Dare to Stand

Daniel 6:1-24
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The strange thing about this story is that Daniel isn't really the man character; it's the emperor Darius. The narrator never takes us inside the lion's den; never lets us experience the darkness and the terror from Daniel's perspective. Instead, we are told of the fasting and anguish of the king.

Who is Daniel then?

The Book of Daniel is split into two sections. The first half of the book records a series of stories about faithful Jews working the court of foreign, imperial rulers, first the Babylonians and then the Persians. The second half is apocalyptic literature about the rise and fall of great empires and God's role in the processes of history.

As I said last week, when we discussed the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the Fiery Furnace, this book was not written when the events it narrates occurred, but centuries later in a different time and context. The author, then, is writing down traditional folk tales as a means of encouraging people in their current crisis.

The book was written in the second century Before the Common Era around the time when the Jews revolted under the Maccabees. Antiochus IV Epiphanes was the Seleucid emperor who ruled ancient Palestine. Antiochus believed himself to be a physical incarnation of divinity, and he wanted his subject people to worship him.

For the author of the Book of Daniel, Antiochus is the personification of evil, a demonic power. In the New Testament, Antiochus is the prototype for the prophesied anti-Christ.

There's good reason for Antiochus to be viewed this way. Bible scholar David M. Carr records the oppressive actions Antiochus took against the Jews:

> He . . . issued a decree forbidding observance of Jewish laws in Jerusalem and surrounding towns. Jews were forced to offer sacrifice to foreign gods, Torah scrolls were burned, mothers who had allowed their babies to be circumcised were killed with their children. Anyone with a copy of a Torah scroll was executed, and leading citizens were required, on pain of death, to eat pork in public, thus openly disobeying the Torah's commands.

This reign of terror led to rebellion and ultimately to the independence of the Jewish state.

This is the context for the writing of the Book of Daniel, though it is set centuries before during the Jewish exile in Babylon, another time when Jews were living under foreign

occupation and had to learn how to live and survive with integrity while enduring oppression. As one commentator wrote, this book exhorts people of faith to "resist and pray and hold fast."

Daniel, then, is a legendary figure. There's no independent historical record of a Jewish Daniel as a prominent figure in the courts of the Babylonians and Persians. In fact, the only Daniel we find mentioned in the independent historical record appears in Ugaritic literature as a righteous king of the 14th century Before the Common Era.

The Book of Daniel inaccurately narrates the timeline of rulers and suggests that Daniel remained a high official over multiple rulers in different empires stretching so many decades that his lifespan stretches credulity.

We can confidently say we are in the realm of folk tale and legend. Who then is Daniel, within this legend?

At the beginning of the Book of Daniel, Daniel, Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego are promising young Jews whom the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar takes into court service. Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Judea and carried away the elite as exiles. The first chapter of Daniel tells us that Nebuchadnezzar ordered his chief eunuch 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" and teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans so that they might serve the king.

It was common in the ancient world to have eunuchs in the service of the royal court. It was also common to make eunuchs of the conquered people and force them to serve their conqueror.

There are layers of horror in this story that we don't encounter in the Sunday school version. These four young men were likely emasculated. They, in many ways, were slaves. One wonders if there is sexual violence involved as well, especially the way the story tells us that the king wanted attractive young eunuchs.

Despite the horror and injustice, these young men thrive in the foreign court. That's especially difficult under the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar has become something of an archetype for the mad tyrant. He consistently makes bad and unjust decisions. His anger is always roiling just below the surface and explodes in violence. In one story, he goes mad and lives like a wild animal in the wilderness for a time.

Nebuchadnezzar is a cautionary tale of his own.

Daniel survives and thrives in this frightening setting and through the reigns of other emperors of varying degrees of sanity, rationality, and morality.

The Persian Emperor Darius comes off pretty good, especially in comparison to Nebuchadnezzar. The Hebrew Bible generally has a good view of the Persian kings. We'll encounter another one in a couple of weeks when we look at the story of Esther. The Persians emperors ended the exile and allowed the Jewish leaders to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and the Temple. So the Bible often views them as the agents of God. The Persian Emperor Cyrus is even called Messiah at one point.

The evil people here are the other court leaders, the bureaucrats. This theme will continue in the Book of Esther.

But as one commentary I read stated, “The court of Darius is a kangaroo court. . . Daniel was innocent; yet Persian law threw him to the lions quite legally and properly.” This story reminds us that even an emphasis upon law and order can itself be unjust.

Daniel, then, has become a symbol of civil disobedience. Even Gandhi studied and wrote about Daniel as he formulated his methods that later influenced the American Civil Rights Movement and most modern efforts to expand human rights.

Daniel may be a legend, but he has had a lasting impact upon our world.

A favourite book in my library is entitled *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible*. It’s a series of literary essays on the Hebrew Scriptures. The essay on Daniel was written by the novelist Lynne Sharon Schwartz. It’s a rich essay full of insights, and I’ll only scratch the surface of it today.

She writes about how as a child she read the stories of Daniel in a children’s book and was fascinated by them. These children’s stories, she says, “taught two supreme things.” And those lessons were:

> That freedom is a quality of the inner spirit and not of the body’s circumstances, and that events move purposefully—if mysteriously—toward just and meaningful conclusions.

These are the simple morals of the stories. But, as I’ve pointed out the last few weeks, these rich ancient stories never stay put for the simple moral conclusions. Schwartz writes, “Many of us who have grown to maturity amid the brutalities of the twentieth century find these beliefs impossible to sustain.”

We all want to believe that we would be people of integrity in the most dangerous of circumstances. We all want to believe that life works out to just conclusions. But we also know how unlikely both are.

At General Synod one of the keynote address was by Glennon Doyle, who is a popular author and blogger, particularly among those seeking Christian parenting advice. After the murders at Mother Emmanuel she was reading a book to her children about Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement. One of her children asked, “Mommy, if we had lived then, would we have marched with them?” Glennon answered, “Of course honey.” Then her other child said, “No we wouldn’t have. We wouldn’t have marched then, because we aren’t marching now.”

One problem with reading this story is that we want to cast ourselves as Daniel, right? But maybe we aren’t Daniel. Maybe we are one of the other characters in the story. This is often a problem in biblical interpretation. We like to think we would be the Good Samaritan stopping to help the injured person, when Jesus really wants us to consider what it is like to be the person beaten up and lying on the side of the road who receives help from a person who disgusts him.

Maybe the narrator stays with Darius instead of Daniel in order to make us think of the ways we are Darius. The ways we are the functionaries within an unjust system.

For example, I'm sure some members of the Omaha tribe think of us as the foreign imperial power.

And one reason it's often difficult to read the writing of Ta Nehisi Coates is that he reminds us white people of the continuing role we play in the oppression of African Americans.

There's a 19th century children's hymn called "Dare to Be a Daniel." The chorus goes:

Dare to be a Daniel!
Dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm!
Dare to make it known!

But maybe what we should dare is to imagine what life is like for actual Daniels who must, as Lynne Sharon Schwartz writes, "go into a dark, savage place" and survive.

Maybe we should dare to imagine how we make that injustice possible.