

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/24/2010, Midweek Lent 5
Daniel in the Lions' Den, Daniel 6:1-28
Also, Matthew 27:11-14
Grace under Pressure

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Almighty God, our redeemer, in our weakness we have failed to be your messengers of forgiveness and hope in the world. Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that we may follow your commands and proclaim your reign of love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Daniel in the Lions' Den.....Daniel 6:1-28, RSV

[A brief word of explanation: Our text speaks of a political office call "satrap." It means a governor of a Persian province.]

¹It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom a hundred and twenty satraps, to be throughout the whole kingdom; ²and over them three presidents, of whom Daniel was one, to whom these satraps should give account, so that the king might suffer no loss. ³Then this Daniel became distinguished above all the other presidents and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. ⁴Then the presidents and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom; but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him. ⁵Then these men said, "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God." ⁶Then these presidents and satraps came by agreement to the king and said to him, "O King Darius, live for ever! ⁷All the

presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever makes petition to any god or man for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions. ⁸Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked." ⁹Therefore King Darius signed the document and interdict. ¹⁰When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem; and he got down upon his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously. ¹¹Then these men came by agreement and found Daniel making petition and supplication before his God. ¹²Then they came near and said before the

king, concerning the interdict, “O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that any man who makes petition to any god or man within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions?” The king answered, “The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked.”¹³ Then they answered before the king, “That Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no heed to you, O king, or the interdict you have signed, but makes his petition three times a day.”¹⁴ Then the king, when he heard these words, was much distressed, and set his mind to deliver Daniel; and he labored till the sun went down to rescue him.¹⁵ Then these men came by agreement to the king, and said to the king, “Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no interdict or ordinance which the king establishes can be changed.”¹⁶ Then the king commanded, and Daniel was brought and cast into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, “May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!”¹⁷ And a stone was brought and laid upon the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel.¹⁸ Then the king went to his palace, and spent the night fasting; no diversions were brought to him, and sleep fled from him.¹⁹ Then, at break of day, the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions.²⁰ When he came near to the den where Daniel was,

he cried out in a tone of anguish and said to Daniel, “O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?”²¹ Then Daniel said to the king, “O king, live for ever!²² My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths, and they have not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong.”²³ Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of hurt was found upon him, because he had trusted in his God.²⁴ And the king commanded, and those men who had accused Daniel were brought and cast into the den of lions -- they, their children, and their wives; and before they reached the bottom of the den the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces.²⁵ Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: “Peace be multiplied to you.²⁶ I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring for ever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end.²⁷ He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions.”²⁸ So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

[A note of introduction: Daniel, in his quietness, puts me in mind of Jesus, “Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: (1 Peter 2:23, KJV)]

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 27:11-14, KJV

¹¹And Jesus stood before the governor: and the governor asked him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? And Jesus said unto him, Thou sayest. ¹²And when he was accused of the chief priests and elders, he answered nothing. ¹³Then said Pilate unto him, Hearest thou not how many things they witness against thee? ¹⁴And he answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Daniel lived as if the saying of Jesus about the soul is true. Though Daniel lived long before Jesus, he seems to have been moved by the same Spirit as our Lord, preferring the lions to losing his soul:

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:26, KJV)

Daniel’s back was curved before no man, not even before those who opposed him so earnestly as to plot his downfall and seek his death. “If lions it must be, then cast me to the lions,” thought Daniel. “Better those proud creatures than to forsake my God.”

If only the disciples of Jesus had been made of such sturdy stuff! But no, they all forsook him and fled. They did not yet have the character of Daniel of old.

