

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

Beaverton, Oregon

Pastor Adam Parker

11/17/2024

Sermon Title: A Faithful Exile

Sermon Text: Daniel 1:1-21

Dan. 1:1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

Dan. 1:2 And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.

Dan. 1:3 Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility,

Dan. 1:4 youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.

Dan. 1:5 The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king.

Dan. 1:6 Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah.

Dan. 1:7 And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

Dan. 1:8 ¶ But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.

Dan. 1:9 And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs,

Dan. 1:10 and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king."

Dan. 1:11 Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah,

Dan. 1:12 "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink.

Dan. 1:13 Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see."

Dan. 1:14 So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days.

Dan. 1:15 At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food.

Dan. 1:16 So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

Dan. 1:17 ¶ As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

Dan. 1:18 At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar.

Dan. 1:19 And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king.

Dan. 1:20 And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.

Dan. 1:21 And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Main Point: Even in our hardship, God is still being actively faithful to his promises.

Outline:

1. Faithful to Covenant Curses (1:2)
2. Faithful to Sustain (1:9, 17)
3. Faithful to the End (1:21)

Introduction

So my memory of the sort of evangelism I was exposed to as a young person was very two-dimensional. And I admit, perhaps I don't remember what I was hearing as accurately I should have, but here was the basic pitch: your life is bad right now, whether you know it or not. And until you come to Christ, it will continue to be bad, and you won't understand why. But after coming to Jesus, you will find that you are happy, that you are inexplicably joyful, and that your life from here on out is an amazing and happy adventure.

And what I found out instead, as I got older, was that most of the hardest things were still ahead of me *after* coming to Jesus. I discovered that it was more complicated than coming to Christ and finding out that everything in my life was going to work out now.

Today we begin this series in the book of Daniel, and the reason I'm beginning this way is that Daniel is a book about the faithfulness of God to his people and his covenant, even when things look incredibly sketchy and painful and dangerous. So I'm starting with this reminder that life following Christ is not always easy not because I want you to run for the hills, but because God has not hidden this aspect of following him: he promises forgiveness, peace with him, and fellowship with his

people. He promises he will be with us, and that he will go with us through our experiences, but he does *not* promise his people health, wealth, or ease.

Let me see if I can help us set the stage. The book of Daniel opens with these four men who got dragged from Israel to a foreign land – Babylon. How did they get there? Well, this book takes place about 400 years after the time of King David. The temple had been standing since the time of his son, Solomon, but God’s people have failed in every way to keep the covenant of God that he gave to them in the law.

During this time, God had still protected them. He had been merciful, he’d sent prophets and messengers to warn and reclaim them, but at every point Israel’s kings and people rebuffed God’s message to them.

God was patient, but by 605 BC, Assyria’s time as rulers over the region was ending. Crown prince Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonian army to victory over Assyrian and Egyptian troops at the Battle of Carchemish in northern Syria. This victory removed Assyria from the equation and established *Babylon* as the region’s unrivaled power. So at this point Nebuchadnezzar and his troops turn southward through the lands along the eastern Mediterranean coast, and as they’re doing this they are consolidating Babylon’s new territorial gains and taking plunder along the way. When the Babylonians reach Jerusalem, Daniel and his friends become part of that plunder.

Nebuchadnezzar then set up what he hoped would be a compliant puppet-king in Israel (his name was Zedekiah) and then Nebuchadnezzar went back home to Babylon with his spoil. And our story today essentially opens with these plundered young men fighting to live faithfully in a very foreign place that is not their real home: in other words, these are men who are living in exile.

This book teaches us that – like so many Christians eventually find out – being God’s people doesn’t mean that the road is smooth. Instead, God is *always* being faithful, but we often experience that faithfulness in a context of pain, hurt, thorns, thistles, and in Israel’s case here, exile.

This is a book about exiles. People who are still God’s people, but who are not at home where they are. But I call this sermon “a faithful exile” because even when

they are in exile, God is still with them. Even in their exile, God is being faithful. And if we think that doesn't speak to us in our own day, then we especially need to listen.

How these exiles live and comport themselves is seriously important and relevant for us. Why? Because we are also exiles.

