July 16, 2017   
Daniel 6  
Children’s Bible Stories All Grown Up: Daniel and the Lions’ Den  
David Elliott   
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

One of my favorite movies is Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas*. The movie recounts the criminal life of mob associate Henry Hill. In one particular scene, Henry, and his partner Jimmy, clobber another hoodlum who owes them money: though banged up, the guy just won’t pay; finally Jimmy says, “let’s take him to the zoo!” Henry & Jimmy grab this poor debtor by the ankles & dangle him over the edge of the lion’s den, threatening to drop him in with the beasts! “Ok, I’ll pay, I’ll pay” the deadbeat cries out. Too bad we’re not doing Greenland Hills at the movies…but then again, every other word in *Goodfellas* is obscene…and it’s about gangsters…and violent. Maybe next year?!?

In our Bible stories all grown up today: Daniel, chapter 6, there are gangsters, of sorts, they conspire to rid themselves of Daniel, who’s definitely a good fella, just not one in the sense of…you know…”wiseguy”! Our story is a portrayal of integrity, honesty, justice, against a backdrop of conspiracy, vendetta, and injustice. A portrayal of decency confronted by indecency. And the lack of political will to do the right thing, to do true justice. And then God’s power revealed: deliverance! It’s a long story. So I’ll summarize it.

I picture the Hebrew people recounting this story, through the ages: they’re under oppression, in exile, when one of their own, Daniel, rises to prominence in the court of the tyrant himself, the autocratic Darius. Our text says Daniel “distinguished himself above all the other governors” appointed by King Darius. In fact Darius is so pleased, he plans on putting Daniel in charge of the whole operation! The other governors are none to pleased, so they conspire to get rid of Daniel…maybe there’s some dirt on him? No? “He’s upright, blameless, ‘no ground for complaint against him.’ So what to do? Ah, Daniel is faithful to his god…he says ‘live forever’ to King Darius, but his true loyalty is to his foreign god…we got him!” So the governors persuade King Darius to compose some bogus discriminatory legal code forbidding the adoration of any being, divine or human, *except* King Darius! Well this must have inflated old Darius’ ego, because…well…he agreed & signed the law!

Now Daniel, impressive beyond measure, in his capabilities to King Darius, bows to no one, but God, offering his final allegiance to God’s justice, God’s love, God’s devotion. Every day, three times, he goes home to face Jerusalem, far away, the city of his people, where their temple exists, and though they are in exile, they still know where “home” is. So he faces towards Jerusalem, and fervently prays…praising, offering gratitude, offering his obedience to God, and God alone. He knows the law Darius has enacted, but can not, *will not*, compromise what he knows to be *true,* *just*, and *right*! Darius is confronted with Daniel’s disobedience, at least to this petty law. The other governor’s remind him of the law he has signed.

So Darius, fully knowledgeable of Daniel’s competence, of his integrity, of his trustworthiness, decides to do the exact opposite of what he should do: exempt Daniel from this law, or, better yet, realize the futility of this law. Darius throws Daniel to the lion’s den. And then frets about it, even tells Daniel, “I hope your God, who seems so just, delivers you!” He can’t eat, can’t sleep. His bad conscience gets the best of him! Let’s step back here. Look at some recent events in history.

We have men like Darius, who know, who understand, what the right actions are, the right path to take, and do the exact opposite, for political expedience, for their own ego, their own corrupt ideology. Look at Alabama Governor, George Wallace, who knew segregation was immoral, yet proclaimed, "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!” As a circuit judge, Wallace treated black lawyers with the same deference as white lawyers. African-American lawyer [J. L. Chestnut](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._L._Chestnut) once said that "Judge George Wallace was the most liberal judge that I had ever practiced law in front of. He was the first judge in Alabama to call me 'Mister' in a courtroom." Yet Wallace succumbed to his own political sense of survival, in order to be Governor, and lauded segregationist policies, not the jurisprudence he knew to be correct!

