

Bottom Line

Daniel 6:16-24

Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, ‘May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!’ A stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, so that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no food was brought to him, and sleep fled from him.

Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, ‘O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?’ Daniel then said to the king, ‘O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong.’ Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. The king gave a command, and those who had accused Daniel were brought and thrown into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. Before they reached the bottom of the den the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces.

Two years ago in November the city of Silverton, just to our South, did an unlikely thing. They elected the nation’s only transgendered mayor, Stu Rasmussen. I had lunch with him this week at the Silver Creek Coffee shop in down town Silverton. Stu is fascinating. He’s one of those people whose life, I think, is a little too full to fit within the lines the world would draw around him.

He was born in Silverton in 1948 and has lived there all his life. He owns the only movie theater in town at the corner of Water and Oak. He’s also been the cable guy and is also a computer programmer who has worked for Intel and is now a self contractor. He’s served on the school board, and served four terms on the city council. In many

ways he is to epitome of this conservative, small town- except for the fact that he feels more comfortable in heels than boots.

I have to admit I was a little bit surprised when I met him. I guess I expected him to be a kind of “in your face” kind of guy. But nothing could be further from the truth. I found Stu to be quiet, thoughtful- serious, even. I certainly didn’t get the sense that he was playing some kind of game or trying to shock me or anyone else. And his own story bears this out.

His transformation came bit by bit. First he just started getting his nails professionally done. Then, he started painting them- but only in very subtle shades. Then, and owning the movie theater was such a help, he started promoting movies by dressing up as the characters- always women. And at some point he realized this wasn’t just a passing interest- this was who he was. And when he finally made the decision to go public with this, there certainly was a response in the town, but mostly, people just rolled with it.

My guess is folks felt what I did. Stu isn’t trying to do something wild and crazy- his life, the person he is, it just doesn’t fit neatly within the lines the rest of us have drawn for him, and rather than hide like most of us do, he’s decided, over time, to live in the light.

Lines. Boundaries. Lines are what the Book of Daniel are all about. Except with Daniel it’s not so much about crossing lines as it is drawing lines in the sand- lines that are NOT to be crossed.

And you can understand it, really. Although Daniel appears to be written during the Babylonian exile we've been talking about, it's widely agreed that it was written much later, about four hundred years later, during one of the darkest times for the Jewish people.

Let me tell you how we get there. In the third century Alexander the Great took his mighty army and conquered all of the known world at that time- extending the Greek culture and language all the way from Europe to India. But Alexander's flame burned a little too brightly- he only lived to the age of 33. In his absence the kingdom collapsed into three sections- the Ptolemaic kingdom in Egypt, the Seleucid kingdom in the Middle East, and the Antigonid kingdom in Greece and the north. And in the second century Jerusalem went from being part of the Ptolemaic kingdom to being taken over by Antioches Epiphenes IV, the ruler of the Seleucids. And this was significant, because while the Ptolemies pretty much let the Jews alone, Antioches had other ideas. He wanted to turn Jerusalem into an ideal Greek polis, or city- and he wasn't nice about it. He was so nasty, in the book of Maccabees we learn that he desecrates the rebuilt Jewish temple, putting an altar to Zeus in the Holy of Holies and actually sacrificing a pig- a pig, the most unclean of animals. It was truly unthinkable.

This situation is what led to Hanukkah- the Jews were so fed up they led an insurgency against Antioches and for a time actually captured the temple and rededicated it. It reminds me of something Melis told me about last week. She was at a meeting, and one of their Israeli controllers was giving one of her bosses a hard time. He yelled across the room- "You missed my Hanukkah party! Why didn't you come?" And the woman seemed surprised and said she didn't know she was invited. And guy raised his eye

brows and his hands and yelled, “EVERYONE’S invited!” And he laughed and said, let me tell you all you need to know about pretty much every Jewish holiday. “Someone tried to kill us. We killed them instead. EVERYBODY drink!”

Well this tense atmosphere is when scholars believed Daniel was written. It was written in the midst of this time when the Jews were feeling pushed and pushed and pushed by Antioches and his Greek ways that they aren’t in a mood to live and let live- they are in a mood to lay down boundaries, to draw a line in the sand and say, “This far- NO further!”

And so it’s no wonder one of the running themes in the Book of Daniel are people finding their faith tested, but rather than caving in- they hold fast. And they are invariably punished for it, but they continue to hold fast, and in the end, even in the hardest of places they wind up surviving.

In Chapter 3 we get Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Three MORE fantastic name possibilities for the new baby, yes? (I mean they aren’t as good as Djabran Fluctus, but they’re not bad. ☺) And Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego are in Nebuchadnezzar’s court. And Nebuchadnezzar sets up this huge golden statue- and he says everyone is to bow before it and worship it. Anyone worshipping anything else is to be put to death. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego- this is simply a line they will not cross. They already accept so many facets of the culture around them- they’ve even accepted Babylonian names- their Hebrew names are Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. But worship a statue instead of God? It’s simply a line they will not cross.

And Nebuchadnezzar is so hacked at this he has the furnace cranked up 7 times hotter than normal. It's so hot the flames swallow up even the poor guards pushing the three in there. But thrown into that fiery furnace they were. And of course everyone's watching like people who slow down around an accident. But instead of hearing screams of agony- they hear nothing. And instead of only seeing three figures writhing in torture- they actually see four people walking around. And finally, they throw the door open and the three come out like they're emerging from a sauna all nice and refreshed.

