

Jan. 7, 2018

Lesson 6: A Sincere Faith

Scripture: Daniel 1:8-21

Context:

For the month of January, the scripture lessons will focus on a living faith in God. This particular living faith will come from the book of Daniel, a well-known book in the Old Testament. The book of Daniel takes place at a time of exile for the Israelites. After Babylonia conquered the southern region of Judah in 586 BCE, both Jews in exile and those in the Promised Land found themselves in a cycle of foreign rule.¹ After the Babylonians came the Persians and then the Greeks by the fourth century.² As the Israelites came into contact with all these different ancient civilizations, they began to take better note of the heroes that were around them both in their homeland and those in exile.

One of the genres of literature that developed during the Persian and Hellenistic (Greek combined with other cultures) was a kind of romance where a Jewish hero would demonstrate loyalty to his or her Jews and their God during a foreign rule.³ We know them as Jonah, Esther, Daniel and then the books of the Apocrypha such as Judith, the books of the Maccabees, and Tobit. Daniel was noted as part romance and part apocalyptic with his bravery and his visions for the future.

The book itself dates to being written in the second century BCE meaning that the stories were told over time and then written down.⁴ The book is twelve chapters in total with the first six focusing on Daniel and then the last six are more prophetic oracles that are apocalyptic. A primary theme is Daniel's willingness to be in the court of Babylon/Persia and to stick to the tenants of Yahweh and helping others to remember that as well. In this first chapter we read of Daniel and his companions training in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. They are even given Babylonian names (Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) so that they will blend in and assimilate. It was often customary for those exiled in to foreign powers to become a part of the court in different ways. In this case Daniel and these young men are probably vigorous and youthful; much like young Olympians who would be trained physically and intellectually to learn the culture and then be shipped back to lead their own people.

However in Daniel's case we see the romantic genre come out as Daniel seeks to preserve certain traditions and display the wit of the Israelite people. When the young men are told to eat food so that they can become strong and to study in the manner of the Babylonians, Daniel takes initiative to approach the chief official over them and the guard to convince them to eat only vegetables and to study the way they knew how to study. So for ten days they don't eat the extra portions and fill themselves with wine. Instead they consume fresh food and water, probably pouring over books as well as the

¹ Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 516.

² Ibid. 516.

³ Ibid., 516.

⁴ Ibid., 527

others probably recovered from their rich diets.

At the end of the ten days, the men are examined along with all the other young men in the court. These four are the healthiest and have a wit about them. They become apart of the royal court that counsels the king and are “head and shoulders” over all the other dream interpreters and enchanters in the kingdom.

Because of Daniel’s steadfast nature and also his quick wit, the men are able to be true to their convictions and to even show to others the strength in their decisions. They become honored in their court and even far away from home, they display a resiliency that is life-giving. It is just the first of several stories where we see these heroes of the Jewish tradition.

Application:

I’ve often heard this passage joked upon as the perfect New Year’s resolution for those looking to get in shape. In fact I think there is a diet called the Daniel diet that takes its hints from this chapter. Maybe you’ve tried it before and it worked. Kudos to you!

In all seriousness though this passage teaches us several things about possessing a sincere faith and the spiritual practice of discipline. Daniel and these other young men are far from home. They have left everything they knew including the land, perhaps family members, and the places where they learned about the faith. As I read this passage, I couldn’t help but think about the transition that so many people make when they leave home either to go to college or straight to the work world. It is a change from the norm, a place where you have to make decisions on your own. Your parents can’t call the shots anymore and you have a new world in front of you. You must decide what is important and what you value.

For Daniel and these other young men, it was their bodies and that was tied to their faith. While we don’t know what exactly what the food looked like or if it violated certain parts of the holiness code and food, we know that it was something they thought was not good for them. It certainly wouldn’t help their bodies or help them prepare for the intellectual and physical training they were to undergo from their perspective. They made a decision to not go with the flow and to stick to being disciplined when it came to their diet and their habits. As I read I thought about all the times we as Christians have to practice the spiritual practice of discipline. When we are tempted to do something unethical, do we justify it because “everyone else” is doing it? Daniel and these young men do model that we have free will and that every day is ours to make changes and to stick to what we say we believe.

The other thing that sticks out in this passage is the resiliency of Daniel and the young men. It would have been very easy after they were renamed to completely lose their identity and change everything about themselves. Instead they participated in the life of the court, and did integrate. Yet they stuck to the things they thought were important and found ways in the system that they lived. I think that’s something Christians can all develop: resiliency and the ability to cope in the midst of change. As we live in a changing world where some days we may not feel like we can keep up, we are to remember that there are certain truths that are universal. Things like loving our neighbor, doing deeds of mercy and kindness, practicing the spiritual disciplines, participating in corporate worship, and receiving Holy Communion are all means of grace that refuel us and nourish us for the journey. Those are things that as we as

Christians are to always make time for and God will help fill in the rest.

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