

Choosing Faith in a Broken World. The Lion's Den Week 1

By Pastor Mandy Barkhaus

Before I get into my sermon today, I want to say this is Communion Sunday, which I'm excited about. Being here in person. But I know there's a lot of you watching online today, due to the weather. And so just wanted to prepare you and give you a little warning that at the end of the service, we are going to be serving communion.

So if you're at home and you would like to participate in communion, grab a piece of bread, or a cracker and some water or juice or something. And at the end of the service, please join us for that holy meal. Today we're beginning the new sermon series on the Book of Daniel. And, not only does the Book of Daniel give us the story of Daniel in the Lion's den, but also some great sayings like, feet of clay and the writing's on the wall.

Those sayings both come from the Book of Daniel, and, before we really get into the Book of Daniel, there are some things that I need to say about the Book of Daniel. But the Book of Daniel is one of the most debated books in, both both the Hebrew writings and the Old Testament, even though it's relative short, it's stirred up a lot of attention over the last couple thousand years, people have argued about who wrote it and what kind of book it is, and whether it's historical details are accurate and to to make things even more confusing, the book was written in the language, the, the Hebrew language, and then it switches

into Aramaic, and then it goes back into Hebrew. So the big question that people wrestle with, one of the big questions people wrestle with is whether the story of Daniel is actually happened, like, is it true or not? And if not, then what does this mean for the rest of the Bible? Like, many of the other stories we, we question, most scholars agree across the board, really, that this is a work of fiction, pointing out the historical details don't line up.

Exactly. And the prophecies that were written actually were written after the events happened. So, so there's all of that now, on top of this, there's a lot of debate about the genre of the book in the Jewish tradition. The this book is placed in the writings in the Christian Bible. In our Bible, it's placed with the prophets, which again, is interesting because it's really not a prophetic book, because all of the prophecies had already happened.

Now instead, this book is split into kind of two different parts, two different sections. The first section, chapters one through six, is kind of a heroic story. Wait, where Daniel is the star, and then chapter seven through 12, the last half of the book is this prophet like, a apocalyptic visions, the last half. So here's the thing.

It doesn't really matter. We're not going to talk about whether this story actually happened or true or not. That's not what we're going to talk about today, because the theological depth of this book is really significant. And this book was in it's in the Bible for a reason, especially when many other books and letters that we have were not included in the Bible.

But this one was. So no matter how you look at this story or this book, there is one big theme that ties both of the sections together. So what's the reason for Daniel? The book of Daniel? What's the big idea? Well, the theological theme of Daniel can be found in two different verses, chapter four,

verse 17 and chapter five, verse 21, which says, the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth.

That's the big idea. Now we're going to talk more about God's sovereignty next week. And the Lions unfortunately, don't come for a few more chapters. So that's going to be in later weeks as well. But in order for us to even really get there, we need to understand the circumstances. And that's provided in the first couple of chapters.

So the Book of Daniel addresses a big question that God's people are faced with now. In 587 BCE, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and brought the people to Babylon. Now the God's people in Babylon now are faced with temptations, and they're faced with demands of what it's like to live in a foreign land, as immigrants and as immigrants who are looked down upon, on the Babylonians.

Now, later this week, I'll be posting a letter, probably on our Facebook page and maybe an email. And this letter is from written from the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church and the Council of Bishops. It is all of the bishops all over the world, the United Methodist, bishops all over the world. And this letter, they wrote this letter and they asked churches to to, read this letter.

And the letter addresses, how we, as followers of Jesus, are called to welcome and care for the immigrants and the migrants and the refugees today. So the Bible has a lot to say about how we care for and welcome these, people. And the this letter will address that. Now, God's people, as we read in the book of Daniel, they understand also what it's like to be an immigrant in a foreign land.