And it's the same with the famous story of Daniel and the lion's den. Like the story of Joseph in Genesis, Daniel has made himself quite popular in the court because of his ability to interpret dreams and his ability to literally read the handwriting on the wall. So he was given more and more power and trust- so much so that the other advisors in the realm, men who had grown up all their lives there, were jealous of this outsider who seemed to live such a charmed life. And then, when Darius decided to appoint Daniel in charge of the whole kingdom as a kind of second in command- well this was too much.

And so these other leaders went to the king, in this case a man named Darius, and they said that people weren't respecting Darius like they should. And in order to fix this problem he should make a decree that for one month everyone in the kingdom should have to worship and bow down to him alone. And anyone praying to any other god or deity should be put to death. Well, this actually sounded like a pretty good idea to Darius. I mean if people were getting unruly that wasn't good for anybody. And besides, it was only a month. And so Darius makes this law.

Of course the other leaders were only interested putting Daniel between a rock and a hard place. If he followed the law, then he'd be turning his back on his God. And if he prayed to his God- well then they could finally be rid of him. And, like Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego, Daniel wasn't about to stop praying to his God. This was very much a line in the sand for him. And it was written that even after the law passed Daniel did exactly as he had always done- he would go into his upper room in his house and pray three times a day every day just as he had his entire life. And of course the leaders wait until they can catch him in the act, and when they do they bring him before the king for sentencing. And even though Darius isn't happy about it- the law is the law. And he consigns Daniel to spend the night with the lions- the ancient version of sleeping with the fishes.

And so Daniel is thrown into the lion's den with a stone rolled over the mouth of the cave. And in the morning Darius and the others rush to open the cave, Darius hoping against hope that Daniel might have survived. And of course Daniel doesn't merely survive, but it seems that an angel visited him shutting the mouths of the lions and giving him a perfect night's sleep. And in one of those savage reversals the ancients so enjoyed the king had the leaders who cooked up this scheme and even their families thrown in where, the text reads, the lions overpowered them and crushed their bones.

Time and time again the Book of Daniel is about drawing lines in the sand- lines that are not to be crossed. The book is about a people who just feel so pushed and shoved that they finally have to say, "Enough is enough!"

And do you know- in spite of all the line crossing that Stu has done throughout his life, the part of his story that is most touching, most powerful to me is actually one about line drawing, and standing up for what you believe in.

See, after Stu was elected by a thin majority there was a church group led by Fred Phelps protesting in Portland. You might have heard of Phelps- he leads a “church” in Kansas, the one that sent a bus load of people to hold up awful signs and yell slurs at the Matthew Shepherd funeral. Well, the group happened to be in Portland protesting another funeral, the funeral of one of our Navy Seals, Marc Lee. Believe it or not Phelps shows up to this funerals and other military funerals in order to hold up signs reading “Dead soldiers equals God’s judgment”, saying these deaths are actually God’s punishment on America for not being a more Christian nation.

Well after hearing about the election, Phelps’ crew couldn’t help but head down to Silverton and make their presence known. So they scribbled on some signs and started marching up and down one side of Water street downtown. As they do at most of their protests they lay down American flags to trample and desecrate, and then they started in with the slurs and held up signs reading: “God hates Silverton”; and “God hates your mayor” and some I don’t even want to repeat.

And then. Do you know what happened? Do you know what happened? It started off as just a few people at first, but folks from Silverton started to gather on the other side of the street. And as word started to get around, more and more started to come. And folks started making their own signs- some reading “God loves Stu” and “My love is bigger than your hate”. And in just a few hours nearly the whole town turned out- hundreds and hundreds of people. People who voted against Stu turned out. And my

favorite part- big, burly men started showing up in ill fitting dresses, and women started turning up in plaid shirts and work boots. One man I heard interviewed said it was definitely his first time in a dress. I guess it just seemed like the right thing to do.

The people of Silverton drew a line in the sand that November day. They weren't all absolutely thrilled about Stu being mayor. A lot of them hadn't even voted for him. But when this group of hate filled people showed up on their doorstep- they drew a line in the sand. Hate may get that far- but it would get no further.

A reporter for the Oregonian was standing by when a young woman named Leslie Brighten jogged by with the running stroller and little one inside. She stopped in front of Phelps's daughter who was holding up a sign reading "God hates fags". Victoria said, "I'm a Christian. This has to be a joke, right?" The young Phelps was only too happy to set her straight. The reporter said Brighten took all this in, thought about it, and then shook her head. "Uh, uh," she said. "I've read the Bible cover to cover. Love beats hate. Bottom line."

Do you know the most interesting thing about meeting Stu was for me? It was how common it was. We were sitting at a large table in the middle of the place and there must have been at least five people who came over and greeted Stu and asked him a question about this or that. These people didn't have the nation's first transgendered mayor- they have Stu Rasmussen, home town boy, who just doesn't exactly fit within the lines the way some others do.

Beloved, Mesach, Shadrach, and Abednego are right. Daniel is right. There are times to draw lines. There are times to say “This far, no further!” There are times to draw lines- but let’s draw them in pencil, shall we? For if there is anything we learn from the Book of Daniel it is that God is God- and we are not. **Amen.**