

Defiance and Deliverance

Daniel 6:1-28

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6 It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom one hundred and twenty satraps, stationed throughout the whole kingdom, ²and over them three presidents, including Daniel; to these the satraps gave account, so that the king might suffer no loss. ³Soon Daniel distinguished himself above all the other presidents and satraps because an excellent spirit was in him, and the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom. ⁴So the presidents and the satraps tried to find grounds for complaint against Daniel in connection with the kingdom. But they could find no grounds for complaint or any corruption, because he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption could be found in him. ⁵The men said, 'We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.'

6 So the presidents and satraps conspired and came to the king and said to him, 'O King Darius, live for ever! ⁷All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counsellors and the governors, are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions. ⁸Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked.' ⁹Therefore King Darius signed the document and interdict.

10 Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open towards 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.'

14 When 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.'

16 Then 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.

19 Then, 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 for ever! 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.

25 Then King Darius wrote to all peoples and nations of every language throughout the whole world: 'May you have abundant prosperity! ²⁶I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel:

For he is the living God,
enduring for ever.

His kingdom shall never be destroyed,
and his dominion has no end.

²⁷ He delivers and rescues,
he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth;
for he has saved Daniel
from the power of the lions.'

²⁸So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

Nearly every evening if I flip through the channels, I can find an episode of *Friends* on television. Such was the case the other night. I flipped just in time to catch the opening of an episode from the second season. It was the one in which Phoebe walks into Monica and Rachel's apartment to find the gang watching *Old Yeller* with concern on their faces.

"Why are you so upset?" Phoebe asks. *"This is a movie about a happy family getting a dog and frontier fun."*

"But what about the end," they ask?

Phoebe replies, “*You mean when Yeller saves the family from the wolf and everyone is happy?*”

“*That’s not the end.*”

“*Yes it is. That’s when my mother would shut off the tv and say ‘The End.’*”

“*But what about the part where he has rabies?*” Monica asks Phoebe.

“*He doesn’t have rabies, he has babies. That’s what my mom said.*”

It’s at this point that the movie playing in the apartment reaches its dramatic conclusion – you know, the point where Travis aims the gun at Yeller – which leads Phoebe to shockingly realize that she had never seen the true ending of *Old Yeller*.

As the rest of the episode unfolds, Phoebe learns that her mother never showed her the ends of sad movies. This leads her on a quest to watch all the movies her mother didn’t let her see in order to check out the actual endings, later lamenting that ET leaves, Rocky loses, and Charlotte dies. In response, Monica suggests a sure-fire selection – *It’s a Wonderful Life*. “*You can’t lose. It’s right there in the title. Wonderfulness is baked right in,*” Monica exclaimed. But by this point, Phoebe is having none of it:

“*Please, I almost fell for that with, uh, Pride of the Yankees, I thought I was gonna see a film about Yankee pride and then, boom, the guy gets Lou Gehrig’s disease.*”

To which guest star Tom Selleck replies, “*The guy was Lou Gehrig. Didn’t you see it coming?*”

Like Phoebe, sometimes we are surprised to learn that we didn’t get the full story when we were kids. Maybe you didn’t see the real endings of movies either. Maybe your dad finished the bedtime story when it got a little scary. Maybe even your history class had its moments. After all, didn’t we all learn that at the Alamo, William Travis drew a line in the sand and Jim Bowie fought valiantly from his sick bed?ⁱ And,

occasionally, we discover that what we learned in Children's Sunday School doesn't always match the narrative we discover as adults.

This morning we begin a new series, *Bible Stories You Thought You Learned as a Kid*. For the next five weeks, we are revisiting stories we learned when we were young – stories that the mere mention of generate an animated picture in your brain. Jonah. David and Goliath. The Feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. The birth of Moses. And, this morning, we are spending some time with the familiar Old Testament character, Daniel.

While there are numerous stories to choose from, when we mention Daniel, the mental picture that develops is almost always of the lion's den – our scripture lesson this morning from Daniel 6. Most of us know from our childhood how this story ends. But what many of us don't know is what happens before the lion's den...and what happens right after.

Daniel's story takes place during the Babylonian exile. Its opening chapters begin around 600 BC, but Chapter 6 finds us in the 520 BC range, just a little before the era of Ezra and Nehemiah who we spent a lot of time with this summer. Daniel, who was born in Jerusalem, became one of the Jewish exiles living in Babylon. Yet, even though he found himself in a foreign land and surrounded by foreign influences, time-and-again, he held fast to his devotion to God. His commitment to and wisdom from God eventually made Daniel a key advisor to King Nebuchadnezzar and King Belshazzar. But after both these kings lose their thrones – one to mental illness and the other to death in a sneak attack – King Darius becomes king.

Our scripture lesson from Chapter 6 opens with the note that King Darius had a different style of government from Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. He was still the monarch, but he organized his kingdom into regions overseen by 120 satraps – governors. But rather than having 120 governors reporting to him directly, he created

another layer of government consisting of three administrators who oversaw the work of these governors and reported their efforts to the king. As we learn, Daniel was one of these administrators. In fact, he was such a good administrator that the king favored him. Verse 3 tells us that Darius was so impressed with Daniel's exceptional qualities that he planned to make him the administrator over the entire kingdom.

It turns out that politics in Daniel's day weren't that different from today. The fact that one person had the ear of the chief executive didn't sit well with the others. And so the other administrators and satraps began to look for something that might take Daniel down. Unfortunately, they couldn't find any skeletons in Daniel's closet. As verse 5 states, he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. Or said another way, he was a man of integrity.

