

Title: "Living Faith in a Foreign Land"

Text: Daniel 1:1-21

For the past few weeks we have been exploring what "living faith" looks like when we are disheartened, disillusioned, discouraged, and down right depressed.

Overall, we are trying to grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of God is,
-well, we are in the "deep" part at the moment, asking:
-Is God's love deep enough to meet us in the depths of our lowest moments in life?

And we have seen through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel that God was indeed with His people in the worst moment of their national life: the Babylonian exile.
-Their nation had been destroyed, their cities and towns demolished, the Temple in Jerusalem defiled and destroyed.
-And as a people, they had been carted off into exile to live among the very people who had devastated them.

It was a horrible time for them, much like what the Syrian refugees are experiencing right now in our day.
-But God was right there with them through it all.
-He was there to speak to them through His prophets.
-He was there to offer them a future and hope.
-He was there giving instructions about how to live right there in that foreign culture.
-And he was there being present to them as a sanctuary,
-being Himself a place of refuge and safety for them.

Today I'd like us to see what this life of experiencing God's presence in exile actually looked like.
-Turn with me to the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament, Chapter 1.
-Daniel was one of those who had been carted off into exile,
-and this week and next week we will get a little glimpse into what that life looked like.
-Listen now to Daniel, chapter 1.

So here we get a glimpse into what life looked like for four young Hebrew men,
-who had been taken by the Babylonians and carted off into exile.

Their Hebrew names were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

-But one of the first things that happens to them in exile, is that the government of Babylon assigns them new names.

-Daniel will now be called Belteshazzar.

-And Hananiah, Mishael, and Asariah will now be called, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

And with that changing of their names, the government has begun the process of seeking to assimilate them into the culture of Babylon.

They are meant to leave their old identity behind, their culture and language.

-They now need to begin to speak Aramaic.

-It means leaving their old stories of the Bible behind,

-and learning to appreciate the classical literature of the Sumerians and Akkadians,

-the forefathers of the Babylonians.

-It means leaving their old religion behind, and turning from the worship of YHWH, to the worship of Marduk, Aku, Nabu, and the many gods of Babylon.

At least, that is the intention of the Babylonians.

-They want to assimilate these Jews into their country and culture so that they will learn to talk like we talk,

-dress like we dress, think like we think,

-eat the foods that we like to eat,

-celebrate the festivals that we celebrate,

-and become good citizens of Babylon.

And the question for Daniel, and his three friends, and for all of the Jews taken off into exile, is:

-how much are we able to cooperate with that program,

-and how much must we resist?

That's actually the question God's people have to ask

themselves in every generation and in every culture in which we find ourselves living.

It's the question you and I are subconsciously making decisions about every day.

- How much of the culture around us are we able to participate in as faithful Christians,
- and how much of it do we need to resist?

And we're not always conscious of this question that is with us every day,

- but, in fact, we are making decisions every day that reveal our values.
- We are saying "Yes" to certain things, and "No" to other things.
- We are spending our time and money on certain priorities, and not spending our time and money on what many other people think are priorities.

Well, in exile, Daniel and his friends were being systematically indoctrinated in a program meant to change their priorities and values, and "Babylonianize" them.

And these four young men were specifically chosen for this program because they were seen to have great potential.

- They were handsome, physically fit, and quite bright.
- The text says they showed aptitude for every kind of learning, were well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the King's palace.

And so they were put on the fast track for advancement,

- and placed in a three year training program for government service.
- All they had to do was cooperate, and learn their lessons, and show that those aptitude tests had been right,
- and they would have a great life in Babylon.

They would have high paying jobs in government, enjoy the good life of the most powerful empire on earth at the time.

So what were these young men to do?

1. Option One is to go with the flow.
 - Give up their old culture and their old faith and learn to live as successful Babylonians in the new culture.
2. Option Two is to go against the flow.
 - Reject the Babylonian life and faith and culture.
 - Reject the offer of the 3 year training program.
 - Refuse to serve the King of Babylon and take whatever consequences such disobedience might incur.
3. Option Three is to learn to swim in the stream,
 - while avoiding the rocks, being mindful of the current,
 - and asking for grace and wisdom all along the way.

Daniel and his friends set about to try and live out Option #3.

- There were other Jews who chose Option 1 in Exile.
 - They gave up their faith and culture and gave themselves to being Babylonians.
- And there were other Jews who chose Option 2, and sought to stay as far away from all Babylonians and Babylonian culture as possible while in exile.

God's people in every age have to make such choices about how they are going to live in this world.

But in this case, Daniel and his friends step out into Option 3.

- They are given the opportunity to become men of influence in government of Babylon,
 - and they accept the invitation to be part of this 3 year training program.

However, they do not simply "go with the flow" of the program.

- No. They start right from the beginning to learn to "swim" within the stream of this program,
 - but in such a way that they stay faithful to God, faithful to who they are as God's people living in a foreign land.

