**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“God Shut Their Mouths”**

Rev. David K. Groth

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Daniel and the Lions – Daniel 6

Daniel has some gray hairs by this time. Years before, he was one of those exiled into Babylon after the sack of Jerusalem. You may recall he was able to distinguish himself by interpreting the king’s dreams, and quickly became a trusted advisor in the royal palace. But Daniel has outlived King Nebuchadnezzar who threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the fiery furnace. He has outlived King Belshazzar who saw the handwriting on the wall. Now Daniel is an older man, still highly regarded, and is serving in the courts of King Darius. All the while, he has remained faithful to God. He has refused to compromise his faith, while also serving with integrity in the king’s palace.

Some of you know how hard it can be to do that in our own day, to remain loyal to and valued at work, while also remaining faithful to God and His commands. For example, some companies have an anything goes party culture, especially when corporate travel is involved. But as a Christian, your first duty is always to God and His commands, not the company.

Daniel shows the way. Darius, the new king, decides to enact an outrageous law. It decrees that everyone pray only to the king. Failure to do so is punishable by death. Daniel has certainly faced ultimatums before, and these experiences can help while facing this new challenge. God builds spiritual muscle in us during times of testing. But as the saying goes, “Past performance does not guarantee future results.” This is a new challenge, and Daniel is faced with a new decision. Obey the king and continue to thrive as a royal advisor. Or, disobey and be executed by being tossed into a pit full of half-starved lions.

Daniel knows it is wrong to pray to anyone other than God, so Daniel already knows he’s not going to pray to Darius. What he does not know is how or even if God will deliver him.

So it is in our own lives. We know God has been faithful to us in the past, seeing us through difficult chapters. However, it can still be a challenge to trust Him with the future because the future is new and unknown territory.

Before we consider Daniel’s response, let’s first contemplate what prompted this new test. Daniel has enemies among the royal advisors. He has done nothing against them that warrants their hatred, but their hatred runs deep. They want him dead. Why? It wasn’t because he was a foreigner. He was the model citizen, loyal to the king, faithful and friendly to his countrymen. It could be they are envious of his extraordinary gifts and the king’s high favor. But I think they hate Daniel mostly because his whole orientation was toward God. His enemies know he is faithful to God. Daniel never hid this. Years before, when he was first welcomed as a young advisor to King Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel resolved to not defile himself by eating the king’s food, some of which was prohibited by Old Testament laws. So, he simply lived on vegetables and water. From the beginning, people who knew Daniel knew his ultimate allegiance was not to Babylon or to the false gods of Babylon or to the king. His ultimate allegiance was to Yahweh.

Daniel knows the gods of Babylon are not really gods; they are nothing. Daniel rightly believes only Yahweh is the true and living God; salvation comes exclusively through Him. I think this is Daniel’s unforgiveable sin. Daniel’s peers could forgive him for a failure in his duties, but they cannot forgive him for his refusal to assimilate fully into Babylonian culture and religion. Daniel is not seeking to give offense, but fidelity to God does offend, today just as much as then. If you don’t fall in line with the new values of our country, you will feel the pushback. In Daniel’s day, his faithfulness to the only true God makes him a target for hate-filled persecution. So, his colleagues in the king’s court hatch a plan to have Daniel executed.

Surely the devil was at work there in King Darius’ palace. We tend to think of Satan carrying out most of his work in bars and casinos and on pornographic web sites. This chapter reminds us Satan can also be at work in places like the Oval Office, or the Supreme Court, the halls of congress, and corporate board rooms. Men and women can dress well and be very articulate and well-mannered and polished, all the while serving unwittingly as instruments or mouthpieces of the evil one.

Because Daniel’s enemies can find no grounds for complaint against him, they resort to a deceitful scheme, using the king’s new law to entrap Daniel, and even force the king’s cooperation. They convince the king to enact this law requiring everyone pray to him. It was not the only time a head of state would be elevated to the level of deity. The Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt did it, so too the emperors of Rome, the emperors of Japan and China, the Kim family of North Korea. Some of our own politicians at least like to think themselves as God’s great gifts to us.

It must have been quite flattering for King Darius to hear his trusted advisors suggest this law, and he fell for it. But he was being used and manipulated to destroy Daniel. And it unfolds just as planned. When Daniel learned the law had been decreed, the first thing he did was go home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees and prayed to God, as he had always done.

Good habits are worth establishing and practicing, because they tell you what to do when things go wrong. Daniel did what he *always* did. He stood firm in the day of trouble because he had been practicing every day. Regular church attendance, personal time for prayer, Bible Study: these are disciplines that pay high dividends as we face the determined attacks of the devil, the world, and our own flesh. Much is gained when these become engrained habits. We know where to turn in the day of trouble.

So, to the lions Daniel went. The king was distressed, but he could not reverse his own law. He spent a sleepless night agonizing over Daniel’s fate, but Daniel’s trust in God had also left a deep impression on the King. Darius’ parting words to Daniel were, “Your God whom you serve will Himself deliver you.”

At break of day, King Darius went to check on Daniel. He had the stone removed and called down into the pit, “Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you serve been able to deliver you from the lions?” Note again the huge impression Daniel’s witness and life had on the king. In answer, Daniel said, “My God sent His angel and shut the lion’s mouths.” Surely this astonished the king and everyone else. News like this would have spread fast.

Early church theologians noticed the similarities between Daniel’s real-life experience in the lion’s den, and the arrest, trial, death and resurrection of Jesus. The similarities are striking.

* Both Daniel and Jesus had unwavering faith and trust in God.
* Both were innocent and remained faithful even in the face of persecution.
* Both were indicted with trumped up charges.
* Neither one tried to mount a defense or fight against their arrest.
* The enemies of Daniel manipulated King Darius and the enemies of Jesus manipulated Pontius Pilate.
* Neither Darius nor Pilate really wanted to give the death sentence.
* Both Daniel and Jesus were sentenced to death, and their enemies assumed that would be the end of them.
* A stone was laid across the opening of the den of lions and sealed. A stone was rolled before the tomb of Jesus and sealed.
* Both acts of execution took place in the later hours of the day.
* Both “resurrections” took place in the early morning.
* Both emerged unharmed.
* Both were vindicated, proven righteous by God.
* An angel was sent to shut the mouths of the lions to protect Daniel. Angels were also present at the empty tomb, announcing the resurrection of Jesus to the women who arrived.
* When both Daniel and Jesus were saved from death, it led many to praise and worship God.
* Both foreshadow our own coming out of the grave. We too will emerge triumphant from the grave.

That’s the beautiful promise of this passage from Daniel and of the entire book of Daniel. Be faithful amid persecution, and you will be saved. That’s the promise of all Scripture. In Matthew 24, Jesus said that shortly before His second coming, “the love of many will grow cold. But the one who stands firm to the end will be saved” (v. 12ff). Similarly, in Revelation 2, Jesus said, “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution . . . Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (v. 10).

What a witness Daniel was to his king and his countrymen, even to us today. But notice, his strong witness came through unwelcome tests and challenges.

God has some unwelcome challenges ahead for you too. You too will face dangers and trials and threatening circumstances. But He who closes the mouths of lions can intervene to keep you safe too. Trust Him. Rely on Him. Submit your will to His. You do not know what He has planned for you, but you know He has been faithful to you in the past and promises to be faithful in the future. He keeps His promises and protects those who trust in Him.

Finally, the witness of God’s people is never stronger than when it is suffering. As Daniel’s witness had profound impact on King Darius, know God can use you and your faith while suffering as a profound witness to the people around you. Amen.