So watch for that later letter later. Now, the question that the people are facing is how can they remain faithful to God in this foreign land? Now, in 539 BCE, the Babylonians were defeated by the Persian King. And then in 333 B.C., BCE, the Persians were defeated by Alexander the Great. So again, all throughout history, the question is, how can God's people remain faithful when they're being ruled or in a different land?

So Daniel, chapter one, verses one through seven says this.

In the third year of the rule of Judah, King Jehoiakim, Babylon's king Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and attacked it. The Lord handed Judah's king Jehoiakim over to Nebuchadnezzar, along with some of the equipment from God's house. Nebuchadnezzar took these two Shinar to his own God's temple, putting them in his god's treasury. Nebuchadnezzar instructed his highest official, Ashpenaz to choose royal descendants and members of the ruling class from the Israelites good looking young men without defects, skilled in all wisdom, possessing knowledge, conversant with learning, and capable of serving in the king's palace Ashpenaz was to teach them the Chaldean language with and its literature.

The king assigned these young men daily allotments from his own food and from the royal wine. Ashpenaz was to teach them for three years, so that at the end of the time they could serve before the king. Now among these young men, from the Judeans, were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. But the chief officer gave them new names.

He named Daniel, Belshazzar. Those shows are Hananiah, Shadrach, Mishael, Meshach, and Azariah and Abednego. And that's why we don't study the book of Daniel very often. Just kidding. Okay, here's a recap of what I said. Jerusalem was captured by King Nebuchadnezzar, of Babylon, and he, attacked Jerusalem and took the treasure from the temple. And then he chose young men from from Judea.

And he selected the best and the brightest young men to serve in his palace. And he trained these young men for three years, and they were taught the language and the culture, with and given food from, and wine from the king's table. And then they were given these new names, Shadrach, Meshach, Bendigo. And these are Babylon in names.

But Daniel, Daniel draws a line and he says, there are some things that I am unwilling to compromise on because of my faith in God. And so what? Daniel, he drew the line and he said, I refuse to eat the food that's offered from the palace. Now, was it because the food was ceremonial, ceremonially unclean? Was it because it was offered to other idols?

There's some debate around or around that. We don't know the reason, but we know the reason has to do with Daniel wanted to follow God. So Daniel asked if he and his friends could have something different to eat, and the guard assigned them. Assigned to them, said in verse ten something like, no. He said, I'm afraid of the king.

And if I feed you something different and you look thin and weak, I'll be beheaded because of your because of this action. And so he said, no. So Daniel said in verse 12 through 14, Daniel said, why not test your servants for ten days? You could give us a diet of vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance to the appearance of the young men who eat the king's food.

Then deal with your servants. According to what you see. The guard decided to go along with their plan and tested them for ten days. So Daniel and his friends ate vegetables and water only for ten days. Imagine eating only vegetables for only ten days. What happened to Daniel and his friends? Well, verse 15, at the end of the ten days, they looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king's food.

So first lesson eat your vegetables. Right? We know, we know they're good for us. Second, and maybe more importantly, follow your convictions in a world that pulls us into different directions, we can learn from Daniel and his friends who choose to remain faithful to God, trusting God, even even in exile, right? Even in difficult situations. Now, last week, Magnus Carlsen, he is the world renowned chess champion.

He made waves in the chess world. Maybe you heard about this. Maybe you didn't. But not because he won a game or he lost a game. But he made waves because he chose to withdraw from a top tournament rather than to change out of his genes. Now the tournament. Tournament rules. There's a formal dress code where participants have to have slacks on, but Carlsen refused.

He had played a couple rounds before they even asked him to change, and he decided to stand by his decision, even though it meant that he would be disqualified from playing in the World Championship. Now, when he when when he was asked about his stance of why he did that, he simply said it's a matter of principle. Now, Carlsen's decision wasn't just about clothing.

It was about conviction. He valued authenticity and integrity over compliance with rules that he felt were unnecessary. Now, his willingness to walk away from the competition rather than to compromise his principles reminds us of the importance of standing firm in what we believe, even if that costs us something. Now, as followers of Jesus, this story points us to something even greater.

