

Kids Stump the Preacher: Daniel and the Big Mean Kitty Cats

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Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Daniel 6:1-23

So, today, as we continue through our “Kids Stump the Preacher” series, we are jumping back in time a little bit. Last week we jumped ahead to the story of Jesus’ birth, as we celebrated Mother’s Day and remembered the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, saying “yes” to God and then enduring all kinds of hardships in the months and years that followed as God used Mary’s courage to change the world.

But now, we are jumping back a few hundred years and stepping back into another favorite kids’ story that took place around the time of the exile.

We talked two weeks ago a little bit about this period of time when we entered into the story of Jonah. If you will remember, there was a lot of political upheaval throughout the Ancient Near East, and the big bad boogeyman at that time was the kingdom of Assyria, whose capital city was in Nineveh, where the prophet Jonah was instructed to go preach. And because the Israelites hated the Assyrians *that* much, Jonah did everything he possibly could to get out of this assignment.

That story was early during this period of history. The story of Daniel comes much later, and a LOT has happened between Jonah and Daniel. Assyria did finally overpower and conquer the northern kingdom of Israel, and basically wiped them off the map. Most scholars now believe that the Assyrians ended up intermarrying with the Israelites to form a new race of people called the Samaritans, who we see cropping up in the New Testament as people who the Jews absolutely hated and would have nothing to do with.

But then, a bigger, badder bully rose to power – the kingdom of Babylonia, led by King Nebuchadnezzar. Babylonia swept through and conquered the Assyrian empire, as well as the southern kingdom of Judah. And thus began what is known throughout much of the Old Testament as “the exile.” Over the course of time, the people of Judah were forcibly marched around the desert to the foreign land of Babylon. This happened in phases; the first group of exiles included the wealthy and the powerful and the elite, and then over time it expanded to include the “commoners.” Nebuchadnezzar’s idea was, bring the leaders over first, treat them well, get them on my side, and then they will help to subdue everybody else.

Pretty smart thinking, if you ask me.

So Daniel was a young man from a wealthy family when the exile began, and he and three of his closest friends Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah (more commonly known by their Babylonian names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego), were among the first wave

of people taken into captivity. They were given titles, and responsibility, and good food (which wasn't kosher, and so Daniel and his friends refused the food, but they were offered it anyway). They were wooed. And Daniel especially really "bloomed where he was planted."

The prophet Jeremiah once offered some advice to the people in exile – to "work for the good of the city where God has brought you as captives, and to pray for that city. And when the city prospers, you will prosper." In essence, stop looking back at what you have lost, and instead begin building a new life where you are. And that is exactly what Daniel did. He worked together with the king; he prayed – three times every day; he held deeply to his faith and to his religious convictions; and he worked incredibly hard for the good of not just his own people but the Babylonian people as well. He spoke truth to power, but he did it with humility and respect. And as a result, he kept getting promoted.

By the end of Daniel chapter 5, King Nebuchadnezzar has gotten old and died, and he is succeeded by his son, and then later, his grandson – King Belshazzar. Under King Belshazzar, Daniel rises up in power to the third in command over the whole country, and then all of a sudden the Persians come in and conquer Babylonia.

History tells us that Cyrus the Great was king of Persia at the time. The book of Daniel talks about King Darius the Mede as being the king. And there are all kinds of historical and theological gymnastics that scholars have done to try to reconcile this difference. But honestly, for our purposes it doesn't matter all that much. What's important for us – and for the people of Judah – is that the whole game changes in an instant. Because now, for the first time in almost 60 years, the people of Judah (who have by now come to be known as the Jews, or the "descendants of Judea"), are allowed to return home to rebuild Jerusalem.

By this point, a lot of time has passed. The only people who even remember life back in Judah were people who were basically kids, or very young adults, at the start of the exile. Most of the Israelites alive during this time were actually born in Babylonia, not in Judah. They've lived their entire lives here. They don't know life anywhere else. And those who did remember the "good ole' days" are getting old. Too old to travel, in many cases – at least, too old to travel by foot the almost 900 miles back home. At the time, Daniel was probably between 80 and 90 years old.

And although he loved Jerusalem, and missed Jerusalem, and even kept a window open facing Jerusalem every time he prayed, he was not one who was ever going to return home. He became part of a huge group of Jews known as the "diaspora" or the "dispersed." Jews living outside of Judea. Over time, the diaspora Jews were essentially looked at by the Judean Jews as "second-class citizens" – "sell-outs," if you will – people who didn't take seriously enough their religious heritage; those who didn't care enough about Jerusalem to help rebuild.

