. It is quite a story that has implications for all time. Most know about Daniel and the Lions, but fewer know about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and the fiery furnace. And while there are many directions a person could go sharing a message on this book, let's start with the basics.

Daniel has taken as a captive to Babylon along with thousands of his countrymen around 600 BC. The book begins with a brief account on how Judah fell to the Babylonians and how the most talented and useful people were taken to Babylon as captives. Names were changed to help these conquered people assimilate into this new culture.

Daniel decided right away that he would not defile himself with what was offered in food and drink. With God's intervention Daniel was able to convince the person in charge of him and his three friends that a diet of vegetables and water would be better for their health and looks. Sure enough this worked and along with faithful prayer and the Lord's intercession the four young people grew in wisdom and understanding. In time they so impressed King Nebuchadnezzar that they entered into his personal service.

While we can't be sure what food was offered there is evidence that the most common food eaten at the time was pork and horse meat. There is also the possibility that the food had been sacrificed to gods of the Babylonians. Whatever the reason, Daniel makes a stand and refuses to compromise his beliefs.

We can learn from this of course, not only in healthy eating but in not allowing our beliefs as followers of Christ to be compromised. While we all have views that vary when it comes to the many issues of our day, the two great commandments still apply. We are to love the Lord with all our heart, mind and soul and love our neighbor as ourselves. Needless to say, our society doesn't encourage this, yet we are called to stand firm in our words and actions.

Next we learn about the king's dream. At first the king summoned his Chaldeans or astrologers to interpret them without giving them any clues as to what they were about. In this culture, dreams were considered to be messages from the gods. Nebuchadnezzar really asked the impossible when he asked his advisors to explain them without any information. They along with some other wise men of the kingdom were then sentenced to death. Daniel and his three friends were included in this decree. Rather than giving up to this fate, they pray for God's intervention. God answers their prayer by giving Daniel the knowledge of and the interpretation of the dream. Nebuchadnezzar realizes the power of the God of Daniel and the Jews and appoints him and his friends to positions of high administration of the province.

Sometimes we get overwhelmed at the difficulties we face. While not faced with death like Daniel, we can be so overcome with our own struggles and what we see happening in the world and in our country that we want to give up. Many times it's because we've run out of human solutions. We look at the continuing wars in Ukraine and Gaza and many other events and see how diplomatic solutions have failed and how the suffering continues. We have hope that things will get better, but far too often we rely on the wisdom of the times we are living through rather than divine intervention. We simply do not put enough faith in the power of God. I realize how I am speaking here a lot about myself. But I'm guessing that many of us are in the same boat. We simply do not go to God often enough in prayer with our thoughts and concerns asking for the Lord to work through people and situations to help make things better.

Yet we all know of individuals who have faced difficult challenges, usually health related who have put their affairs in God's hands. They do what they can to better their situation in life, but they know that ultimately God is in control. I have seen this time and time again. Sometimes things work out and sometimes they don't but ultimately these folks are at peace with what happens.

Recently a friend of our family has undergone chemo treatments for a very aggressive form of cancer. This person approached it with the faithfulness she has always carried with her. So far the news is good, very good. But I know either way she and her family and friends will continue to put their faith in God no matter what.

The first part of this book continues with Nebuchadnezzar being the pagan king he is making idols, having dreams that only Daniel can interpret and the incident where Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego survive the fiery furnace because of God's intervention. He rules for 43 years. His dealings with Daniel and others tell us much about his reign. Several times he praises the God of the Jews but he never acknowledges Him as the one, true God. When he dies there is a period of rulers who reign for a short time. Belshazzar becomes king and things take another turn.

One of the first things Belshazzar does is have a great feast. He decides to use the gold and silver goblets stolen from God's temple in Jerusalem for the wine. This leads to the incident called the writing on the wall. This was a warning to Belshazzar. Although Nebuchadnezzar was far from perfect, he recognized and humbled himself before God. Belshazzar had done the opposite and in a rebellious challenge drank from the sacred goblets. The literal translation of the original writing appeared meaningless. It seemed to mean 'two minas, a shekel and two parts' or 'numbered, weighed, divided'. MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.

Daniel is summoned and interprets the writing telling him how his kingdom will be put to an end because of his corruption and be divided and given over to the Medes and Persians. The very night Belshazzar dies and the kingdom falls to the Medes and Persians.

Today we are all familiar with the term, 'I can read the writing on the wall,' and we know it means something unpleasant or unwelcome is about to happen. While many know the meaning of the phrase, they don't know how it is based on this incident from the book of Daniel. This phrase has been used as figurative language for centuries now. The phrase has also become the name of some songs and included in others like one of my favorite from rhyming Paul Simon, Kodachrome , those of us who are older know it, "but my lack of education hasn't hurt me none, I can still read the writing on the wall." Now that I have that song stuck in your head let's move on.

Darius becomes the new king and Daniel now in his 80's continues his top administrative work. Darius becomes very impressed with his ability and plans to appoint his work over the entire kingdom. Others become jealous of him yet could find no fault in his work, so they come up with another plan. They convince King Darius to pass a law making it a crime to pray to any god other than the king himself. The punishment would be a one way trip to the lions' den. The statute is signed and becomes law. Daniel becomes aware of it, yet continues to pray to God anyway.

Well, chances are you know the rest of the story. The king must uphold his law and Daniel is thrown in the lions' den. An angel sent from God shuts the mouths of the lions and Daniel is unharmed. King Darius rejoices and sends those who conspired against Daniel to the lions. Darius also comes to recognize the power of Daniel's God and chapter 6 ends with verse 28, "so Daniel enjoyed success in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian."

The rest of the book, chapters 7-12 tell of Daniel's visions. These visions gave the captives hope and reassured them that God is still in control. Evil will be overcome. They were to remain strong in their faith and not give in to the sinful way of life around them.

Today we have this enduring story on how devoted Daniel was. All through this captivity in a foreign land he was faced with overwhelming odds yet he continued to be faithful in his devotion to God, even to the point of death. We look at the outside influences on ourselves and see how they are pale in comparison to the trials Daniel faced. Yet how often do we conform to the standards our society has set. We can be tempted to think all is lost and lose hope and simply don't look to God. Again we like the song says, we simply do not take things to God in prayer. One of our goals during a Bible school day is to teach our young people about prayer and how it can become big part of our daily lives.

Earlier I mentioned the two great commandments. In my dealings and observations with many people these days I see how we as a culture have really distanced ourselves from loving the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Many will tell you how they believe in God, but then basically it stops there.

Our last hymn, *Dare to be a Daniel*, was written and composed by Philip Bliss in 1873 for his Sunday school class the First Congregation Church of Chicago. He wanted to share a message from the biblical story of Daniel, who along with his three friends resisted the cultural pressures they were living in and remained faithful to God. Bliss wanted to emphasize the importance of personal integrity, standing firm in one's beliefs, and not being swayed by worldly influences. The hymn has remained popular in many Christian circles, continuing to inspire and encourage individuals to live a life of faith and unwavering commitment. We hope to learn it well and share it and what else we learn that day.

Fortunately it seems to be an easy hymn to learn with a solid message especially in the refrain, "Dare to be a Daniel, Dare to stand alone! Dare to have a purpose firm! Dare to make it known!" These are good words for not only young people to hear but all of us. We are living through some very trying times yet we are called to stand firm in the faith we have been taught. May God continue to guide and strengthen us in the days ahead. Amen.