

Daniel 1:3-21
Title
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I wonder, where is it hard for you to live your faith? Each one of us lives the vast majority of our lives immersed in a culture where we must make decisions, possibly daily, how will I live my faith in God in a world that is not always open? Now there are certainly moments where the surrounding culture may have good reason for its suspicion. Too often in the Church's history of public life it has become more known for what it opposes, rather than what it supports. But, if we are called to be people of hope, people of the resurrection, a very important question for each of us ought to be, how am I being called to live my faith publicly. What is our witness in a culture that, increasingly, is not interested in what the Church has to say.

Last week I began a new series of sermons and the image I invited you to consider is that of a pendulum or perhaps the two foundations of a great bridge, like the Golden Gate. I illustrated that our lives are lived between the poles of "In the beginning" and "the day of Christ." And where we find ourselves is somewhere between, in the tension of already, but not yet; or well begun and well done.

I told you that this tension is particularly poignant for me right now as I journey through this season of intense grief, and yet also acknowledge that Jesus is risen, and so there is also profound hope in the midst of deep grief.

Today I want us to look at this question: what does it mean for me to be a fruitful and effective witness in the culture in which we live? Jesus invites us to live differently, and that doesn't mean detaching from the culture around us, but it also doesn't mean that we embrace and endorse everything our culture offers.

So again, I ask the question: where is it hard for you to live your faith? It's easy to be a Christian at Church, or with your Christian friends at bible study, or at a retreat, or in a serene natural environment. But I want each of you to think about your own life and I want you to write this question on the back of your bulletin: where is it difficult for me to be a Christian?

At the office where no one knows your ethics

In the kitchen with your spouse when you're in the heat of an argument

In middle school or high school when other young people who can be so nasty to one another are picking on someone, and you have the ability to do something about it. Or maybe it that person was you.

Or maybe it is late at night when you are sitting in front of your computer screen

Maybe its when you are balancing the office finances

Or maybe its when you get the news that one more person who is dear to you gets a diagnosis at the result is cancer.

This morning we are going to meet three young men who feel and know how difficult a thing this can be. We're going to read from the book of Daniel, beginning in chapter 1 verse 3

Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family^[a] and of the nobility, 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. 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. ⁶ Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. 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.

The environment in which these four men find themselves is extremely harsh towards their faith. And that comes through in a number of ways in what we just heard. Maybe most forcibly in the last detail that comes through—the changing of their names. These four men were subject to a systematic reidentification program. They found themselves in a culture that told them that they were no longer who they thought they were, but their identity was now what the powers-that-be told them they were.

In the ancient world a person's name was not just how they were known to their parents and family and friends. Your name was an indicator of who you are at your heart and soul. And this story was immensely popular in Jesus' time, and what every reader would have seen immediately is that each of these Hebrew names has the name of God built into it somewhere. Sometimes God is called El, sometimes Yahweh, but each of these Hebrew names has reference in it to the God these men grew up worshipping in Jerusalem. And now that they have been taken from their home and carried off into captivity in Babylon, their names are changed. Daniel (Dani-el) is changed to Belteshazzar which has the name of a Chaldean god in it. And so on for the other three as well.

Do you see what is happening here? By giving them a new name, they are, in effect, taking the God that lives within them, and replacing it with an idol. They live in an environment that is organized to rob them of their spiritual life and replace it with something that is false.

We live in an environment that does that as well. The world around us is organized to take God out of us and replace Him with something false.

Two other things happen as well.

1. A 3-year educational program where they learned the history and language and culture of the Chaldeans. They had to learn the spoken language which is a mixture of Arabic and Aramaic, as well as the written language of Cuneiform Acadian. The powers that be were also attempting to reform their minds. Now this can be very overt and startling like a long 3-year course like this, but it can also be very subtle the ways that the culture around us shapes our mind. Here's a really simple example: "Break me off a piece of that...football crème."

They lived in an environment that sought to take God out of them, it sought to change their mind over the course of years. They also lived in an environment that also sought to change them physically. It says in verse 5 that the king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. The king put before them food that was rich and full of good nutrients that would help them grow strong and better enable them to loyally serve and fight for that

king. Plus, we all know how difficult it is to say no to a really choice meal with rich meat full of marrow and aged wine and vegetables endowed with that beautiful little ingredient that makes everything better—I'm speaking of course of bacon.

What is happening here, both subtly and not so subtly is that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah have been confronted with a new and foreign culture, one that is opposed to the God of Israel and his word, and they are going through a process of spiritual, mental, and physical reformation. Now we might be tempted to say to ourselves: "Ok, I'll give you the 3 year reeducation, but the food and names? Isn't it possible for them just to keep in mind who they are, and not put all that much stock in the food that they eat? Can't they continue to know and remember who they are even though these minor changes are taking place.