Since Daniel was so upright and honest, the other administrators and satraps realized that they would never find anything to use against Daniel...unless it had something to do with his God. Suddenly a light bulb clicked on in their minds. If they could use this fact to their advantage, this would be the way to get rid of Daniel. And what resulted wasn't just a conspiracy theory floated to the media by a government official. It was an actual conspiracy.

One afternoon, our scripture lesson tells us, the administrators and satraps went as a group to see the king. Actually, a better translation would be that the administrators and satraps crowded in to the king in a raucous mass gathering. They proclaimed that all of the royal administrators, prefects, satraps, and advisers – all of the government bureaucracy – agreed that King Darius should issue a decree. For the next 30 days, anyone who prays to a god or man other than King Darius should be put to death. Darius, who heard them proclaim that all of his government was in agreement with this suggestion, and who may have thought that Daniel agreed as well, decided the idea of being god for 30 days sounded like fun. And so he followed through with their

suggestion, issuing an edict that could not be repealed (because it was thought that the Persian kings spoke directly for the Zoroastrian gods, who could never be wrong).ⁱⁱ

Now we all know what happens next. When we learned this story as kids, we discovered that, despite the edict, Daniel – who always followed the rules – broke the rules. Yet, we were taught, in breaking the rules, he did the right thing. He prayed to the one true God. But what we probably didn't learn as kids is that what Daniel was doing was, in the words of the late Congressman John Lewis, getting into some “good trouble.” He went about some civil disobedience, openly defying the King's edict. He went home, threw open the windows where he could be seen, got down on his knees, and started praying to God. He peacefully protested, openly declaring his disobedience.

As you know, the conspiracy then comes to fruition. The other administrators and satraps ran to Darius to tell him that Daniel had violated his edict. They told him, “King, you have no choice. No edict or law that the king establishes can be changed. Therefore you must punish Daniel.” And despite what appears to be distress in following through on his edict, the king ultimately gave the command that Daniel was to be thrown into a den of lions. And so Daniel, now 80 years old, was tossed in with the lions. He's probably lucky he didn't break a few bones in the fall. And once he was in, a stone was rolled over the mouth of the den and the king sealed it. This seal served two purposes. It prevented someone from coming in to rescue Daniel, but it also prevented one of the conspirators from entering to kill Daniel himself.

Again, we know what happened. After a night in which he couldn't sleep, the next morning King Darius rushes to the lion's den and calls out for Daniel. Amazingly, Daniel calmly responds to him, telling the king he was unhurt because an angel of the Lord shut the mouths of the lion. Overjoyed that Daniel was safe, the king ordered him to be lifted from the den.

Now, I don't know about you, but I don't remember my childhood Sunday School teachers telling the story of what came next. Like Phoebe's mom, they ended the story of Daniel with his deliverance; with him coming out of the lion's den unharmed to live happily ever after. I don't remember learning about the reversal of fortune that came next. Because once Daniel was out of the den, King Darius ordered that all those who had accused Daniel be thrown into the lion's den. And not just them. Also their wives and children, too. Despite their innocence, anyone who might live to question the king or stir up trouble about these brutal deaths were dealt with as well.

American theologian Daniel Smith-Christopher, a professor of Biblical studies at Loyola Marymount, suggests that we can't let Daniel 6 simply be a children's story. There's more here than meets the eye – on both sides of Daniel's visit to the lion's den. As Smith-Christopher points out, there are two issues of particular importance. The first is the meaning of nonviolent resistance. Smith-Christopher notes that Mahatma Gandhi believed Daniel to be the model of resistance. Other than flinging open his windows, Daniel was otherwise portrayed as a model citizen. Further, the lion's den served as a metaphor of both unjust punishment and imprisonment – a reality Gandhi saw Indian South Africans dealing with routinely in the early twentieth century.

The second issue Smith-Christopher points out about Daniel 6 is the violence of reactions to injustice. One of the main motifs of “reversal of fortune” stories in the Bible, and Daniel especially, is the punishment of those who seek the death of Jewish heroes. However, sometimes this reaches disturbing proportions, as it did in our scripture lesson this morning. It's here that Smith-Christopher urges caution. He writes:

This is not an excuse or a plea for understanding the violence of the oppressed. There is no such thing as “righteous” violence, as if brutal actions are somehow transformed by calling them

aspects of the struggle for justice. Such manipulation is as offensive in progressive circles as are the more nationalistic versions of justification of violence by using patriotic terms. Both sides only succeed in justifying violence... Our call is to understand anger and to accept it as a reality in people's lives... But understanding anger is not an invitation to suspend commitment to the way of peace. [That's why, in contrast to those who suggest "there is no peace without justice,"] ultimately, there is no justice without peace.ⁱⁱⁱ

As adults, we can't hear the story of Daniel and assume that everyone lived happily ever after. No, we live in a world that still looks a little like it did 2500 years ago. I suspect you have already begun to draw some comparisons between the events of our scripture lesson from Daniel 6 and the events of today...a time in which resistance is characterized by both a mix of both non-violence and violence. The question, though, for us is where do we need to throw open the window? What, like King Darius, is keeping you awake at night? What is not as God intends? What, like Daniel, are you taking to God in prayer? Where does the abundant peace of Christ need to be pursued in your life? Where do you need to be part of the resistance? At work? With your family? In a community divided by racism and socioeconomics and new school locations and politics? These are the questions of an "adult faith." And, it's only in wrestling with and working out these issues – it's only by generating a picture of what "could and should be" in our minds - that we will truly understand the full ending of our stories...of the story God intends for me and for you.

ⁱ Santos, Richard G. "Mythologizing the Alamo" in *The San Antonio Express News*, March 3, 1990.

<http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org//adp/archives/newsarch/santos.html>

ⁱⁱ Smith-Christopher, Daniel L. "The Book of Daniel" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol VII*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.