

The Story: Among The Lions
By Jason Huff
Psalm 91:1-10, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5, Daniel 2:14-30

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Daniel 2:14-30. Listen now to the Word of God. "When Arioch, the commander of [King Nebuchadnezzar's] guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact. He asked the king's officer, "Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him. Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven and said: "Praise be to the name of God forever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him. I thank and praise you, O God of my fathers: You have given me wisdom and power, you have made known to me what we asked of you, you have made known to us the dream of the king."

Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him." Arioch took Daniel to the king at once and said, "I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means." The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?" Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you lay on your bed are these: as you were lying there, O king, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than other living men, but so that you, O king, may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind."

With 12 nominations, the Oscar nominee to beat this year is *The King's Speech*. Catha and I saw it on Valentines' Day, and though it wasn't the most romantic movie of the year, I get to use it as a sermon illustration, so it all works out. The movie is about Prince Albert, who struggled with a terrible stammer. Doctors throughout his early years treated him with no success. Through his wife's connections, the prince meets Lionel Logue, who helped hundreds of soldiers overcome speech problems related to stress disorders after WWI. There's one problem – despite that Prince Albert is second in line to the throne of England, Logue won't change his process to suit his new patient. It's his house, his rules...and he knows his methods get results. At first, Prince Albert is insulted and refuses to work him. But over time, Logue is proved right. And because of their work together, when Albert is crowned King George VI, he overcomes his stammer and leads the British people through the horrors of WW II...all because one man stood up to the future king, knowing what he was doing was right.

The movie is great, and it really reminded me of the story of Daniel and his friends in chapter 18 of *The Story*. Daniel and his companions stood their ground in the face of imposing monarchs, and by doing so, they brought glory and honor to God. Now last week, we saw the nation of Judah fall. It was captured by the Babylonians in 605 BC, and waves of Jews were deported to Babylon until the capital, Jerusalem, was destroyed in 587 BC. In the first wave of exiles were four promising young Israelites: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. These last three are best known by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were trained for three years in everything Babylonian so they could serve in the royal palace.

From the very beginning, the four friends are loyal to Yahweh, and they agree not to eat the king's royal food provided for them. Not only was the king's food extravagant, but the meat was likely sacrificed in honor of another god and may have broken Jewish dietary laws. Daniel's group was determined not to let themselves become too comfortable with Babylonian pleasures. So they eat nothing but vegetables and water, yet they are far healthier than all the other young men eating the royal food. At the end of the three years, the foursome become personal servants to Nebuchadnezzar, able to assist him far better than all his magicians and soothsayers.

In the story we heard from Scripture just a few minutes ago, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that deeply troubled him, so much that he couldn't sleep. He called in all his wise men to tell him his dream and interpret it, but no one could. The king was enraged and ordered all the wise men of Babylon killed. When Daniel finds out, he and his friends pray, and God reveals the dream to him. When Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar his dream, he and his friends are promoted. Throughout his life, God gives Daniel the ability to interpret dreams and visions. God gives him his own visions, including one that promises the resurrection of all people at the end of time.

The king's favor on these four makes them unpopular with some of the Babylonians. When Nebuchadnezzar creates a golden image and requires everyone to worship it or get thrown into a furnace, his astrologers tell on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The king gives them the opportunity to change their minds, but they reply that Yahweh will protect them...and even if He doesn't, they will not worship the king's gods. The king gets enraged, ties them up, and has them thrown into the fire. But something amazing happens. Not only are they not consumed by the fire, but a fourth person appears with them, one who looks like "a son of the gods." Amazed, Nebuchadnezzar calls them out and orders that no one again challenge Yahweh.

Something similar happens to Daniel several years later under a new king named Darius. Daniel's godly wisdom makes him able to rule the whole kingdom, and others want to discredit him. They lure King Darius into signing a law whereby anyone who prays to anyone other than Darius over a 30-day period will be thrown into a pit of lions. Daniel won't comply and winds up in the lions' den overnight, but God sends an angel to protect him. Darius is so pleased that Daniel is alive, he issues a decree calling the whole kingdom to revere and honor Daniel's god.