God calls us to to live, our lives modeled by by Jesus, right? Not by the rules that we decide, but what Jesus is all about and what Jesus is up to. So now Carlson's stand was about personal conviction, right? He was personally convicted by what he did. But our faith calls us to stand for something even greater.

And that's these eternal truths that we know, principles that are rooted in loving God and loving our neighbor. And these convictions, if we hold firm to them, they may challenge the world around us, and standing firm in our convictions might come with significant costs for us. It might come with, maybe our relationships, or our reputations or personal comfort.

Now, Carlson's words, it's a matter of principle. Remind us to ask. Ask what? What are our principles like? What are we standing by? What are we living by? Are we? And are we willing to stand by our convictions, even if it's inconvenient or unpopular? Now, Daniel Daniel chose the inconvenient, unpopular choice. He chose not to eat the food offered by the King, even though it would have been much easier for him to just blend in with the culture and eat the food.

People, asked me quite often why I only eat plants. It's not because of Daniel. But it is because I am. I am convicted, I, I have a firmly held belief that eating plants, and not animals is. God is what God intends for me to take care of my body and for creation. But we don't all think alike, do we?

So what are your convictions? And how did you come to those convictions? Beginning a new year is a perfect time to take a self-assessment of what we value and what we believe and and think about why we believe what we believe and are we taking action that shows what we believe, even if the world says something different now, we live in a broken world.

We know this. And if we don't stop occasionally to think about what we believe and what we value or what we stand for, eventually we're going to stand for anything and everything that comes our way. So where do we draw the line? Where do you draw the line, and does that line ever change? Now the answer to that is yes.

And I'll talk about that in in a minute. But, maybe you got one of these on on your way in. If not, grab one on your way out. But, this is kind of a self-reflection, a little self-assessment about, ways that you can, learn from Daniel and know your identity. And that's the first step is to know your identity.

Daniel and his friends were given new names, Babylonian, Babylonian names, and they were immersed in this foreign culture. Yet they stayed true to their faith and identity as God's people. So reflect on your values. Take a few minutes to think about and write down what are your top three core values? What are the things that you stand for?

And then maybe what's one thing that you can do to act on your values? And then the second thing is to think about the small choices, because small choices matter. Daniel decided not to eat the king's food, right? Staying faithful to his dietary convictions despite potential risks that that could

come with that. But small daily decisions reflect our values, and they also prepare us for bigger life challenges that may come our way.

So in the morning time, maybe right down, some intentional small decisions that you plan on making that day. And then in the evening, reflect on all of the choices and all the decisions that you've made and ask yourself, do these decisions do these choices align with my values? Then the next thing is to live out your convictions with humility.

Daniel didn't fight back. He didn't, cause drama. Instead, he handled tough decisions with respect by staying calm. And he earned respect and influence because of that. And I hope that you'll read the whole book of Daniel in the next few weeks. Now, I talked about drawing a line in the sand, and I think that's important. Like, right.

What what are we unwilling to compromise? But then I also said that sometimes that line in the sand can change. You think about it. For me, certainly I can think about some things that I believed and I held firmly on those beliefs years ago. And, because of, studying Jesus and his life, because of studying scripture and and learning to love people as God loves people.

Some of those lines have changed. And I think that's a beautiful and amazing thing, because if we are growing in our faith, things might change just a little bit. Now, if you have convictions, I invite you to hold them firmly. Yet Grace graciously, allowing our integrity to shine through over, maybe harshness that comes sometimes from holding a conviction.

And so an action step for this is just simply to pause and listen. Maybe when you disagree with someone, you can practice humility and, by apologizing or seeking someone else's perspective when you maybe even when you know, they think a little differently than you do, the next thing is to seek wisdom from community. Daniel prayed and, pursued God's wisdom, and he relied on his friends a lot on his journey.

