



We Have Been Here Before

TEXT
Daniel 6:1–24

September 22, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In the early and mid-second century BCE, violence erupted in Israel. Israel had been living under Egyptian control, but the king who ruled the empire to the northeast of Israel — at the time called the Seleucid Empire — was able to push Egypt out of Israel. The Seleucid ruler was named Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus was hostile to Jewish faith. Some Jews bowed to the pressure, but others rebelled. The leaders of the Jewish rebels were a family named the Maccabees. Their rebellion was called the Maccabean revolt.

Antiochus responded harshly. Antiochus, an evangelist for Greek culture, demanded that Jews worship Zeus. No faithful Jew could do this. Antiochus ordered that scrolls of the Torah be burned; practicing Sabbath observance was a capital offense; and Jewish mothers who had their children circumcised, according to Jewish tradition, were to be killed. Jewish rebels were tortured, dismembered and brutally murdered.

During this time of violence, when faith was under pressure; during this time when people had to decide just how they were going to live; it was during this time when the writer of the book of

Daniel began to tell stories. They were strange stories of Jews who had been courageous in faith hundreds of years before. The writer of Daniel told stories from the period of the exile. In exile, faithfulness had to be chosen. It was challenging being ruled by a foreign people and a foreign culture. The environment was strange and hostile.

He told stories of guys with the most unfortunate names: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These guys were tossed in a fiery furnace. Their crime? They stayed true to their faith. Because they lived their faith, they emerged from the fiery furnace with not so much as a sunburn. That's quite a story.

And of course, there is the story of Daniel — same crime, new punishment. Perhaps having learned that the faithful can survive a fiery furnace, they tossed Daniel into a lions' den. But it turns out, Daniel survives this too. Those who had turned on him were tossed into the lions' den, all 123 of them plus their families, and the lions destroyed them before they hit the ground.

These are strange stories — so strange that one commentator asked, "Why would a preacher bring stories like this into the pulpit in our day?"¹ You may be

asking the same question. Part of the challenge of these stories is that they bear no nuance, no uncertainty. Everyone is either 100 percent faithful or 100 percent evil. The faithful are protected, the evil ones destroyed. That makes the stories fun, but not real. We know that life is never black and white.

Not only life, but scripture bears witness to this. Jesus was cast into the lions' den of sorts, and he didn't come out. He died. He was raised from the dead, but he faced the harshness of death. The stories of Daniel are drawn with clean lines, but real life is complicated. So why would we revisit these stories?

David Lamotte gave a concert here at Village several years ago. He's a folk singer and lives in the shadow of the Appalachian Mountains. He wrote a song that says:

There's a neon cross on the mountain, sayin' sinner best beware.

That means that somebody went to the trouble to run power way up there.

These mountains speak to my spirit and it kinda blows my mind,

That someone could look at that vista and think God needs a neon sign.

I'll admit, I wonder if sometimes I need a neon sign. Oh, not a cross planted in the mountain range, thank you. But people. I think that's why Daniel tells these stories. They are like neon signs that encourage us, particularly when life is hard, and Daniel reminds us, as a people of faith, we have been here before. Like those who have gone before, choose faith. And to help, Daniel says, "Let me tell you a story."

You see, sometimes we think God exists to inspire us or protect us or make the circumstances of our lives easy. At least, when life gets hard, it is easy for us to wonder: "Why did this have to happen? Where is God?"

But God may not be who we think she is. If I understand the text, these stories testify that God is not the one who keeps you out of trouble, but God is the one who carries you through.

Sometimes we need a neon sign to direct us, and those signs are going to come to us as people — like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and Daniel.

So, I'm thinking of some of the people who have been neon signs in my life. I'm thinking of my buddy Brant. He's been gone almost six years now, and I still think about him all the time. Brant was the one who introduced me to camping in Canada. He was leading the Scout troop and took me with him on a canoe trip.

In our group, the Scouts all had jobs, and one of the jobs was reading the map. These are not maps that tell you to paddle one-fourth mile and veer right to the portage. No, these are actually

paper maps that you have to read, and that's a skill. Well, there was one kid in our group who lacked this skill. He really struggled. "This way or that way?" Brant would ask.