But I think it's the food that is actually the greatest threat to these young men. Some of you have read Leviticus? There are clear guidelines in Leviticus about what we are to do and how we are to live. These young men would have grown up in a place where they were taught that faith expressing itself means that you eat some things and you avoid other things. If these four guys were arrested it would have been very clear that they were not just people of faith by what they thought or what they were called, but they were people of faith by their mouths and what they ate—even this was determined by what God wanted from them.

Now I want to make a clear distinction here that we are not bound by the same dietary laws, the New Testament reorients our view of things that are clean and unclean. But we ARE bound by the notion that faith always expresses itself in real and visible ways in life that are as tangible as what we eat and how we conduct ourselves at the dinner table, and how we treat those who don't have as much as we do. The point I am making is that our faith is to express itself in real tangible ways, and until this happens, we will not be genuine ambassadors for Christ in our world.

For these young men, there were things they were allowed to eat and things they were not allowed to eat. I wonder, at the beginning of their three-year term of preparation, if they came back from the cafeteria, where all the other future men of the king's guard had just filled their bellies with all that good food, if they looked at one another and said: what are we going to do? They all knew what they were talking about. Everyone here is eating this food that we're not supposed to, but what are we going to do? IF we stop eating the food, we will stand out, we won't be able to keep up with the physical demands of our training, we'll get skinny, and they will know that we are not being honest with them.

They had a decision to make, and that decision was where do we choose to fit in with the culture around us, and where do we choose to be faithful to God—even if it means standing out from the rest.

Every one of us has to ask the question: am I going to be a person who, at every turn, does what he or she feels like doing? You know that they wanted to eat it. You know they asked themselves the question, what's the big deal, it's just food. You know that the pressure on them was immense to keep up with the rest and be able to do the things that are being asked of them in this foreign land. The question that is being asked of them, and it's the same question that is being asked of us is am I going to be faithful to the one who has called me, who has given me a name, the one who has given me a history and a future filled with hope—even if our present seems uncertain or we are tempted to accommodate to our culture.

The question that is being asked of us is not, will I be faithful to the law, but will we be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ?

Now the text goes quickly to how Daniel and his friends respond to this dilemma and challenge to their faith. Look with me at verse 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. ⁹And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs,

In Hebrew culture, the heart was the center of emotional life, but it was also the center of thought and decision-making life. Daniel centered himself and thought to himself, how should I respond in this situation? What is the right choice on how I am to live?

We live in between the poles of competing values, on the one side we have the culture around us that has a prevailing set of values, some of them align with ours—many do not. Then on the other end of that pendulum is what Paul calls in Galatians “the Law of Christ” this is the mandate that each one of us has over our lives that says we are to be guided by the example and ethic of Jesus Christ—like it was the law over our lives.

What Daniel decides in this moment is that he will not be faithless, he will not walk away, he will be faithful, because he knows that God has always been faithful to him. We should ask ourselves in moments when we are being invited to make crucial decisions that involve either remaining faithful to Jesus or choosing to listen instead to ourselves or the culture that surrounds us, what would Jesus do in this situation?

We live in a culture that in many ways, on the surface and even among some of its leaders proposes to be a Christian culture or a Christian nation, when in reality when we look beneath the surface of our institutions and culture making bodies, is really anything but faithful to Jesus. Even some of the most outspoken people in public life who claim to be followers of Christ, live lives that do not reflect the generosity, compassion, justice and grace of Jesus Christ.

Now I want to tell you that for some who seek to be faithful to Jesus in their lives, the answer for them is to disconnect entirely from the culture around them. Setting themselves apart by their separateness is the approach some, like the Amish. They have chosen to live very much apart from the world. I'm not sure this is what the Scriptures teach if we look at stories like this one in Daniel, as well as the community in Exile in Babylon addressed in the book of Jeremiah.

In Jeremiah 29 God addresses the small remnant community in Babylon who have been carried away and who now experience the very real threat of their people and culture and faith becoming diluted to the point of non-recognition amongst a much larger and more powerful nation and people. He says in verse 4:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your

daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

What Daniel decides in this moment is he chooses not to be faithless and chooses not to cave in to the pressures of the culture. There is only one

What does it mean for you to be a person who follows Jesus, the faithful master?

Let me tell you how this story ends for Daniel.

Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ¹²“Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³Then 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.” ¹⁴So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵At 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.

After telling the palace guard that they will not defile themselves with the palace food the guard is worried because they may become weak and grow skinny. They found favor with the guard and Daniel asked if they could have vegetables and water.

They grow in wisdom and knowledge, they become wise because of their faithfulness.