

First Sunday of Advent - Daniel in the Lion's Den

November 27, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Luke 23: 1-5; Daniel 6: 6-27

A lion's Den - "a place or state of extreme disadvantage, antagonism, or hostility"¹
A lion's den - "demanding, intimidating, or unpleasant place or situation."² Ever found yourself in one? Will Willimon, former Chaplain at Duke University wrote about an occasion when he received a call early one Monday morning from a student, a chapel regular, who was very upset: "Dr. Willimon, are you up yet?" "Yes." "I need to see you right away. I've had a terrible night and need to talk." "I'll meet you in the chapel in thirty minutes," Willimon said.

Upon arriving at the back door of the chapel, the student greeted Willimon and in tears. "What's happened?" Willimon asked. "It's terrible," the student said. "I've had the worst night of my life. Last night, after the fraternity meeting, as usual, we had a time when we just sit around and talk about what we did over the weekend. This weekend, during a party we had on Saturday, I went upstairs to get something from a brother's room and walked in on a couple who were, well, 'in the act.' "I immediately closed the door and went back downstairs, saying nothing. Well, when it came time for sharing at the end of the meeting, after a couple of brothers shared what they did over the weekend, one of the group said, 'I understand that Mr. Christian got a real eye-full last night.'

"With that, they all began to laugh. Not a good, friendly laugh; it was cold, cruel, and mean. They were all laughing, all saying things like, 'You won't see nothin' like that in church!' and 'Better go confess it to the priest,' and stuff like that. "I tried to recover, tried to say something light, but I couldn't. They were serious. I could feel their hate. I walked out of the meeting and stood outside and wept. I've never been treated like that in my life."³

Pastor Willimon's response to that student's distress, in part by explaining: "Just one person running around loose who can say, No! is a threat to everyone else. He has to be put down, ridiculed, and savaged into silence."⁴ In his actions that student had dared to say "No" to prevailing norms of acceptable behavior in his frat house. He had simply tried to live according to the values and guidelines he had learn in Scripture, his church and family. That was threatening enough for those who were suppose to be his frat brothers. To keep their version of acceptable values and behavior on top, they had to push him down, push him into exile with ridicule and cruelty, throw him into the lion's den. Jesus lived that truth and so did Daniel.

Daniel lived faithful to God's ways. And even though he was a foreigner working for the current ruler who held God's people captive, Daniel brought God's ways of honesty and integrity into his work. The king noticed and was going to promote Daniel which galled

the other leaders. How dare this “outsider” be put over them, the native-born citizens. Using flattery, guile and manipulation, those leaders got the king to sign a law they knew Daniel would break — no one could worship anyone but Darius the king. Daniel worshiped the one true God. He had to make a choice. He could have moved away from the window and prayed more privately. Instead, Daniel committed an act of civil disobedience. He continued to turn three times a day toward Jerusalem to pray to the Lord Almighty, the center of his life who was steadfast in love and promises. Praying was an intentional act of resistance against the powers of injustice, oppression and hate. And if all went as planned, it would have cost him his life.

When we hear this story, we’re usually captivated by the miracle of Daniel being saved from the hungry lions. Even King Darius considered Daniel’s deliverance from the lion’s den “proof” of the existence and power of the God of Israel. But there is another miracle in this story, another powerful sign of the mightiness of God that is important for us to notice --- “God gave the faith and strength to Daniel to defy the injustice under which he lived. “Daniel’s God is the living God,” (vs. 26) King Darius announced, and this is most certainly on display in Daniel’s act of defiant faith. Indeed, [as king Darius declared] the kingship of God is “indestructible” (vs. 26), even though Jerusalem lay in waste, the people of God are in captivity in Persia, and human kings and the wealthy trample on the ways of God by enriching themselves and denying justice to the widow, orphan, the migrant, and the poor.”⁵ Still, God is the God who will be victorious.

To eyes without faith, it may seem God is ineffectual and powerless compared to the nations, armies and leaders of our world. As we learned by watching Jesus, the power of God is not exercised through coercion, violence or oppression as the world does. Instead, God’s power lies in mercy, compassion, forgiveness, erasing lines between insiders and outsiders, and providing the means so that all may have enough. Our world doesn’t see such things as power but as weakness. But the Pharaohs of Egypt have come and gone. The empires of Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Rome have come and gone. In our life time we have seen national boundaries and powers shift. Still God reigns. Still God has given strength and power to well-known and unknown everyday followers to stand up for what is right, true and just in God’s eyes.

In my lifetime I’ve seen such defiant faith among those who opposed apartheid in South Africa & in the American civil rights movement, in Teresa of Calcutta caring for the rejected and abandoned in India, among students who meet regularly for devotions and prayer at their school’s Fellowship of Christian Athletes, in those who have faced ridicule and wrath when they choose to serve a Thanksgiving meal for strangers before joining their family celebrations and even in those who protect their Sunday morning’s for worship

or refuse to gossip or disparage another. In each case they walked or risked walking into the lion's den as they defied what was common belief, the popular culture or accepted norms. The strength, passion or courage to stand up for what the Lord has told us is right, just and good, despite the dangers and hardship, is as powerful a miracle as shutting the mouths of lions. It's a miracle of God's grace and power planted in each of us at baptism to provide what we need to live into our calling to boldly proclaim the good news of our Lord in our thoughts, words and deeds.

We are so blessed and perhaps so sheltered in this land of freedom that we may forget that we are to be "in" but not "of" this world. I can't remember ever being persecuted for my beliefs. Perhaps ridiculing that cost me anger and hurt but not outright persecution that has gotten in the way of practicing my faith. Am I just fortunate or have I been too timid in the living of my faith? Do I pray at the window like Daniel or keep my faith safely in the shadows where I won't attract attention or cause offense? When the values of our culture or nation become so comfortable or commanding that they no longer rub against our faith or God's mercy, grace and generosity, it is very likely we are living our faith a bit too quietly and safe. Because, like that Duke University student discovered, being a witness to the ways, wonders and love of God can put us at odds with others and "the ways of the world."

Today we begin the Advent season — a truly counter-cultural tradition in our current world. While everything around us seems to conspire to get us to focus on buying lots, eating lots, over scheduling, over doing, trying to make it all Hallmark perfect, our church challenges us to take a refreshing breath and keep our eyes on Jesus. While we're bombarded with claims that a new car, jewelry, the latest electronic gadget, or costly whatever will fulfill our hearts, desires and spirits, Advent calls us to back to what is really life-giving and central — God among us — Emmanuel — who came into the lion's den of hostility, violence, and injustice to show us another way to live. In Advent, we are reminded that we are a people in exile but we are not abandoned or powerless. But we are just not home yet. We prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior — born a helpless baby in a manger in a land occupied by foreign soldiers and governed by unjust kings. In this first week of Advent we walk and pray with Daniel toward Bethlehem: Come, Lord Jesus, be our guide, give us courage and make us brave that "our own works and words will defy the sin and evil of this world, and we show forth the Kingdom of God"⁶ in all its grace and glory. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 11/26/16

ENDNOTE

1. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lion's%20den>

2. https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/the_lion's_den

3. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 27-28.

4. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 27-28.

5. Chris Duckworth, "Proof That God Exists" as posted on <http://neyjoy.org>.

6. Chris Duckworth, "Proof That God Exists" as posted on <http://neyjoy.org>.