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Eastminster Worship Services

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Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

Dare to Be a Daniel

Daniel 6:1-16

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What's in a name? The name Daniel has three syllables and each one in Hebrew has a meaning. "Dan" means "judge". The "e" sound of the letter "i" means "my". And "el" means "God". So Daniel's name means "God, my judge"; "God is my judge".

Daniel lived a life that shouted the truth: "God is my judge, not man!" Daniel knew that he would give an account for how he lived his life to God; not to Nebuchadnezzar, not to Belshazzar, not to Darius. Daniel's life was centered on God. It was built on God. This comes out in the way he wrote his book, ate, interpreted dreams and prayed.

Take the way Daniel wrote his book. In chapter one, Daniel describes the capture of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon like this: "And the LORD delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand."¹ God gave Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar's hand! Again and again, Daniel tells the story of great political events like that.²

Or, take the way Daniel ate. Remember, Daniel was one of the captives taken to Babylon when Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem. He was chosen with others to be trained for service in the royal palace and fed with the king's best food and wine. But Daniel saw his diet as a God-issue. Daniel 1:8 states, "But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine." Daniel looked to God to judge his cause, not to the king. The result of this resolve on Daniel's part was that God gave him knowledge and understanding in all kinds of literature and learning; and Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds."³

Moreover, take the way Daniel interpreted the dreams of king Nebuchadnezzar. Notice 2:28, "but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in the days to come." And Daniel accuses the most powerful rulers on earth of irreverence and treason against God. Every interpretation

¹Daniel 1:2

²Daniel 2:21, 2:37 and 5:18

Daniel gave has God right at the center.

But the most amazing example of Daniel's living out his name is his prayer life. "God is my judge" means "What God thinks and what God does matters more than what anybody else in the world thinks or does." That's the way I want for my life; for your life; for our life as a congregation. What God thinks and what God does more important; vastly more important than what anybody else thinks or anybody else does. For Daniel that meant a life of daring, defiant, disciplined prayer. If what God thinks matters most, then you consult him most. If what God does matters most, then you ask him to act first. In other words, you live your life by prayer.

Do not forget that Daniel was a very powerful political person. You recall that Nebuchadnezzar had made Daniel "ruler over the whole province of Babylon."⁴ Here in our text, Darius makes Daniel one of the three presidents over the 120 satraps (or governors) of the entire empire.⁵ Sometimes we slip into thinking that prayer is the way monks spend their time. Or it's something for pastors and professional religious people, but it's not for activists or people with power and influence. That is a very wrong way to think about prayer and about your life. Daniel was more immersed in secular life than most of us and he lived by prayer; daring, defiant and disciplined prayer. God was his judge. What God thought and what God did mattered most.

Today's text is an amazing testimony to the daring, defiant and disciplined prayer life of Daniel. This text fills me with longing to be courageous in prayer. It makes me want to be daring and if necessary defiant against earthly powers and disciplined in prayer. My hope is that God will use Daniel's example here to fill you with the same longing and the same commitment. God's Word can change us into daring, defiant and disciplined prayer warriors.

Daniel was one of three presidents over the kingdom of the Medes and Persians. He excelled above the others and king Darius planned to put him above the others and over the whole kingdom. Daniel had a successful future in front of him; all the influence, prestige, wealth and freedom he could have asked for. But this made him a target for jealousy and envy. Verses 4-9 describe how the other presidents and satraps persuaded Darius to make a law that read, "Anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into lions den."⁶ In other words, Daniel's life of prayer was so well known and so established as part of his

³Daniel 1:17

⁴Daniel 2:48

⁵Daniel 6:2

⁶Daniel 6:7

character that his enemies knew that this was one place they could count on him not equivocating. And they were exactly right.

Notice verse 10. This is where I gain the insight that Daniel's prayer was daring, defiant and disciplined. When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem; and he got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.

Let me give you three expressions of Daniel's daring, defiant and disciplined dependence on God.

First, when Daniel went to pray, he did not act in ignorance. He acted in full knowledge of the law and the consequences. Don't forget, Daniel was right on the brink of being promoted to the main ruler over Persia. Think of the rationalizations that must have rushed to his head; "my influence would be so great if I held that position ... I can do more for God alive than dead ... it's only thirty days, and then I can pray again ... legalism is surely a worse sin than expediency." But Daniel rejected all the rationalizations. He knew the law. He knew the penalty.