The Apostle Peter addressed his first letter to Christians living in a pagan Roman culture, and do you know what he called them? "Elect Exiles...according to the foreknowledge of God" (1 Pe 1:1-2).

This is the right mindset for us to have. We have far more in common with the Israelites living in Babylon than we do with a Christian living in Constantinople in 1000 AD, or whatever we might think of as the height of "Christendom." That day is long past.

Because of this, as we read Daniel we should absolutely be taking notes. We should absolutely be asking, "How did *they* do it? How did *they* survive? How did *they* remain faithful?"

Here's how I'd like us to look at this first chapter of Daniel today. The first point is, faithful to covenant curses. The second point, faithful to sustain. Then third, faithful to the end. Even though this passage seems like a story about Daniel and his three friends, they are actually the conduits of God's glory. God is the one who is faithful. God is going to show himself to them and to Nebuchadnezzar through them. And so because of that, this book is actually a book – not about Daniel (whom the book is named after) – but a book about God.

1. Faithful to Covenant Curses (1:2)

First, this passage teaches us that God is faithful to his covenant curses.

That might seem like a strange place to start, but repeatedly what we find out is that even in exile, Israel is not at the whims of random happenstance. They aren't even really at the whims of the foreign ruler who comes for them. Instead, this exile is a work of God. And it's a work of God that is actually an expression of his

faithfulness. It's not a sign that he's not with them. This exile happens *because* God keeps his promises.

Because God is faithful, he brought the Babylonians to Israel's front door. Because he is faithful, the temple was raided and people were taken away. One of the Reformers in the 16th century (Johannes Oecolampadius) made this comment, that at the end of the day, "it is the Jews, not the king of Babylon against whom God himself battles."

Think about the language here in Daniel. It doesn't say that Nebuchadnezzar was such a brilliant tactician and strategist that by his cunning he succeeded in besieging Jerusalem. Instead, the author says this is about God. The defeat of Jerusalem is a theological event. Daniel here, who is the author, gives God a much more active role than we might be comfortable with. He says, "The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand, with some of the vessels of God."

So it's not just the king that God gives over to Babylon, but he also "gives" the vessels used for worship and sacrifice! Think of this: even the vessels from Jerusalem's temple get turned over to the pagans (1:2). Only by understanding the covenant curses can you feel the gravity of this exile. This is Israel reduced, not strong. It is Israel utterly helpless and humbled. They can't even fall back on their religiosity, because God took it away. He said in essence, "You have not worshiped me for my sake. You used these vessels and tools for your own vanity, and because they belong to me, I'll give them over to the pagans. You cannot have my worship if you will not have me." He steals away their empty worship, and takes their temple from them.

Am I exaggerating the role of God here? Well, no. All of this has happened because God has decided to finally visit the curses of his covenant upon them – these are curses he has held back from executing on his covenant people for a long time.

What curses am I talking about? Lev. 26:31-33 warns about this exact event long before it happens:

"And I will lay your cities waste and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing aromas. And I myself will devastate the land, so

that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled at it. And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you, and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste.” (Leviticus 26:31-33 ESV)

He's giving us a preview of something that happens half a millennium later.

Look at Deut. 28:49, which also promised that this would happen if Israel did not keep their covenant with God:

“The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young.” (Deuteronomy 28:49-50 ESV)

And then, not to place too fine a point on it, Isaiah makes a prophecy that is recorded in 2 Kings 20, warning that this is about to happen:

“Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD. And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.” (2 Kings 20:17-18 ESV)

And so nobody in Israel could say to God, “You didn’t warn us. You didn’t tell us. We didn’t know.” They could *definitely* say, “We didn’t believe your word when you told us about this,” but we have to be very clear: this exile *is* the faithfulness of God, whether it feels like it or not. This exile happened because God keeps his promises, not because he doesn’t.

That’s not just me coming in from outside and saying that, either. In Daniel’s prayer in Daniel chapter 9, look how he’s going to pray when we get to it:

“We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land... [We] have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by walking in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.” (Daniel 9:6, 10)

So even Daniel acknowledges that they didn't listen to the prophets, and now here they are in Babylon. He knows how they got here. Those covenant curses predicted what Daniel has lived through in this book (9:13-14). God did this because he said he would.

