

Season after Pentecost

Summer Sermon Series: "Daniel and the Lion's Den"

August 16 & 17, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 27: 1-8; Daniel 6

Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen

Did you hear about the hungry lion who was roaming through the jungle looking for something to eat. He came across two men. One was sitting under a tree and reading a book; the other was intently, incessantly writing in his journal. The lion quickly pounced on the man reading the book and devoured him. Even the king of the jungle knows readers digest and writer's cramp.

Once there were three lions sitting on a hill. They were getting hungry. Below them, three men walked by — a Frenchman, an Italian and a Czechoslovakian. The first lion said, "I haven't had French food in a while." So, he ran off and ate the French man. The second lion said. "Well, I'm hungry for some Italian food." So, he ran off and ate the Italian man. The final lion looked at the sole remaining man, and said, "I guess it's my turn to spring for the Czech."¹

The lions don't get to talk in the much beloved story of Daniel and the Lion's Den. And we don't talk too much about Daniel and the Lion's Den outside of children's Sunday School classes. It never shows up in the regular schedule of readings for church services. That's rather unfortunate since there are certainly meaningful facets of God's Word to be found for adults as well as children in this story

The setting of the story is after the Promised Land had been won, prospered and then lost to the latest powerhouse empire. Judah, the last Jewish stronghold, Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians. Daniel, who has a place in the Hebrew Heroes Hall of Fame, is said to be among the prisoners carried to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. Along with several other young men from the cream of the Hebrew crop, Daniel is brought to serve in the king's palace, where they are trained in the literature, language and ways of the Babylonians. These young Hebrews turn out to be superior in understanding and wisdom and earn favorable, influential positions within the royal government. Daniel, with a gift for interpretation of dreams, gains even more favor in the royal palace.

By the time King Darius takes over, Daniel, now an old man, is one of three presidents selected to oversee a portion of the kingdom now under Persian control. He is the only foreigner and Hebrew among the appointed leaders. Again, Daniel distinguishes himself above all others. Soon the lions of jealousy and greed are circling Daniel. His

Persian peers try to figure out how to discredit Daniel and end any plans Darius may have about giving Daniel oversight over the entire kingdom. They begin digging for dirt with the ferocity of Fox Network, CNN and Nightline put together. Yet they can find nothing.

They move to Plan B. Using stealth and backdoor conniving that might even make modern day politicians blush with envy, these Persian leaders appeal to the king's ego. Let's have a month-long celebration of Darius — our wonderful king and only god. Anyone caught praying to any human or god other than you, great Darius, shall be thrown into the lion's den. Honored and pleased, Darius signs the edict that cannot be reversed by anyone, even the king himself.

Daniel, a faithful Hebrew and loyal servant of the king, knows what the edict says and what disobeying it will mean. We live in a country where we practice our faith without fear for our safety and with few legal repercussions. Yet we often live as if we are more frightened to publicly claim our faith than Daniel whose very life was threatened. When it comes to admitting we are followers of Jesus in conducting of our public life, are we openly faithful or chronically compromise to avoid discomfort, embarrassment or conflict? When we refrain from praying in public before meals or when we have guests because we say we don't want to make others uncomfortable; when we let others takeover our Sunday mornings without claiming it sacred for worship and Sunday School because we say we don't want to be troublesome to others ; when we rationalize skirting the law for convenience, personal gain or thrill because everyone else does it; when we go along with the wayward choices of the crowd because we claim we don't want to seem pompously pious or a goody-goody. Is it coincidence that as mainline Christians have become less open and more passive about their faith, that the number of people in organized churches has declined and the public is more likely to associate Christianity with those more vocal branches that are mean-spirited, judgmental and divisive? Back to Daniel.

