

Daniel and the Lion's Den

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Preacher: Preaching Cohort

[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. My name is Anselm Beach, and I'm so excited to be here with you all this morning. You know, I first began coming to the Table Church last at Advent season, and so I think it's incredible that in this weird kind of a full circle kind of a way, I'm here preaching before you all today on the first Sunday of Advent, but I'm not alone. I'll be joined by a few other people from the preaching cohort this week and next week. You know, if you're anything like me, and you grew up in the 90s as a church kid, then you got to consume a lot of awesome media that was designed to introduce children to stories from the Bible. I'm not just talking about the really cool, like, colorful children's Bibles that were out there. I'm talking about, like, you know, peak programming, like VeggieTales or, like, Superbook or The Flying House or my favorite, here we go, The Greatest Adventure, Stories from the Bible. You know, The Greatest Adventure,

I remember we had it on VHS, and it followed these two archaeologists and their nomad friend, Moki, aka the Foreign Comic Relief. It was the 80s. As they traveled back in time and got to actually live through, you know, stories from the Bible. I'm talking the greatest hits like Adam and Eve, you know, Joshua and the Battle of Jericho, David and Goliath, and the story that we'll actually be covering today, Daniel and the Lion's Den. Now, what these TV shows had in their ability to introduce children to stories from the Bible, they lacked in their ability to weave these stories together to show that they weren't just these seemingly disjointed standalone episodes, but that they were vignettes within a larger story that was painting the picture of God and God's relationship with humanity, humanity's relationship with one another, and how through God coming to earth and living in humanity, and us recognizing the divinity within humanity, we can create heaven here on this earth.

And so for those of you who may be wondering, what does Daniel and the Lion's Den have to do with the coming of Christmas? Well, that's what we hope to explain to you all today. We're going to have a really cool opportunity to hear from myself and four others as we talk about various aspects of this story that helps us to look forward towards the coming of the Messiah. So the first person that we're going to hear from today is Aaron. Aaron's going to share with us about the context of the story of Daniel and the Lion's Den and how the people who were reading the story wrestled with this and how it helped point them towards the hope of the Messiah. Many of us come to the story of Daniel and the Lion's Den as a children's story. I certainly do. The first images that come to mind as I read this passage are the colorful drawings of friendly lions in our children's storybook Bibles. What's interesting is that friendly lions aside, this view of the story as a fairy tale isn't that far off. When scholars read the book of Daniel, the stories read more like folktales than like historical accounts. They tell of the adventures of a great hero who lived hundreds of years before the book was written, a man so wise he was the trusted advisor to three different kings, so gifted he is known around the kingdom as the dream interpreter, so faithful that God protects him in a den of lions. The stories in the book of

Daniel include a king who transforms into a wild beast and a mysterious hand that writes on a wall. In some Greek stories that are not a part of the Protestant Bible but are included in the Catholic and Orthodox texts, Daniel successfully kills a dragon and then survives another week in a lion's den under the reign of yet another foreign king. So how do we read parts of the Bible that aren't history books?

The way I like to approach this is by working to understand who these stories are about, who they're for, and what they meant to those groups of people. In Daniel's time, the Jewish people have been living in the land of Judea for hundreds of years.

[4 : 1 5] Their religion and culture were built on a specific place, on their experiences of God in the kingdoms of Israel and Judea, on religious holidays that centered on a specific temple in Jerusalem,

and on different states based on the 12 tribes of Israel, all within an area a little larger than the state of New Jersey.

Their relationship to God had always been linked to their relationship to this place, the Promised Land. Suddenly, an army of the very powerful Babylonian Empire comes in, takes their land, kills their king, pillages their temple, and takes their leadership and a lot of other Jewish people captive, including the prophet Daniel.

You may know about this period, called the Babylonian Captivity. Books of the Bible like Jeremiah and 2 Kings discuss the captivity, and about a year ago we as a church read through the book of Ezra, which tells what happened when it ended over 60 years later.