As for those who plotted the death of Daniel, there was a base ingratitude in them. Had they forgotten that this Daniel was the very one who had intervened and saved the life of his Babylonian betters long ago? King Nebuchadnezzar had laid an impossible task on his court magicians, astrologers, and sorcerers. The king had dreamt a troubling dream, and he needed to know what the dream meant. So, he commanded his court magician, astrologers, and sorcerers to interpret the dream. I am sure they would have given a good try at doing that except for this ruling: Nebuchadnezzar refused to tell them his dream. He required of them that they relate both the dream and its meaning to him, on penalty of death! He reasoned that if he told them the dream, they would offer whatever fancy came into their heads as its interpretation. But he did not want fancies and inventions. He wanted the dream and its true interpretation, and if he did not get it, he meant to shed blood:

Then the Chaldeans said to the king, “O king, live for ever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation.” ⁵The king

answered the Chaldeans, “The word from me is sure: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins. (Daniel 2:4-5, RSV)

Well, this goes beyond what mortals can do, and so those court interpreters of dreams were left in despair. They could not relate the dream and so the king ordered their death.

But Daniel, who was a young man at the time, heard of this horror and intervened on behalf of the court interpreters. Nebuchadnezzar’s request went beyond what mortals can do, but it did not go beyond what God, the Maker and heaven and earth, can do. So, the Lord gave the dream and its interpretation to Daniel, who in turn gave them to the king, in the process saving the life of the court interpreters.

Now, a new generation of local power holders are seeking the death of Daniel. He had done them no harm. He had interceded for folks like them years ago, and in the intervening years, he had served the empire faithfully.

Daniel, it seems, was blessed not only with gifts for the interpretation of dreams, but also with gifts of administration. That is no small thing. A good governor or mayor or CEO is a strong blessing on earth and they deserve our prayers. Such a good governor was Daniel.

He puts me in mind of Joseph down there in Egypt. You might remember that Joseph was a man of high morality and purity of heart. Also, he was an interpreter of dreams, which is how he came to the attention of Pharaoh. And once he came to Pharaoh’s attention, that ruler made Joseph governor of Egypt and entrusted the administration of the empire to the Jew so very far from home.

Likewise with Daniel: he possesses purity of heart and strong gifts for management, and so he ends up one of the presidents of the empire, though he is but a Jewish exile from a defeated land.

But now, in this evening’s story, Daniel has fallen victim to the machinations of those who envy him. When they should admire him and be grateful for him, they instead envy him and plot his downfall.

At first, they try to accuse Daniel of wrongdoing. But there was no wrongdoing to be found in the man:

⁴Then the presidents and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom; but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him.

Then they plot against Daniel. Their plot is clever. It takes advantage of Daniel’s consistent piety and of the King’s weak-wristed nature. They persuade the king to sign a law forbidding appeal to anyone except the king. They no doubt argue that this is meant to elevate the king in the eyes of the people, teaching the people to look to the king in time of need. So, the king signs the law, not even

imagining that the law could be used against Daniel and his practice of prayer.

Daniel prays on. Surely he knew of the new law. He was one of the ruling triumvirate. He knew of the law, he knew of the danger it meant for him. But he prays on.

In his consistency of piety, he is like Jesus of Nazareth, who does not flee when the soldiers march toward the Garden of Gethsemane. He spends his night in prayer and he waits patiently for the beginning of his sorrows. Indeed, he waits in the garden and intercedes for his disciples:

⁷Then asked he them again, Whom seek ye? And they said, Jesus of Nazareth. ⁸Jesus answered, I have told you that I am he: if therefore ye seek me, let these go their way. (John 18:7-8, KJV)

So, Daniel prays on and is soon arrested for it. He is denounced before the king, who tries with all his might to have Daniel released, but cannot, and so commands that Daniel should be cast into the lions den:

¹⁶Then the king commanded, and Daniel was brought and cast into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!" (Daniel 6:16, RSV)

This is no cynical cry from the poor king. He is not mocking Daniel, as if challenging Daniel's God to deliver the man from the hand of the king. Rather, the king seems to be praying a sincere prayer: "Deliver him, Lord. Deliver poor Daniel, for I am unable to do so."

King Darius has played the same foolish role that King Herod will play with John the Baptist centuries down the road. Herod had promised half his kingdom to the dancing girl, who instead asked for the head of John the Baptist. Herod was appalled by this and did not want to comply, but did not have enough strength of character to refuse. Likewise with King Darius. He did not want Daniel to die because of the law he, the king, had signed, but in the end, the king decided that he did not have enough authority to save Daniel. So, he commands that the man be cast into the den.