But as we see in the story of Daniel in the Lion's Den, those who decided not to go back home again actually maybe had the most challenging job of all: trying to figure out how to remain true to their God and committed to their faith when the entire culture around them was moving in a totally different direction. Trying to figure out how to work for the good of a country that was not aligned with their own ideals, while maintaining some semblance of personal integrity in the process.

Daniel had somehow managed to spend his whole adult life striking this balance. Serving the Babylonian king faithfully and earning his trust and admiration, while also serving God unabashedly and unashamedly.

But one day, that gets really hard when some of the king's royal advisors get jealous of Daniel and decide that they want to "off" him. And to do this, they use Daniel's religious convictions against him. They manage to talk King Darius into issuing a ruling that for 30 days, every person in the kingdom should pray to him – the king – and only to him. And if any person is discovered praying to anyone or anything other than the king, the punishment is death. They would be thrown into a den of hungry lions.

Now, this maybe seems a little bit weird to us...why would anybody ever pray to a king? But it was actually a really common thing back in the day for people to look at their king as a god (or at the very least, a demi-god). This was the case for Pharaoh in Egypt, and this is the case for the King of Babylonia too. The idea of praying to a king – of worshipping a king – was not at all out of the ordinary. So when Darius was presented with this idea, it didn't seem all that crazy. "Oh, yeah. Okay. Let's do a 30-day prayer challenge. Sounds good to me. What's for lunch?"

But that presents a MAJOR problem for Daniel, and for pretty much all of the Jews still living in Babylonia. How do I continue to live out my faith, when the consequences of doing so are steep? How do I hold onto who I am – a child of God – when I can't be this person in public, without fearing for my life? How do I continue to "work for the good of the city where I am" – as God has commanded me to – when the city itself is going against everything I know to be true?

And the question for us living in the 21st Century is actually not all that far-removed from Daniel's question. Fortunately for us, we don't have to fear for our lives every time we kneel down to pray. But, we are living in a time in history in which "churchgoing" is no longer the "norm" on Sunday mornings for most families. A recent Gallup poll revealed that today, for the first time in history, fewer than 50% of Americans identify as members of a faith community. And we can talk all day about why that might be the case, but the truth for us is that we no longer exist in a "Christian bubble," where all of our friends and family and colleagues and co-workers and clients and people living in our community share all the same beliefs as us. We no longer live in Judah, where everybody worships in the temple, and where everybody prays to the same God. It's

more like we are in Babylon where we are trying to feel out how we can continue to live in community with those who think and act and believe differently than we do – and to do so from a place of love and respect – while at the same time not abandoning but instead *deepening* our relationship with a God who calls us to be all-in.

And that is no easy feat. When we live in this tension, usually we find ourselves drawn in one of two directions: We either give up on Babylon altogether and go back to Judah – we un-friend all of our Facebook friends who think differently than we do, and surround ourselves *only* with people who act and think and believe exactly like us and demonize everyone else, *or* we give up on Judah altogether. We let our faith slide into oblivion, while we bit-by-bit, little by little, become indistinguishable from the Babylonians. We say “oh, the king wants me to pray to him now. Well, I don’t really want to get eaten by lions...so what will 30 days hurt, in the grand scheme of things? God will understand. I’ll just go back to praying to God next month.” But the problem is, next month comes, and we’re out of the habit, and our busy lifestyle has just gotten busier, and God has basically gone on the back burner.

It’s a rare person who can hold the tension between the two – to live in Babylon, and work for the good of Babylon – while serving the God of Judah. To live with integrity and love in the midst of a world that we sometimes – or oftentimes – disagree with, while at the same time clinging to the God who sustains us and who calls us more and more deeply into relationship with him.

And part of the challenge is that while God calls us into this tension: To preach to Nineveh; to work for the good of Babylon; to love those who make our blood boil – AND to live above all else as God’s people – God never tells us that this will be easy. God never promises us that there will be no lion’s dens in our path. We will occasionally find ourselves in impossible, no-win situations. And some of these situations will feel like they have fangs attached to them.

But God does promise us that even in the lion’s den, God will be with us. When we are tired and weary; when we feel misunderstood or bullied; when we try and try and try and it feels like we have gotten nowhere; when we go head-to-head with somebody who really just pushes our buttons; when we pray to God and wonder if anybody can hear us; when we are facing down hard life situations and we are not sure whether or not our faith is strong enough to get us through, this is when God shows up and reminds us that wherever we are – in Babylon or in Judah; at home or in exile; in the midst of friendly or hostile circumstances; kneeling down to pray or facing down the lions – God is with us, giving us strength and wisdom for the next step that we take.