The stories of the book of Daniel are about the Jewish people in exile, specifically about Daniel and a few other young Jewish men. In Daniel chapter 1, the king of Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar, violently takes over Jerusalem, and then the Bible tells us, verse 3, The king commanded his palace master, Ashpenaz, to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace.

Among them were Daniel, Hadaniah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the tribe of Judah. So Daniel, our hero, was a Jewish man who grew up near Jerusalem, and then when he was a young man, the king of Babylon took over his homeland, and Daniel was selected as one of the wisest, most handsome, and most competent young men in the land.

[5 : 54] He served as an advisor to the kings of Babylon for a number of years, while the Babylonian empire ruled over his homeland. The Babylonian captivity was a formative period for the Jewish people, a time when so many of the traditions that had defined Judaism for centuries were suddenly and violently taken away from them.

It was a time of uncertainty and waiting, when the Jewish people weren't sure of their future and waited for an end to their suffering, knowing it might not come. In the midst of this uncertainty, the Jewish community tried to answer a lot of questions about who they were and what it meant to be Jewish.

What makes us distinct as a people? What are the important parts of our history, and how do we want to remember them? When is it okay to listen to a leader who doesn't follow our God? And when do we stand up against them?

The book of Daniel addresses these questions. In it, we get a hero named Daniel who proclaims over and over again that there is no God but God, that he and his friends will not worship anyone else, and that they will not praise idols.

We see that they are willing to risk death by a fiery furnace or a den of lions rather than stop worshiping God, and we see that God is with them and keeps them safe in a world that keeps testing their faith.

[7 : 02] Shockingly, we do not see God tell Daniel or any of the Jewish characters that they must risk death to pray three times a day or avoid worshiping idols. Even Daniel's pledge to eat vegetarian food is something he decides on his own.

Daniel and the other figures in these stories do these things because they know that is how God wants them to live, even as God appears to be silent, and we see that they are rewarded for their faithfulness.

This would be an essential set of stories for Jews living during the Babylonian captivity. The thing is, the book of Daniel wasn't written until about 400 years later. These stories about Daniel and the other heroes of the time may have been told during or soon after the captivity in the 6th century BCE, but the book of Daniel was written for Jews living in the 2nd century BCE.

They remind 2nd century Jews of the importance of keeping the faith and trusting God. So why did 2nd century Jews need that reminder? When the book of Daniel was put together, the Jewish people were living under a foreign ruler yet again.

Around 200 BCE, the Seleucid Empire, which ruled a similar area to the Babylonian Empire, took over Judea. They weren't too violent at first, but about 25 years in, a king named Antiochus IV Epiphanes took over.

[8 : 14] Antiochus pillaged the temple, took women and children into captivity, refused to allow the Jewish people to practice their religion. He killed people for celebrating Jewish holidays, having a copy of the Torah, for circumcising their children, and for refusing to eat pork.

So once again, we have a foreign king who comes to Jerusalem, kills the people in charge, pillages the temple, and demands that the Jewish people stop practicing their religion. Maybe it feels once again that God is silent.

Certainly, God has not prevented this massacre. The Jewish people are waiting for relief and wondering what to do. What makes us distinct as a people? How do you handle being punished for your religion?

When the king commands you to sacrifice to his idols and use your temples to worship his gods, what do you do? You look to the heroes of the past. What did Daniel do? 200 years later, under Roman occupation, Jewish figures like Mary and Joseph would have faced the same questions. How do we live under empire? For them, the book of Daniel would have been the most recent book of the Bible to be written. The community who raised Jesus would have looked to Daniel's example in their waiting and uncertainty, just like those who lived 200 and 600 years before.

[9 : 24] You know, I remember the first time that I actually had to wrestle with the idea that the book of Daniel might have been written hundreds of years after the events in Daniel actually took place.

And I'll be honest, it really freaked me out. But there was something about the way that Aaron just shared the context of the book, the story of not just the stories within the book, but the story of the book itself that gave me a lot of peace.

You know, I found it profoundly impacting to imagine Mary, someone who I've read about in the Bible, reading about Daniel, someone that she read about in the Bible, and finding the same amount of courage and hope and faithfulness that I strive to find by reading hers and his and many other stories.