"I can't tell," he said. I had a map, I could tell, but I wasn't the map reader for the day.

Brant said, "Let's all gather around and figure this out together." (That's hard to do with four canoes in the middle of a lake.) After about the fourth time doing this, I was growing impatient. I knew where we needed to go, but no, it was not my job today. "So let's gather around."

I was thinking, "This is ridiculous. We are never going to get there."

It took me a while to realize, this was not about where we were going; it was about who we were being. You see, Brant approached every moment as an opportunity for those around him to be better than they had been before. Just because you failed last time, doesn't mean you will fail this time. Gather around, and let's see how it goes. What do you think life would be like if we all lived like that?

God puts people in your life who show you what it means to choose faith. Maybe you aren't being persecuted. Maybe no one is burning your Bible, but faith matters every day. And faith has to be chosen.

I'm thinking of Kathy Miligan. She was one who knew in her heart that the church was more faithful when we treated everyone as a child of God. When the leaders of her church decided some folks were not pure

enough to be welcomed, she said, "No, I can't support that."

She wasn't alone, and she inspired others. She, and folks like her, are the reason Village is now in two campuses. And even though Kathy moved away, when she died this year, she wanted her service to be held at Antioch, so that her last act of faith would give testimony that the grace of God is for all people. We all need people to teach us about grace.

Some of you were here yesterday as we held a funeral service for Stormy Shank. Those of you who were here, I hope you will forgive my repeating some of what I said then. I need to — because Stormy was like a neon sign.

If you didn't know her, when I tell you about her, you are going to assume I am making this up. I'm not. She was wacky — always joyful, always silly, always playful, always into mischief. She began her prayers, "Hey, Fella." She always wanted to have a party and needed no more excuse than "It's Tuesday" to have a party.

She loved the choir and sang in this chancel for over 50 years. Years ago, the choir would process in during the opening hymn. Stormy may be the reason we don't do that anymore. The choir would come in singing and process to the chancel, but not Stormy. She would come down the aisle as if she were running for office. She would shake people's hands, sometimes give children little peppermints, even hold conversations with friends.

One Sunday, the hymn concluded, and Stormy was still in

the aisle. Gene Augustine was leading the Prayer of Confession, and Stormy just walked up the steps and found her place in the loft. And she was laughing the whole time. She could find joy in every moment, and the truth is, that's remarkable — because Stormy had more than her share of heartbreak.

Her father died when she was a child. She buried not one, but two husbands whom she loved. Her son Gary was killed in Vietnam. And in her last days, she would come to worship here. Macular degeneration had stolen her eyesight. She couldn't hear. But she couldn't bear to be away from here because she wanted to worship the God who brought her through.

Joy seemed to come easily for her, but I know better. Her joy was an act of defiance. It was a choice of faith. I wish I were more like Stormy, but only in some ways.

I think of Chris Plog. Life gave her a bent-over body — with a halting gait and a wrecked voice that made me wonder if that's what Owen Meany sounded like. But she was here all the time — practicing friendship with those who would risk friendship with a woman who looked odd and spoke odd. And she would attend classes because she was always thinking, always reading. And she would sit in the back and worship. It was no easy thing for her to get here, but she never missed. She was a neon sign of what was important.

I could go on. I imagine you have your list. If I understand the text, Daniel teaches us that

there will always be challenges between this Christian faith of ours and this very unchristian world in which we live. We are going to need to choose faith.

You will have to, as we said last week, decide if grace can be trusted; if love can be given; if forgiveness can be offered; if justice can be pursued. And sometimes it will take all you've got.

The apostle Paul was in prison, and he wrote, "No one has come to my defense, but the Lord is near, and he has kept me from the lion's mouth." In his darkest hour, Paul was leaning on the stories of Daniel.

That's why the church has given us these strange stories. Because we will all face the dark hour, and when we do, remember the neon signs God has placed in our life. Remember you are not alone. As people of faith, we have been here before. And what the prophets are teaching us is that God will not keep you from the storm, but God will bring you through.

¹Sib Towner, *Daniel: Interpretation Series Commentaries* (1984). Sib offers his own answers to this question. I'll offer my suggestion in the sermon.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.