These are among the most popular Bible stories from the Old Testament. They involve brave heroes standing up for what's right and God doing miraculous wonders to keep them safe. The lion's den and the fiery furnace capture our imagination and make the danger real to us. But there's more than just memorable stories here. I saw a few concepts in today's chapter that help us make sense of our own situation and who God is calling us to be.

The first is this: *this world is not our home*. Let me repeat it again; it's so simple and so important we can miss it...*this world is not our home*. Daniel is the story of life during exile. It's life away from home. These four guys are young enough that they live over 60 years in Babylon. They are surrounded with foreign languages and foods and temptations. They are given new names and taught a culture alien to their own. Even the language of Daniel is foreign. The rest of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew, but chapters 2-7 of Daniel are written in Aramaic. I've studied Hebrew enough to get by with some serious help, but when I looked at this in Aramaic this week, I was totally lost. The only thing that keeps these guys from buying into their new culture is their love for Yahweh and their trust in Him. They know they may not have a homeland any more, but Yahweh is still their LORD and God and Savior.

This idea of exile continues into the New Testament. Jesus talked about the fact that He and His followers had no place to lay their heads, and that they were not a part of this world but a part of His eternal Kingdom. Jesus' disciple Peter wrote that believers are "aliens" and "strangers in the world." We may think we're from Detroit or Chicago or wherever we were born or grew up, but that's not really the case. Have you ever heard the statement, "You can't go home again?" It's truer than we think. It's funny when I go back to Indianapolis now; it feels foreign, even though I spent over thirty years there. Some of you have told me how you grew up in Hamtramck and how it's a totally different place. It no longer holds that sense of home.

I think this is a God thing. I think God *wants* us to feel a little homesick. God wants us to be content with what we have, and yet throughout the Bible, we have a picture of a sort of divine discontent with our earthly home. It's not permanent. It's not our final destination. When we get to the end of *The Story*, we're going to read Revelation, and we'll see a picture of our eternal home. It's better than earth; it's even better than heaven. It's a picture of a new heaven that meets a new, fully restored earth, a "best of both worlds." The most important part of that picture is not our physical location; it's that God is front and center, that we will be with Him forever. *He* is our home. Like our heroes stuck in Babylon, our hope and home is Yahweh, our creator and redeemer. Like them, we need to stay faithful in the midst of our sojourn here.

That leads us to the second insight from this passage for us: *stay off the world's diet*. We can speculate what was being served from the king's table, but Scripture doesn't say. All we know is that the Israelites would be defiled if they ate it, so they didn't. When the palace official questioned them, concerned about his own head if they got sick, Daniel asked for a ten-day test to show God's favor, and God came through. They didn't have to defile themselves.

For some of us like myself, we need to watch what we eat in a literal sense. But all of us need to beware what the world is serving us. Think about this: the average American watches four hours of TV a day. That's two non-stop months of TV a year. Over 10 years of the average American life will be spent watching television. The average child spends 900 hours in school each year and 1,500 in front of the TV. That child by age 18 has watched approximately 200,000 acts of violence and 360,000 commercials. In comparison, the average parent spends three and a half minutes in meaningful conversation with their children each week.¹

¹ Facts from "Internet Resources to Accompany *The Sourcebook For Teaching Science: Television & Health*", <http://www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html>.

It might seem easy to pick on television, but that's what the average American spends a quarter of their lives doing, and that doesn't include time on the Internet or video games. How does all of that affect us? It's almost impossible to say, but it's no wonder that our society is falling apart at the seams. As the old saying goes, "You are what you eat." We watch people behaving badly, and we start to accept those morals. But here's the thing...even morally OK shows can still distract us from the things that matter in life, from family and friends and God.

TV is just one example of the larger problem. Everywhere we look, the world wants to suck us in. A lot of us could get away with slacking on the job if we wanted to. Many workplaces are loaded with pride and ambition and gossip. Those who've retired have to decide what to do with their time, whether it will be spent productively in the service of the LORD or following after your own desires. Gossip's no stranger to the retirement community, either. Those of us a little younger have families that demand a lot of our time, and it's easier to hop on the computer than to take the time to relate to our children. Our culture tells us it's OK to get a divorce if you're not passionate about your spouse any more or if you've fallen for somebody else. We could go on and on, but they're all the same at the core. The world keeps chanting to us, "Follow your own desires; fulfill your own needs; everything is about you; you are the only one that really matters." The world throws everything it possibly can at us to get us to ignore those things that point us in the direction of God. The world is deadly to our souls.