God is faithful. He's faithful when the sun shines, and he is faithful when it rains. He is faithful when you can see the sun through the clouds, but even when the clouds are out, the sun is still there. When your life is going smoothly, praise him. He's given you peace. When hardships come, praise him. He's brought challenges. But he is always sovereign, good, and trustworthy.

2. Faithful to Sustain (1:9, 17)

Second today, this passage shows us that God is faithful to sustain.

Let's move away from the big global political events, and zoom in on a more intimate story: the story of Daniel and his companions. Daniel and his companions have been dragged off against their will to the greatest city on earth, in a land that could not be more different than Israel.

I have never left America. In fact, I am not well-traveled. I grew up in Kansas, went to school in Arizona, went to seminary and pastored in Mississippi, and one time in 2019 my family and I visited Oregon. It was our first time being in the Pacific Northwest. Portland was probably the most exotic place I had ever visited – what with your tent cities, and your graffiti everywhere, and your giant dramatic beachside views. But as weird as Portland is compared to the south... none of us would be prepared for the culture shock of going from Israel to Babylon.

They eat different there. They drink different there. They talk different there. They worship different there. It's a massive change. So much so that they need three years of indoctrination so they don't make fools of themselves when they finally meet the king.

But let's also not overstate things too much. The whole reason this happened was because the people of Israel already yearned in their hearts to be like Babylon and Assyria and all the other nations. They were a people who suffered because they

wanted foreign gods. They wanted life, not as people of Yahweh, but as people who were curious to know the other gods.

So it's also probably good to say this: Babylon would have been foreign to them, but if we're honest, maybe not quite as foreign as they should have been. This is how they ended up here in the first place.

So Nebuchadnezzar has a plan. Actually his right hand man Ashpenaz has a plan: they are going to have some court entertainment – foreigners from another land who can tell stories and sing songs from their strange lands. This is where Daniel and his companions come into the story. Because the plan is to reeducate them and make them belong in the court of this King.

They are going to take these bumpkins from the hill country and make them into sophisticated Babylonians.

For three years, the plan is that Daniel and his three friends will experience a rigorous reeducation:

They will be given new names, for starters. Ashpenaz gives Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah whole new names. Babylonian names. Yet here's the interesting thing: if you read through Daniel, their Hebrew names keep being used. What we find, if I may, is that one of the means of controlling someone is by what you call them, and what you expect others to call you. It's a way of asserting control. But their Babylonian names do become their real names. Their Hebrew and Babylonian names live side-by-side now. They live with these dual identities.

And here's the first lesson I'd like to see about how God preserves us as Christians: he places his own name and sign upon us. In baptism, we are marked out and set apart. Even the rebellious teenager or young adult who wanders far from home, as a baptized covenant child knows that he or she has been marked out and set apart by God. It is God who remembers who we are, even when we don't. And we shouldn't expect to be able to preserve our heavenly identity on our own. God is the one who does this. But notice that throughout this book Daniel will be sustained in his faith and not be assimilated, in part by holding on to his true name, even in the face of intense cultural pressure.

The second aspect of their reeducation relates to their food and drink. There are several kinds of animals that in Leviticus 11 God's people are forbidden from eating. Surely not all of the king's food was unclean, but some of the food would have been – for instance, pork just as an example.

We can be grateful to the Lord that in Christian freedom, God declared through the Apostles that all foods are clean. To the pure, all things are pure (Titus 1:15). Christians as God's people are no longer distinguished from the world by things that we eat and drink. But we are distinguished in other outward ways that the world can see. There are things the world does that are off limits to us. There are priorities that the world has that won't be ours as Christians.

Here's the way that the world does try to re-educate us: it tries to change the way we speak, the things we care about, and the way that we think. It does this through a combination of threats and promises: "it would be a shame if you didn't get that promotion; maybe you should just go along with our way of thinking after all." Or it's more overt with the threats. But please know, that you are exiles and you absolutely live in a culture that is seeking to reeducate you. Like Babylon, we live in a world that would like to eradicate every memory of who you really are, where you are from, and what is good and pleasing to your God, replacing that memory with their own compromised and twisted ways of thinking. A lesser view of the world. To make you forget.

