

Sermon Series on Sidekicks of the Bible

*Sidekicks of the Bible 5: Daniel, Fires and Lions and Kings, Oh My!*

Daniel 1 & 6

10 August 2008

We've all heard of Daniel. We all know about the lion's den. So at first I didn't intend to preach on him because I thought he's too well known. Then I discovered that Daniel only appears once in the entire three-year lectionary cycle, and it's one of the apocalyptic visions on an obscure Christian holy day. The lion's den? The fiery furnace? As far as the lectionary is concerned, they don't exist!

I also decided to preach on Daniel after reading Esther last week. The two stories have a lot of similarities when it comes to the plot details, but they differ hugely in that Esther does not mention God, whereas Daniel is full of religious content. As I said last week, they both are about how the Jews manage to hold onto their identity once they lose the land and the nation God had given them when God brought them out of Egypt. Both stories can help us wrestle with the age-old question of how to survive as people of faith in a secular or even hostile world.

Here, then, is the first chapter of Daniel, in which the king searches for and trains young men to serve him. Notice how similar this story is to that of Xerxes' search for a new queen. (Read Chapter 1)

As we heard last week, part of the plunder that the conquering king carries off is not only treasure but also people. So the king calls for the brightest and best to be put through a three year mental spa training to beautify their minds. The line about "without physical defect" is the same qualification Jewish law calls for in animal sacrifice: first-born males without defect. Which raises the question, could these young men be seen as sacrifices to the pagan king? Then there is the three-year training, which includes being instructed in Chaldean language and literature. These could be seen as a corrupting foreign influence on young Jewish minds. And yet none of this is what Daniel and his friends object to. Nor do they object to being groomed for service to the king. Like Esther, they don't seem to have any problems at all with their situation except for one thing. They object to the food.

No reason is given in the text as to why the men refuse to eat the king's food, and scholars have debated ever since about their objection. It could be because the food wasn't kosher. But if that is true, why not say so in the text? There are plenty of legitimate religious reasons to object, but none of them are cited. One commentator speculates that Daniel does not want to be beholden to the king. And yet I have some problems with that interpretation as well. I mean, Daniel is already being groomed for the king's service. So why does the refusal of his food make such a difference? We don't know. And in the end since no reason is given, we have to focus on Daniel's actions and not his logic. His choice sets him obviously apart. It is a signal that as much as he's willing to receive from the king - education, housing, employment - he doesn't depend entirely on the king. In this he differs from Esther, who kept her identity secret and who did nothing to mark her as different.

Daniel and his friends flourish on their diet, so they are allowed to continue the practice. Their difference, their choice is honored, and they grow and prosper and are ten times better than anyone else, so they enter the king's service - like Esther who beat out her competition.

So in both these stories the Jewish exiles become a part of the gentile world around them, even become part of the government itself. This is in stark contrast to those religious groups throughout history who have sought to separate themselves from the corrupting influences of the world - from the Qumran communities of the Dead Sea, to monastic communities in all religions, to modern communities like the Amish or the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints. For such people, in order to be faithful and pure, you need to be separate and apart. Surely for

the exiles Jews such an approach was very appealing, to huddle together, to circle the metaphorical wagons, to remain as faithful, isolated islands in the midst of a foul, gentile world.

But Daniel and Esther present a different approach. They each immersed themselves in the new world they found themselves in. They apparently didn't feel the world was something they needed to keep themselves pure from. For them it was entirely possible to be good and faithful Jews even while in the service of a pagan king.

We see this spelled out a bit more completely in the tale of Daniel and the lion's den. The story is basically the same as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the fiery furnace, but I want you to also listen to the similarities with last week's tale of Haman and Mordecai. (Read Chapter 6)

In this story we get another definition of "pure and without blemish," only this time it's about Daniel's character. Daniel is one of three co-governors, second only to the king in power, rather like Joseph who rose to prominence under Pharaoh, or Esther the favored Queen or Mordecai the loyal courtier. As with Mordecai and Haman, Daniel's colleagues are jealous of his success, and they seek at first to find some dirty linen of his that they can air before the king. But Daniel's character is pure, without blemish, and they can find nothing to accuse him of. So just as Haman had done, they resort to stealth. They go to the king and urge him to pass a new law, one that they know will ensnare Daniel. They don't even have to mention his name. indeed, the plotters seek to squeeze him between two irreconcilable forces: God's immutable, eternal law, and the absolute, irrevocable law of the Persians and Medes. It seems that once the king passes a law, he cannot go back and rescind it - a legal problem that played a role in Esther's story as well. And it doesn't say much for either Xerxes or Darius that they are so easily manipulated by their own advisors! Indeed, it turns out that Darius is very fond of Daniel, and he's deeply grieved when he realizes what his hasty law has done.

The law, of course, sets Darius up as a godlike figure, and no one is allowed to pray to any god but him. It was quite common in ancient times for kings to be granted godlike status, but usually they were willing to share that pedestal with other gods. At any rate, Daniel quietly and calmly disobeys the new law. He will continue to serve this blasphemous gentile king, but he will not abandon his duty to his God. He remains blameless before God, but also before Darius in his loyal service. And just as Haman was hung on his own gallows for his treachery, so Daniel's accusers end up themselves tossed to the lions.

This then is the approach Daniel takes as a stranger in a strange land: he immerses himself in it, but does not let himself become obligated or compromised because of it. He fulfills his secular duties faithfully and diligently, but not at the expense of his religious duties. He can interact with this potentially corrupting environment because he himself keeps pure.

Our situation today is nothing at all like Daniel and Esther's. Indeed the challenge for us is not that the surrounding culture is pagan, but rather that it is Christian, or at any rate has Christian trappings. We seldom see ourselves as lost in an alien culture that threatens our religious identity. And yet I'm willing to bet that all of us at various times do feel so lost. Maybe it's that we see so many people from a variety of countries, and we wonder where are the people "like us." Maybe we feel like values have changed from when we were kids, and we're not sure we approve of these new values. Maybe it's that technology has changed so much: satellite TV and internet and iPhones, and we're afraid that soon we will become obsolete.

It's natural to fear the unknown, and we fear all these changes and differences because we don't know what they mean. The tendency is to cling all the more tightly to what we do know, to what is familiar, to isolate ourselves and resist these corrupting and dangerous influences for fear of losing what we value most. In that sense, our situation is similar to Esther and Daniel's.

So perhaps as we hear their stories, we can gain some insight into our own situation. That which is different doesn't have to be scary. Like Daniel, we can learn the language and literature of the Chaldeans, become familiar with the differences. Like Esther, we might even marry into those differences! Yet at the same time, we do need to hold on to that which is important: our loyalty to God and our loyalty to one another. A loyalty which does not exclude the new, but which cherishes and embraces the people and values we love most. With that loyalty to anchor us, we will be able to face any furnaces or lions we may get thrown to along the way.