The story shows us the way to stay off the world's diet is to resolve to follow God's ways before you're tempted to go astray. Daniel resolved not to eat the king's food before it was ever brought to him, and he made an agreement with his commander so that the temptation was never even before him. The problem was solved before it ever started. We should do likewise. Know that the local salon is a hotbed of gossip? Resolve not to go there. Know that personal attacks go on at the water cooler at work? Find somewhere else to hang out on break. Know that you're tempted by Internet sites when you're at home alone? Resolve not to turn on the computer unless somebody is there with you. Don't flirt with temptation and think that you'll be OK; you won't be. We're all human. We're all frail. Too many of us, myself included, keep ice cream in the fridge and then wonder why we crave it all the time. It can't be enough to think that willpower will keep us out of sin. We've got to stay away from it, period.

Here's the good news – when the really tough stuff comes, when Daniel and his friends face death because they won't bow down to anybody but Yahweh, it's no sweat. There's no question or hesitation. They are willing to lay down their lives because they've already set a pattern of following God. That will be true for us as well. If we resolve to follow God in the little things, when a big crisis comes, you'll already be prepared.

That brings us to the best news of this passage: *you never need be alone on your journey back to God.* Theologians for centuries have argued who exactly was in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Some think it was an angel. The language used of the fourth person in the fire suggests it might have been Jesus before His incarnation as a human being. It's impossible to say, but this much we know – for both those three and for Daniel, in their time of greatest need, God sent His messenger to stand alongside them in the trial. And during the everyday trials of living in Babylon, these four had one another. They were able to stand together where they might have fallen separately.

Jesus is called the head of the church, which in Greek means “the assembly.” The church is never the building; it’s always the people. When we come together in the name of Jesus Christ, wherever we are, whether it’s here or at the ballgame or the park, we are the church! And we as the church are called to support one another. There’s a reason that the ancient believers called one another “brother” and “sister.” We’re supposed to be even closer than family. We are called to stand by one another and strengthen each other. We were never meant to go through this all by ourselves. Even Jesus, the one perfect person, hung around with over 70 disciples. He often went off by Himself, but He always came back to the community.

This is a big difference from the self-reliance of most Michiganders. Some of you don’t tell anyone at the church when you’ve been to the hospital or had a big issue in your life because you didn’t want to be a bother to anyone. But that’s why we’re here! God gives us other believers as a support system. When you only rely on yourself, you’re buying into the lie that we don’t need anybody else. At the very beginning of creation that we read a few months ago together, we heard God say, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” We were made for community! We were made to be together!

You may not believe it because I get up here and preach each week, but I’m an introvert, like many of you. Parties and socializing are work for me. But get me in a small group of people, and I come alive. You don’t have to be a “people person” to still need people. God wants us to rely on one another. I can write a sermon like nobody’s business, but you don’t want me to fix the church’s plumbing.

And moreover, God brings us into relationship with each other so that we get a picture of relationship with God. As Christians, we believe that God is totally unified yet three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are unique yet in perfect relationship with one another...they are one in a way we can’t fully comprehend. Yet we get a glimpse of it when we come together as friends, as brothers and sisters, in shared unity through Jesus Christ, the one who saves us from sin and brings us together in love for God and for one another. If you’ve never asked God to forgive your sins and enter into a relationship with you, do it today. And if you’ve never seen the church as more than just a building, if you’ve never seen the people sitting next to you as brothers and sisters on a journey of faith with you, I ask you to pray and see how God would lead you to be their traveling companions.

Four friends stood up to the kings of Babylon, and God protected them. They became the highest officials in the kingdom. They made a difference in a land that was not their home by resolving to serve God faithfully and supporting one another. We can make a difference in this land that is not our home too by holding fast to our faith in God, rejecting the world’s ways, and being there for one another as the church. If we are willing to do this in the midst of our friends and neighbors and co-workers, we can bring a bit of God’s Kingdom into this one as we walk together in faith.