And we need to do that, too. We need to seek God in prayer and seek God's wisdom and and seek people around us who will help us, be accountable for things. Now where as we have growth track starting next week. So if you're, new or old, right. Old, not old, if you're new to the horizons community or you've been in the horizons community for a long time, or young or old, it doesn't matter.

You can sign up for growth track. A growth track really is for anybody who's looking to grow. Grow connections, maybe take a next step in serving or connecting with people. So that starts next week. We also have lots of life groups that you can be a part of too. But seeking wisdom in community is important. And then the last thing is trust God with the outcome.

Daniel's faithfulness put him at risk and we're going to discover more as we continue to read. But, he trusted God to protect him, even in the lion's den and the fiery, firm furnace and all of those things. So we have to recognize what our fears are, and maybe even write down those fears, like write down what your fears are, because sometimes we only take steps when we know the outcome.

But when we do that, sometimes we compromise, compromise our values. And that's not a great thing. Now we can learn also from people who have great character, people that are living, people

who have gone before us, people who have great character and, and live by their convictions. In an article I read recently, I learned that the, the late, former President Carter was a Southern Baptist who believed pride was a great sin.

So author Kai Bird, he wrote about Carter and he, he said this, Carter knew he had a lot of pride and ambition. And so the way he reconciled this was to say to himself, I will achieve power. I will do whatever I can to win the presidency or the governorship. And then when I do, I will do the right thing, regardless of the political consequences.

I will be righteous. Now, Carter is not perfect, right? He's human. And and made some mistakes along the way. But Carter in his presidency and then continued to live after that. He continued to live his life out as a humble servant of Jesus. On Christmas Eve, I shared the story of Ignatius, this early Christian leader who faced lions in the Roman Coliseum, and he faced his death there.

And he had this unwavering faith, faith even when he faced death. And he even called his impending death peaceful. That's the kind of faith that Ignatius had. Now, most of us aren't aren't ready to offer our lives in the same way. But Ignatius didn't rely on his own strength. He relied on the strength of, of of Christ. And he drew from the idea that Christ suffered and he was suffering.

And there was that beautiful connection that made it amazing. But Ignatius had this way of viewing Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist, as he called it, and he called the Eucharist medicine of immortality.

And as we come to the table for communion, we too can be strengthened by Christ, by thinking about Christ suffering and his death and his resurrection. We can be strengthened by this holy meal and this sacred meal, allows us and equips us to face life with faith and conviction, no matter the challenges that we might encounter. And so on this day of sharing the Sacrament of Holy Communion, together, we think about Jesus and how he gathered with his friends, his disciples, his followers, and he.

And he took the bread, and he gave thanks to you. And he broke the bread, and he gave it to his disciples. And he said, take, eat. This is the body of Christ. Which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. And then when the supper was over, he took the cup, and he and he gave it to his disciples, and he said, drink from this, all of you.

This is the blood of the new covenant poured out for you, and many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. I ask God to pour out the Holy Spirit on us gathered here. And on these gifts of bread and cup, make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world, the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood, by your spirit.

Make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy church. All honor and glory is yours. Almighty father. Now and forever. Amen. Would you please join me in saying the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray?

Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those

who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever and ever.

As a reminder, all are welcome at this table. This is an open table. You don't have to be a member here or part of the United Methodist Church. This is an open table. And, if you are willing to say, here I am. God, I'm ready to seek you or I want to know more or, I'm ready to serve wherever you are on that spectrum.

It is an open table. The host will, dismiss the rose and you'll come down the center aisle. We receive communion by intention, which means you will receive a piece of bread and you will dip it into the cup. If you're uncomfortable with, the dipping into the cup, we do have individual servings of the juice that you can have.

And then there are gluten free options here at the center tables that you can, take. And if you would like to be served at your seat, please just let one of the hosts know, and they will make sure that you have communion at your seat. So please come to the table.