It really reminded me of the passage in Romans chapter 15, verse 4, that says, For everything that was written in the past was written so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.

Now that we've established the context of the story of the lion's den, we're actually going to dive deep into it. And it's a story that, again, it's one of the most popular ones in the Bible. But hey, as Jesus himself said, a student of the scriptures is like someone who goes into the storehouse and brings out both old and new treasures.

[10 : 48] And Edwards was looking to help us to discover what are some of the new treasures that we can find in the story of Daniel in the lion's den. The story presented in the book of Daniel, chapter 6, is another episode of the court life and work of the Jewish people in exile.

Daniel has become a solid administrator in the court of King Darius, advancing so far to the point where he had been appointed to overlook the bureaucratic functions of the entire empire.

Daniel is still living in a foreign land and a foreign context. So naturally, there's going to be some rubbing of the shoulders in the wrong way between our Jewish friend Daniel and the people that aren't.

Now Daniel distinguished himself by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him to oversee the whole kingdom. Now out of envy, his entire colleagues begin scheming against him. If you can't bring down the guy, make sure the system can bring down him. And sure enough, they bring forward to the king a very simple law.

[11 : 55] Anyone who prays to any god or any human being for the next 30 days, other than King Darius, must be thrown into the den alliance.

Now Daniel still has the fortitude knowing that this decree hangs above his head. His faithfulness has still remained the same, despite the system changing and working against him.

His loyalties to God appear to be unshakable. And when we're reading this, is it fair to think his wisdom leads to a wellspring of hope, a bold hope in God?

Now nonetheless, the colleagues find him in the act of praying. Now let's bring this into closer context and make sense out of this. Washington, D.C. can be a very competitive place.

You have all the talent in the world to compete for just a select number of job openings, full-time, permanent, contractor, you name it.

[12 : 54] And really, only the best and brightest can make it here. Perhaps there's some savagery along the way to get there. You aced your interviews, you shook hands with the right people, and heck, you probably went to that networking event.

And off to the races you go, right? Life is going to be great. However, darkness can still wait at your next promising line of work. Think about your workplace.

It could be toxic, and unfortunately can sour what could have been a solid career builder. I think Daniel would understand you. Now when the king hears this, he knows the kind of quandary he's put himself into.

He also realizes the kind of fate that has been spelled out for Daniel. And really, he can't do anything about it. But oddly enough, as you can see throughout the story, Daniel doesn't take an active speaking role here.

He gives no defense. He doesn't say anything. He just remains silent. I wonder what's going on in Daniel's mind.

[14:00] If we can be creative and insert ourselves and immerse ourselves into the story, was Daniel nervous?

Was he calm? Was he hopeful? I wonder what was going on in between Daniel's ears.

Unfortunately, the king has to follow through the law.

And sure enough, the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the alliance then. May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you.

Now later, we find a king in such grave despair. And what is despair? The complete opposite of hope.

The author of the story, I wonder, probably wants to highlight the contrasting pictures of hopefulness and hopelessness. We see hope and despair put together in a relatively short story.

[15:05] Now the sun rises. It's another day. And at the first light of dawn, we have the king running over, just hoping and possibly praying to his deities of what happened to Daniel.

Of course, you would want to know what happened. And to a great sigh of relief, Daniel finally says something in this story. May the king live forever.

My God has sent his angel and he shut the mouths of these lions. They have not hurt me because I have found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, your majesty.

Our story ends with another decree paling in comparison to our first one, highlighting the respect that the God of Israel commands.

And that is found in the very last part of this segment. And sure enough, a very rosy and a very wonderful end to this story. Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus, the Persian.

[16:14] I want to take a second to reflect upon the fresh insights that Edward provided about this old and familiar story. Because one thing that he highlighted that I never really connected with before was that, yeah, Daniel was surprisingly silent as he was facing clear injustice and oppression.

He doesn't protest or object except for to simply disobey by praying. And when he does pray, we don't even know what it is that he says. We only know at the end from him that he has been delivered.