Daniel faced death if he continued to be faithful and pray to God. He could have decided that giving up prayer for 30 days was no big deal. God would understand. He could make it up the next month. Daniel could have decided faith was really a private matter, so what's the big deal about closing the window shades and praying in secret for a month. Daniel could have decided to give up on God altogether. If God was going to allow him to be in danger, then maybe God doesn't deserve his worship. Daniel faced the same kind of temptations we face when it comes to being a faithful, unashamed, public follower of our Lord. Please note that choosing to live out his faith did not mean Daniel was going to beat up or demean others with the fear of God or his faith. What Daniel chose was to

continue to live his faith and trust in God because that is what he believed, that is what gave life meaning. Caught in the evil plotting of others, Daniel held on to God as he faced the lion's den and being the lion's supper — And it was no joke.

So what lion's den have you faced? What circumstances or events did you think would devour you? Lose of a spouse, job or dreams? Did you feel trapped by the hungry lions of cancer, flooding, one bad news story after another? Have you ever felt there would be no escape from the overwhelming demands of school, work, or debt? Like Daniel, we may have prayed fervently for a miracle that would spare us or our loved ones the pain of a lion's den. Yet we read that Daniel was not saved *from* the lion's den. Daniel went into that den trusting in the goodness and grace of God, not knowing if it meant God would intervene or God would meet him at his death. God's grace is not magic and God's goodness does not mean that things always turn out the way we hope. But the grace and the goodness of God *does* mean "you don't have to get it all right in order for it to be all right... and it can be all right even when it seems it is all wrong."²

I always enjoyed when a worship leader or preacher, in the tradition of African American churches, says, "God is good" and the congregation answers "All the time." Then the leader says, "all the time" and the congregation answers "God is good." But I don't know that I always appreciated what an incredible statement of faith that is. What faith and trust in God to be able to say, "God is good all the time," even when you face the lions of devastating circumstances, human disease, evil or sin! One of the themes in this year's vacation Bible school was "Even when we don't understand — Jesus loves you!" We asked the children to write down some things they didn't understand on these huge question marks. There were some questions about why do some animals have to be dangerous and why do crayons get smaller. But there were other questions like "Why did God let me and my Dad live apart?" and "Why do people have to hurt or die?" We lifted up the question marks with those things we don't understand that can cause us to worry or doubt God. Later we put the question marks together to form hearts. Even when we don't understand, even when we're not happy, unsure, frightened, or angry at the circumstances that threaten to devour us the truth remains -- Jesus loves you. And that CAN see us through. Believing "God is good all the time. All the time God is good" is what allowed a Daniel to face the lion's den. Whether he would be spared or die, he believed in his very deeps, beyond reason or sense, that God was good and loved him and was for and with him always. And that is what we learn as we survive our own lions' dens. We may not be spared from the lion's jaws or end up where we thought we wanted — but God will bring us

through to life that may be different than we anticipated but more meaningful than we imagined.

For the Hebrew hero Daniel, he was spared death by lions and the scheming scoundrels got their comeuppance. King Darius himself sends word out to all the nations throughout the world that the God of Daniel is the real thing — eternal and powerful in the heavens and on earth. It's the classic Hollywood ending with the hero's reputation cleared and his goodness richly rewarded. It doesn't always happen that way in real life. But that's really not the point. When you live trusting in the all-powerful grace, goodness and victory of God, you don't expect to be spared from prowling lions and temptation.... Not even Jesus was. When we live trusting in the all-powerful grace, goodness and victory of God, we do our best to walk in God's ways so other may see God's grace and goodness in our lives, so they too can be freed from the devouring lions of greed, fear, selfishness, hatred, or despair. We live freed, hopeful and relying upon God, who we proclaim is good, loving, and triumphant even when we can't feel it or see it. "God is good." (All the time) "All the time." (God is good) And we are not lion, I mean lyin'. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 8/15/14

ENDNOTES

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1. All three jokes posted on www.lionlamb.us/lion/lafflion.html by site creator Tim Stoffel
 2. J. Howard Olds, "Daniel: The Problem of Power" Christian Globe Networks, Inc. 7/23/2006, 0-000-3398