Daniel will be sustained in his faith. He will not be assimilated. Let's make the same resolution that by God's grace, carrying his name, and remembering who we are, we won't assimilate.

3. Faithful to the End (1:21)

Third, I want us to see that God is faithful to the end.

Daniel is resolved not to assimilate, but ultimately Daniel isn't really the one who has the power to make that happen.

If I might simplify the narrative a bit, Daniel makes a request to Ashpenaz: please don't make us eat the unclean food. Instead, let us just become vegetarians. Ashpenaz is like, "You know, the whole point is for you guys to get handsome and

tough and strong. Veggies won't do that for you." I concur, Ashpenaz. As a lifelong protein-eater, I concur.

Daniel basically sets up a test. If the Lord would help them to grow strong even just on a vegetarian diet, then it won't matter if it was veggies they were eating, or bacon that they were eating. But if they keep shrinking and getting weaker on their veggie diet, then they will eat the Babylonian way.

This is like a contest of the gods in a way: it's Babylon's way versus Yahweh. And as readers we are perhaps not surprised to find out that "they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food." But in one sense, we should be.

So a few months back, I was dieting, but I was also lifting weights. And at first, I was putting on muscle and I was also losing fat, which is a great combination. This happened for about a month. And then after that month, I would get on the scale and my scale kept telling me that I wasn't just losing fat – I was losing muscle. No matter how hard I lifted and worked out, I was losing muscle because I was in a calorie deficit and my body just did not have enough nutrients to build muscle anymore, so eventually my body even started eating not just the fat but the muscle, too.

The body is an amazing thing, but if you starve it, it's not going to grow. And that is the miracle here: God preserves Daniel and his friends by doing something that shouldn't be possible: they are living on a calorie deficit and gaining more weight than the guys eating the bacon cheeseburgers.

A while back there was this huge fad of churches doing what they called "The Daniel Diet." And yet it's a really bad idea to make a diet out of what happens here. Because the whole point of what Daniel eats is the upside down results: Daniel should have gotten smaller, weaker, and lost muscle and that didn't happen. So nothing here is meant to be a dietary blueprint. This is not a passage that is even ultimately teaching us to emulate the diet of these four young men.

Instead the whole point is the faithfulness of God to sustain his people to the end, even when his people are in danger. Their protection was a work of God from beginning to the end, from the day they were carried away to exile all the way

until the time of King Cyrus. And we'll see more of that as we move through this book. This is only the beginning. Maybe you wish that you lived in a different place – a place with more Christians, a place where people see eye to eye with you. Some Christians even decide to move away from places like Portland because they want the greener grass of redder America.

But maybe consider that God will be faithful to you where you are. Don't flee. Instead, stay where God has placed you, and care about that place. We'll talk more about this later, but consider that the place where you live is a place where God can show his mercy and his faithfulness.

Conclusion

So as we conclude, yes, Daniel is a picture of faithfulness. We need those pictures of faithful people in unfaithful contexts. Yet we are not Daniel, and that cannot be the whole message of this book: just to be more like Daniel.

While we should yearn to be faithful, we do fall short. When we do, we have to look to Christ, who is better than Daniel. Because think of what Jesus does: he entered into our own fallen, compromised world. He was surrounded, like Daniel, with temptations on every side. Yet he was never assimilated. He was faithful perfectly. And he resolved always that he would stay faithful to the very end. In fact, do you remember how those covenant curses were the whole reason Daniel and his friends were dragged to Babylon in the first place?

Well Christ himself bore the covenant curses for us. They were headed our way, because we are lawbreakers, but Christ came and obeyed the law that we broke. Christ himself was surrounded by sin and evil yet never folded. Yet on the cross he was treated like he had. He suffered all the curses of the covenant in their fulness for all of his people.

Place your faith in the one who absorbed and endured those curses for all who will trust in him. Believe on the Lord Jesus. What a great mercy the Lord has on his people.

Let's pray.