It made me wonder if there was a connection between the seemingly silent God that Aaron pointed out and the seemingly silent suffering servant, alliteration for you, that we heard about in Edward's retelling.

We'll probably have a chance to come back to that later, but before we do, I want to kick it over to Tim, who's going to talk about how the story of David connects with the season of Advent. So Advent is a time of waiting expectantly for a new kingdom to arrive.

The question that we often wrestle with at this time of the year is how to wait well. And in this passage, we see two examples. One is an example of what to do, and the other is an example of what not to do.

[17:38] King Darius is definitely the latter of these. As Edward described, he has all the power in the world to bring about justice in this situation here and now.

He does not have to send Daniel into the lion's den, and yet he allows himself to be convinced by the satraps that it is the just, right, and only thing for him to do.

On the other side, we have Daniel, who is persecuted for his faithfulness. He has done nothing wrong, but also has no power whatsoever in this situation.

For him, waiting is an act of faithfulness. He can do nothing but trust that God will show him favor. Take this in comparison to the season of Advent.

Advent is a time in the liturgical year that many Christian churches observe a period of both preparation and waiting for the birth of Jesus at Christmas, as well as the return of Jesus during the second coming.

[18 : 51] Many people think about waiting for the birth of the Messiah. In many cases, waiting is just that, sitting patiently, praying, and expecting God to move.

Other times, there's more to it than that. I think of Mary as one who waited very well. She was poor, unwed, pregnant, just in a very, very difficult situation.

It's hard to imagine someone having less power than her. All she could do was trust that God would be faithful to her.

I don't think it's that much of an exaggeration to say that being a pregnant, unmarried woman in the first century was almost as dangerous as being thrown into a lion's den.

Both her and Daniel were called on to believe that the Lord was with them and that with him at their side, no harm could come to them. But sometimes, like with King Darius, waiting is more than that.

[20 : 04] Sometimes it means action. A positive example of action from the Advent story is the wise men. Herod, in the story, calls the wise men and tells them to report back to him the birth of Jesus.

Now, it would have been very easy for them to just do what they were told, to submit to the ruler in this situation. But an angel came to them and told them that they must go another way home.

They didn't have to do this, and yet, in their position of power, they used it to help stop an injustice here and now, in this moment.

I think the most important point is this. These two things are not in conflict with one another. Waiting means different things in different circumstances.

We wait patiently and prayerfully for the coming move of God while being sure that we are not missing out on an opportunity to bring his kingdom here.

[21 : 11] This story makes me think about two groups of people. The first being those civil rights activists of the 50s and 60s who, probably inspired by Daniel in the Lion's Den, utilized civil disobedience as a form of protesting the racist policies and practices that govern their time.

But unfortunately, I think I also think about the people today, many of them professing to be Christians who, inspired by this story, irresponsibly gather in large numbers for these large praise and worship concerts as a way of, I don't know, turning the tide against a seemingly anti-Christian bent in our nation.

And I think about what's the difference between the two? Both are used in the same scriptures to justify very different behaviors. And I feel like what Tim just shared actually shed so much light on what the difference is.

is that waiting for God, whether it means being still or acting, should always bring about a decrease in the injustice that we see.

It should always bring about good and love and a consideration for the humanity of every single human being, for the fact that every single human being is an image bearer of God.

[22 : 39] The last person we're going to hear from today is Anna. She's going to share about what this story from thousands of years ago has to do with us today.

Interestingly, the story of Daniel, we see that Daniel's adversaries passed this law that is meant to keep him from worshiping God, to praying to God. But in that moment, I like to think that my natural inclination would have been to petition the king, maybe talk about it, protest in the streets, look for a friend to speak to.

But what does Daniel do? In verse 10, we see that Daniel actually went to God. His act of praying, window open to Jerusalem, it wasn't his act of defiance to the unjust law.

It was his way of seeking help from his friend, from his God, in his time of need. He prayed and he sought the Lord. I think in this Advent season, it's probably important for us to reflect upon the story of Daniel, as well as Mary, but thinking about what does the story of Daniel and the lion's den tell us about how we are to wait?

