

Daniel 6:6-18

The Insolence of Office

The most important thing in the preaching line is to be true to the scripture at hand. I am tempted to say, it's most important to tell the truth, but truth can be expressed in many ways, and sometimes truth may be used to hide truth- like the times one might quote a verse of scripture to prove a pet prejudice. So, I'll just say that it's vitally important to deal honestly with scripture, and to seek out those truths that may be hidden in it. In this passage are perhaps hidden meanings, but to be forthright, let's simply recognize the fundamental meaning here is that God is present for Daniel, assurance that God protects those who are faithful, even in dangerous and frightening circumstances. You know how the story ends- Daniel comes out of the lion's den without a scratch, which you know is odd indeed, if you have been around cats at all. Daniel is our example of faithfulness and trust: even though he knows perfectly well the consequences, still he prays and gives thanks to God.

This is the third of three very popular stories in Daniel, the other two we have read in worship in past weeks: the courage of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and their willingness to face the fiery furnace; and Belshazzar's terror at the writing on the wall, and Daniel's wisdom as he interpreted it. And here is

Daniel's utter commitment to God, and- as the story continues in later verses- his deliverance is proof of his blameless service to the king. So that King Darius rejoices that Daniel is unhurt, and issues a second decree praising God as the living God who rescues and works wonders in heaven and on earth. Daniel's faithfulness results in honor being given to God throughout the Persian Empire.

But there are deeper truths in the story than the obvious ones, because the Bible is never simply literalistic; it requires interpretation. It contains words with subtle meanings and hints hidden within the context. What concepts are in our passage- or in any passage- that help us understand better what it means that God is present and watching over us? Let me share with you what else I think this passage wants to tell us.

It's a long story, Daniel in the lion's den, and I've edited out earlier verses that told how the king's men were jealous of Daniel- who himself was one of the king's men, and convinced the king to enact this law just to ensnare him. Did you notice the three times they came together by "agreement" (verses 6, 11, 15)? The idea behind that word is "conspiracy." These leaders of the nation gathered and plotted in order to consolidate their own power, and ruin a good, honorable man. "Hey, let's make a law, that punishes people different from us," they may be

thinking. How significant is it that they remind the king that his edicts cannot be revoked? And yet, sometimes laws must be rewritten, changed, because our situations and understandings change; society expands, civilization progresses, and our insight into human interactions grows deeper. Is it right to punish individuals or an entire people for their faith, as these men seek to do? Of course not. And so this wicked cabal fails, and the king comes to see the greatness and goodness of the true God, and the nation rejoices. But the goodness and greatness of God can be seen only when prejudice is defeated.

King Darius appears oblivious to the secret purpose of his own regents and ministers. He wouldn't have passed this law if he had known the intent behind it—Daniel seems to be his favorite. Look at his distress when he learns it is Daniel who is captured by the new legislation: tries to find a way out of the law, cannot sleep and eat that night; and the next morning runs to the place where the lions were kept, and cries out before the door can be opened, “Daniel, was your God able to deliver you?” It is refreshing, hopeful, I think, to see a world leader so concerned, so involved with one of his subjects, so suddenly aware of what he has done and the injustice of it. But it is also obvious that Daniel is saved from the danger not by the king's regret, and not even by his influence and power, but only

by God's power. Let's be encouraged that God can do what presidents and kings cannot. In any situation, still God can save. And so we give to God alone worship and praise.

A question we may want to ask ourselves is whether or not we live faithfully so that God's name is praised. And that is a big question. My feeling is that, yes you are doing a pretty good job of being God's men and God's women, but the news and the internet are filled up with persons who claim to speak for God, but then set out to demean others, and profit from them, who try catch all "those sinners" at their evil deeds, and complain about various laws that don't meet their definition of godly. They have every right to do that. But is God's name praised when they attack another person with hateful speech, or another group with bigoted legislation? No, that only turns people from God. What did Daniel do? Confronted by an unjust law, he prayed. And God turned it to victory. It became a reason for rejoicing for all the people in the kingdom.

The sermon title comes from the famous soliloquy in Act 3 of Hamlet, "To be or not to be." As he ponders "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," and the "calamity" of a "long life" that must bear "the whips and scorns of time- the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, the pangs of despised love, the

law's delay," and "the insolence of office," in which the unworthy man takes away what the patient man has earned. In our passage are the unworthy, wicked leaders of the nation scheming to overthrow humble, patient Daniel. He prays, while they show themselves insolent and secretive, heartless and ambitious. And if we're paying attention, many politicians- and many political religious leaders- are too often self-promoting and arrogant, and filled with narcissism; listen closely, and you can hear their insolent disdain for individuals.

I'm not trying to make a political point, but people are watching: what do they hear when we speak, and what do they see in our actions? Is our religion directed toward ideology, or people? Is it merely wishful thinking and a longing for times gone by, and the fear that we aren't keeping our place in society and our power over it? Shouldn't we instead be concerned about loving people? Rather than insisting upon their perfect obedience to our fallible interpretations of scripture, shouldn't we ourselves obey the first law, of love and compassion? Not working to turn them to our ideological viewpoint, but working to show them the hope of our God. We don't have to agree with everyone (and we never will); we don't all agree in here about some things. We can't force others to be like us. But

that isn't important at all: we aren't commanded to compel obedience; we are commanded to love one another.

Let it be that we experience God's spirit of love as we remember the Lord who came for us, as we share communion at his table.

There is something else hidden in this tale. While the age described in the stories of Daniel is the 6th century B.C., scholars say that this prophetic work was completed perhaps as late as 160-165 B.C., and that the kings in these stories represent a ruler of that time who tried to diminish and overthrow the Jewish faith. But here is Darius, an honorable man, seemingly, trying to do right, and certainly he thinks highly of Daniel. Maybe he is presented in a favorable light because sometimes we just need hope. Perhaps we need to be reminded that they aren't all insolent scoundrels, lest we find ourselves in Hamlet's existential quandary, wondering, after all, if it is better "not to be."

And maybe we need to let this word become clear to us as God's good news. That an entire nation may be saved, that a people may come to find hope, and a way out of the darkness- not by compulsion or commandment or legislation or by

uniformity, but as they behold the acts of kindness God's people perform, and as they see us loving and affirming even those unlike us. The kingdom that God rules over is filled up with all sorts of people, and we are welcome in that kingdom, only so much as we are willing to accept and love one another.