Second, when Daniel went to pray, he did not go to a secret place to pray. He went to his house. He could have kept on praying to his God without putting himself at risk if he had just gone underground for thirty days. In fact, Daniel went to the room with windows (open windows); the one in the second story of the house, the one most visible, the one that faced Jerusalem. Daniel was not just praying contrary to the king's decree. He was doing an act of public civil disobedience. And he prayed this way three times a day.

And third, when Daniel prayed, he specifically addressed his God; not Darius. Not the gods of the Medes and Persians, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

What are we to make of Daniel's commitment to prayer? I suggest three applications.

First, Daniel's prayer was a public testimony and we should seek to do the same. But Jesus said, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."⁷ Does this indict Daniel's public demonstration of prayer? I don't think so. Jesus was warning against our love of praise for prayer, not our willingness to suffer for prayer. He was not saying that it is wrong to be seen in prayer. Jesus was saying it is wrong to want to be seen so as to be praised for your piety.

Blessed are you when men persecute you for righteousness sake;⁸ but woe to you when you use your righteousness to seek their praise.⁹ For Daniel, prayer had become a public statement about the glory of God over the glory of Darius.

Second, Daniel's prayer was disciplined and regular. Prayer was not something he checked off his list to do as a follower of God. Daniel was disciplined, not legalistic, in his prayer life. He prayed three times a day in a stated place. There was pattern, routine and discipline. Does it strike you as strange that in America today that few Christians pray this way? I'm sure that there are some who would celebrate this absence of order, design, habit and pattern as a sign of freedom from legalism. I might believe it if I saw anything like the freedom and power of Daniel where discipline like his is absent. But I don't see it. Could it be that Daniel's discipline in prayer was the secret of his unexpected, unplanned and spontaneous encounters with God as well as his growth as a follower of God?

Finally, prayer was more precious than life to Daniel. Daniel knew that the penalty for praying would be the lions' den. I don't think Daniel knew that he would be delivered by God any more than Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew it as they stood before the fiery furnace and said, "But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."¹⁰ This must mean that prayer is more important than life. Daniel would rather pray than save his life. Not praying was a worse prospect to Daniel than being eaten by lions. That is a radical commitment to prayer. And Daniel was thrown into the lions' den.

Legalism is not attacking the American church today in the form of spiritual discipline. I think the most distinctive form of legalism in our day is almost exactly the opposite. Let me speak of a coin having two sides.

One side is a fear of anything remotely resembling the biblical concept of discipline implied in phrases like "train yourself in godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7) or "strive to enter by the narrow gate" (Luke 13:24) or "take up your cross daily" (Luke 9:23) or "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:13) or "I pommel my body and subdue it" (1 Corinthians 9:27) or "If your right eye offends you pluck it out" (Matthew 5:29). That reality of Christian discipline is feared today in the new legalism.

The other side of the coin is the emergence of what you might call psychologically correct speech. If you don't use a certain language to describe morality, ethics, duty and God's commandments that is "psychologically

⁷Matthew 6:5-6

⁸Matthew 5:10

⁹Matthew 6:2-4

¹⁰Daniel 3:18

correct”, then you are defective as a Christian caregiver. In place of the old list of taboos there is now a new list of taboos; words like “ought” and “should” and “must”. And warnings like “those who do such things shall not enter the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:21), and “if you live according to the flesh you will die” (Romans 8:13) are rejected. They are simply not “psychologically correct” ways of dealing with reality.

If there is a creeping legalism in the American church, I think it’s this and not the discipline of Daniel’s praying three times a day. I urge you to consider whether some of our weakness in the cushy, self-indulgent, meet-my-need American Christianity owes not mainly to our bondage to lifeless lists of dos and don’ts, but to our loss of biblical discipline. Consider Daniel as you ponder the way you want to pray.

I call myself to prayer. I call you to prayer. I call you to search your heart and see if God has something new for you. For your own sense of spiritual life and reality and power, step back and pray. As Paul writes in Philippians, “in everything present your requests to God.”¹¹ God looks out for his own, those whom he has called to himself.¹² Let us pray!

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¹¹Philippians 4:4-7

¹²John 17:6-12