Do we act out and misuse our power like the satraps who Edward referred to as Daniel's envious colleagues? Do we like King Darius, perhaps worry or stress or lose sleep or pace of the night?

[24 : 02] Or are we like Daniel, people who remain faithful in their suffering? As Tim noted, do we remain faithful while we wait? Perhaps what you're really asking is what should we do when God is silenced amidst our struggles?

What do we do when we're faced with struggles or hardship? What do we do when we're forced to wait? Or maybe our prayers aren't answered, or we lose a job, or we can't pay our bills, or a family member gets sick, or we're struggling with anxiety or depression?

Is God any less loving or divine in the midst of this waiting, in the midst of his silence? By no means. Hebrews 11, an often quoted scripture from the New Testament, reminds us that faith is the confidence in what we hope for, and the assurance of what we do not see.

Although Daniel had never seen God, he knew that he could go to him for help, that God could deliver him, and he would deliver him, but that Daniel decided that he would have faith, even if God didn't.

Is that the kind of faith that we have in our waiting? I know a lot of people in our congregation have celebrated the recent presidential victory of Joe Biden over President Trump.

[25 : 15] This was a moment that a lot of people waited for. But what if he hadn't? What if it's overturned? Or what if bad things still happen under a Biden-Harris administration?

Spoiler alert, they probably will. Will we lose faith? Will we ask, why us, God? Why did you let this happen? I think we all know the answer to that, and that's that deep down, our faith isn't in earthly things or earthly people.

Mary and Daniel really show us that. Their faith wasn't about the fact that things were going well. What did Mary do in her time of waiting? Well, in Luke chapter 1, we see that Mary was this virgin mother of Jesus, pregnant for six months.

At that point, she's visited by an angel of the Lord. But we don't quite know what she was doing during those first six months of her waiting. She was probably really afraid. She was probably trying desperately to hide her baby bump or to not let people find out.

But when the angel of the Lord shows up and he tells her that she's going to give birth to a son and call him Jesus, and he will be called the son of the Most High, she went to be with her cousin Elizabeth.

[26 : 31] And when she went there, they prayed together, Our soul glorifies the Lord, and our soul rejoices in God our Savior. In Mary's story, we learn the importance of being with fellow believers when faced with uncertainty and fear, or troubles, or waiting.

Luke chapter 1, verse 56, tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. So when we face trials in this Advent season, let us hold fast to the faith we profess. Let us pray. Let us seek God's face. Let us be with the support of our community of believers, knowing that God's coming might be just around the corner.

If there's one thing to take away from what we shared with you this morning, it's this, that in the midst of God's silence, God speaks through the waiting of faithful people.

Whether it's Daniel, who waited patiently for the morning to reveal God's deliverance from the lions, or the people who read about Daniel and awaited a Savior who would save them from the oppressiveness of the nations that ruled them.

[27 : 40] whether it was Mary, who waited to see if the child who she carried was indeed the one that God had promised her people for generations, or Jesus, who waited on a cross and then waited in a tomb for God's power to reveal itself through his resurrection.

Or whether it's us, who, as Philippians 3.20 says, eagerly awaits a Savior from heaven who would transform our body to be like his glorious body.

We find that joining hand-in-hand with the work that God has been doing for generations and generations, that we are the ones that we've been waiting for. Anna will close us out in prayer. Let us pray. Dear Heavenly and Gracious Father, thank you for being Emmanuel, God with us, even in our struggles and our waiting. thank you for giving us stories to remind us of your goodness and your glory from Daniel to Mary to the birth of your son, Jesus Christ.

Thank you for being the God with Daniel in the midst of his struggles and equally with the writer of Daniel, who was inspired to write this story to give us hope and inspire us as well.

[29 : 01] in this Advent season, we patiently wait for your son to arrive through your holy servant, Mary, and believe that you can birth good things through us, even in our waiting, even still today.

Bless and be with those in the midst of trial and persecution and comfort those who are mourning and in pain. Finally, move us to be the peculiar people like you who are with others in trial and in pain and help to make things better here on earth for all.

We ask these things in the unity of your holy body and in the shared belief of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.