And to do this, they have to pick and choose their battles.

- They have to make compromises in some areas, while standing firm in other areas.
- And they have to figure out which areas are which.

When it comes to having their names changed, they decide that is not an issue they are going to make an issue of.

-Even though, each one of their name changes involves bearing the name of a Babylonian god.

Daniel's name in Hebrew means, "God is my judge."

-But the name Belteshazzar which he was given in Babylon means "Bel, protect his life."

-Bel was one of the gods of Babylon.

Hananiah's name in Hebrew meant "The Lord shows grace."

-But his Babylonian name, Shadrach, means "By the command of Achu," a Babylonian god.

Each of their name changes involved that kind of a shift in allegiance.

So it was an issue for them to decide whether to accept or reject these new names.

-We are not told how they made the decision, but they seem to have decided that the Babylonians could call them whatever they wanted,

-it didn't change their identity, nor would it change their allegiance.

-So they let the names stand.

However, it was a different story when it came to their diets, and what they would take into their bodies.

-Babylonian food and wine from the King's own kitchens was what was put before them every day.

-And most people would have thought they had died and gone to heaven to be fed from the king's own kitchen.

But a portion of that food and the wine had routinely been offered in worship to Babylonian gods,

-and the meats were often from animals considered unclean by the law of God,

-and none of it was cooked in kosher ways.

So Daniel, and we may assume his other three friends, resolve not to defile themselves with the royal food and wine.

-They decide this is an issue they will make an issue of.

But the question they faced, and all of us face when push comes to shove, is:

-how will they go about making an issue of this issue?

Will they go on a hunger strike?

-Will they be belligerent and simply refuse to eat anything set before them?

-Will they make themselves obnoxious and get kicked out of the program?

What are they supposed to do in order to be faithful to God, and faithful to who they are,

-and yet also be faithful as citizens of this new country in which they have the opportunity to be men of influence.

It's never an easy path to figure out.

-What they do, is they go to the chief official who is in charge of their program,

-and by the way, a man who verse 9 tells us was already favorably disposed towards them.

So they pick a man who has the authority to act on their behalf, and who has demonstrated a willingness to act on their behalf;

-and they go to him.

And they share the dilemma they have in regard to the food being served.

-They also listen attentively to the dilemma that the chief official has in regard to their feeding program.

-He is concerned that if they deviate from the nutritional regimen that is part of the training,

-that they will end up under-nourished, and look physically worse than the other recruits.

-And his head and job will be on the line.

So Daniel and his friends take this into consideration, and propose an experiment.

"Let's try having you give us a vegetarian diet for 10 days, with only water to drink,

-and then see what we look like at the end of the 10 day period.

-Based on our appearance, you can then make whatever decision about our diet seems best to you.”

This idea was acceptable to the chief official, and so on a trial basis, he took away the rich royal food and wine, -and served them veggies and water.

And lo and behold, at the end of the 10 day trial, they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the other young men in the program.

So the chief official let them work with the kitchen staff to make up their own nutritional program.
-One in keeping with their faith, values, and priorities.

Now, on a human level, what we have been calling this year a 2 dimensional level,
-Daniel and his friends are there in Babylon on their own, trying to figure out how to live and navigate a new life in a new and confusing foreign land.

And we don't see God showing up here with a prophet to tell them exactly what to do in every situation.
-In fact, we don't see God showing up in any overt kind of way at all.

So how was God present with them?
-How was God being a sanctuary for them?
-How was God teaching them how to live in the foreign land?

Well, who was it who opened this door of opportunity for them to become men of influence in Babylon's own government?
-Who was it who caused these young Jewish men to find special favor with the chief official in charge of the program?
-Who was it who enabled these young men to graduate at the head of their class,
-being found to be ten times better than all of the other candidates for government service at the end of the program.

These were foreign students who started the program not knowing the Babylonian language or culture at all.

-How did they end up graduating as valedictorians?

Well we are told in verses 9 and 17 that it was God who brought all this about.

-And we are told that God also enabled Daniel in particular to have visions and dreams,
-and to be able to interpret the visions and dreams of others.

What Daniel saw in those visions at this early stage in his life we are not told.

-But we do know that God was making himself known to Daniel and his friends in multiple kinds of ways all along.

He was giving them wisdom, and insight, and discretion.

He was enabling them to find favor with the people around them, even with the King himself.

He was being a sanctuary for them, a place of safety and rest in a foreign land.

God was with them.

-And they were learning to swim within that foreign culture in a way that was both faithful to God, faithful to who they were as God's people,

-and at the same time be good citizens of the country in which they lived.

Next week we will see what happens when faithfulness to God would mean trouble with the culture in which they lived.

-But for today, let's pray and ask God to guide us as we continue to swim in this 21st century American culture,
-trying to find a way every day to be faithful.