Before our story in chapter 6 of the Book of Daniel, we have the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, in chapter 3: thrown into the fire by King Nebuchadnezzar for refusing to bow down to him. Like Daniel, these three young men, refuse to compromise what they know to be just, to be true, to be provident. Returning to the Civil Rights era, we contrast Governor Wallace, with Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney, three civil rights activists, two Jewish, one African American, who came to, and from, Mississippi to register black citizens to vote. They, like Governor Wallace, knew segregation to be immoral, yet, unlike Wallace, vowed to defeat it, not laud it, even at the cost of their very lives. These three young men were thrown into the fires of hate, in compliance with love, justice, and sense of doing what was right, not expedient.

Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, all worship, reverence, obey, God. In prayer and service. Doing God’s will. Remember what Paul says of God’s Kingdom, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” A radical sense of equality among believers, among the prayerful, among the obedient. As Christians we are called to this radical sense of equality. Remember what Exodus 22:21 teaches us, “do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners…” doesn’t matter if those foreigners are legal citizens or not. Theologian Carol Newsom says of Daniel 3 & 6, “…(these stories) explore the proper nature… of state power in relationship to the sovereignty of God. Although critical of state power’s tendency to arrogance, these stories affirm that such power can be redeemed and made to fulfill its proper function in the political economy of God’s world.”

The “political economy of God’s world”…God’s Kingdom…God’s Kin-dom. We are called to be Daniel: displaying integrity, honesty, most of all, faithful to God’s justice, to God’s love, to God’s Kingdom. In prayer, in marching in the street, in service, in resistance to injustice. Perhaps going to jail, even giving up our lives.

During the Nazi terror, the Peoples’ Court, a kangaroo court set up to try a broad range of “political offenses”, lorded over by the fanatical Dr. Roland Freisler, who also was a respected jurist, one who understood the legal premises of “adequate defense”, “prosecutorial misconduct”, and “fair trial” yet disregarded all of the preceding in service to Nazi ideology. In front of him stood the White Rose, anti-Nazi activists Hans and Sophie Scholl, who declared “we will not be silent, we are your bad conscience.” In contrast to Dr. Feisler, there were Martin Niemoeller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, confessing Christian pastors who refused to place the swastika on the altar. Oskar Schindler, member of the Nazi party, who used the injustice of slave labor as a means of saving lives from the gas chambers. Anne Frank, a Jewish teenager, who gave her life as a witness to the Holocaust.

We are confronted by injustice, by corruption, by the proverbial lion’s den. If we declare “black lives matter” perhaps we are unjustly, incorrectly, accused of being “anti-police.” If we support our undocumented neighbors, we are accused of “disregard for the law”. If we decry the ostracizing of our transgender friends, by forcing them to use bathrooms not compliant with their gender identity, we might be confronted as “supporting perversion” or, even worse, “coddling child molesters in restrooms”! If we expose the duplicity of elected officials, especially if they are from “our party” then we might be branded as “disloyal”. Throw them in the lion’s den!

And we hope God will deliver us. God delivers Daniel, for God shuts the mouths of the lions…and then Darius throws not only the other governors, but their families, into the den of beasts (perhaps he should’ve thrown himself in?!?). In these days of nefarious, openly discriminatory legislation, of bathroom bills and anti-sanctuary cities legislation, we are called to do God’s will, to proclaim, “(w)hoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” We pray God will deliver us, even in the face of the lion’s den, the fiery furnace. Perhaps, like Sophie Scholl or Anne Frank’s stories, our stories will speak to, and of, God’s ultimate deliverance. Even if we lose our lives. Is it easy? Easy is to succumb to popular discrimination, easy is to look the other way in the face of corruption. So no it’s not easy. Is it scary? Obviously! Yet God promises us infinite love: the ultimate deliverance. Though we pray, “and lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil,” we end up praying, “your kingdom come, your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.” I pray, like Daniel, we, especially myself, have the courage to face the lion’s den, trusting in God’s final deliverance. Amen