As the Bible tells the story, Daniel is getting on in years by the time of the lions' den. It could hurt even a young man to be "cast into the den of lions." A fellow could break a hip bone or an arm just falling into the den. At the end of the story, we read that when those who had plotted against Daniel were themselves thrown into the den, and that certainly hurt them:

...and before they reached the bottom of the den the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces. (Daniel 6:24, RSV)

In any case, being cast into the den of lions could hurt even a young man, but I do not think Daniel was young. Daniel was one of the Israelites deported to

Babylon back in the days of King Nebuchadnezzar. That first deportation of the Jews took place in 597 B.C. Daniel was but a boy then, along with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But many years have past since then and this evening's story. Nebuchadnezzar ruled until 562 B.C. That's thirty-five years after the first deportation. Then there was an intervening king named Belshazzar, and now this third king named Darius. This great story about Daniel and the lions' den took place sometime during the reign of Darius.

So, many years have passed since Daniel first came to Babylon, and they have been good and faithful years for the man.

Daniel, then, is cast into the den of lions. The den is blocked with a stone and a royal seal is placed on the stone, confirmed that there can be no rescue for Daniel. Only there is a rescue for Daniel! As with Jonah when he was cast into the sea, so with Daniel cast into the den of lions. The den received the man, but harmed him not, just as the waves harmed not Jonah. The mighty creatures became the companions of Daniel, but just as the whale did not harm Jonah, nor do these lions harm Daniel. He probably lay his head on their tummies and got him a good night of sleep.

Then, the great parallel with Jonah and with Jesus reaches its happy conclusion. As Jonah was saved by the whale and deposited on dry land, and as Jesus was raised from the dead though he was cold dead in the tomb, so Daniel is alive in well in the morning.

Furthermore, Daniel shows the same sweetness of spirit that Jesus shows upon resurrection. When King Darius calls down to the man he had condemned, Daniel answers in his accustomed sweet tones:

²⁰When he [King Darius] came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish and said to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?" ²¹Then Daniel said to the king, "O king, live for ever! ²²My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong."

There was no rebuke in the voice of Daniel. Though he had been reviled by others, he reviles none in return. The peacefulness with which he answers the king is akin to that sweet peace in which the resurrected Jesus refers to his faint-hearted disciples as his "brothers":

¹⁶Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. ¹⁷Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. (John 20:16-17, KJV)

Daniel, then, shares in our Lord's victory. He rises up from that den, just as Jesus rises from the tomb.

Had it been worth it to Daniel to remain true to his God? It cost him the lions den, but it did not cost him his soul, and so I say, Yes, Daniel made the better choice.

Should we not follow Daniel in this? Though a faithful walk with Jesus might leave us poorer in possessions or slow down our vocation, it will make for a life rich in virtue. It is a good thing to be able to lay your head down at night knowing that you tried to walk with Jesus that day.

The den of lions threatens each of us. Students might be led to think that if they refuse to plagiarize or purchase papers from online services, they will fall behind and the lions will eat them.

Young people wanting love are led to think that they must conform themselves to the romantic ways of a wastrel world that would have them accumulate lovers and spend them freely. "Do this, else face the lions," it is suggested.

Seasoned husbands and wives are tempted to overthrow their marriages because the roar of the lions frightens them: "Seek a new lover, for you are getting older. Your time is running out."

I do not underestimate such threats. I heard real lions roar once, a few years back. It was feeding time at the Philadelphia Zoo. The lions wanted their meat. Their roar shook the cement. It penetrated my heart and my bones. It was awesome! Likewise, the threat of the lions den against you and me can be a terrifying roar. "Abandon Jesus and flee away, else face the lions!" It was a convincing argument even against the holy disciples, and it can be a compelling argument for us too in our individual trials and temptations.

But Daniel heard the lions and did not waver in his faithfulness. And he lived to see the clear light of day again, with a happy heart.

And the resurrection of Jesus means that we have a champion at our side. We have someone who is stronger even than a lion. Why, we have the very Lion Tamer at our side. So let us cling to him in faithfulness, and trust him, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

The service continues with LBW 106, "In the Hour of Trial."