

The Story Series

Week 18: Daniel

Rev. Craig M. Sturm Trinity Lutheran Church, Sherman Texas

Only four weeks remain in our journey together through the Old Testament *Story*. What a journey this has been! We have reached the point in *The Story* where God's people have been cast out of the Promised Land and are exiled to a place called Babylon. Although God gave his people chance after chance to be his faithful representatives in the world, they chose instead to set their own agenda. They chose to live by the ways of the world rather than by the ways of God.

So here's the question I want you to ponder today: Are you just fitting in, or are you following Him?

(move towards the congregation and sit down in one of the pews).

The desire to fit in with the world is so tempting, is it not? Sometimes we don't always want to do what God has called us to do. We would just rather do our own thing. Set our own agenda. Go with the flow. Fit in with the crowd.

You're probably asking yourself right now, "Why is pastor sitting in the pews? Why isn't he behind the pulpit where he is supposed to be?"

Ask yourself: Are you just fitting in, or do you want to follow Him? In my own personal journey, if I had chosen to just fit in, I would be sitting here, in the pew, rather than following God's will for my life and standing behind the pulpit. True, not everyone is called to be a pastor, but that was God's will for my life. The life plan I had set for myself was to be like everyone else, but God had another plan for my life. I was forced to ask myself: "Do I want to fit in, or do I want to follow Him?"

I am sitting down here today to help you recognize that when we choose to just fit in with the world, we – the people of God – lose our voice, we lose our influence, we lose our true identity. The book of 1 Peter tells us that "you are the ones chosen by God, chosen to be God's representatives out in the world, to do God's work and to speak out for God, to tell others of the night-and-day difference God has made in your life. Once I was a nobody," Peter writes, "but now because of God's grace, I am somebody."

How long would you like me to continue my message this way, with an empty pulpit? Do you want me to fit in, or do you want me to follow Him? This is not the way it's supposed to be, is it? This is not God's will for my life, so I will return. *(return to pulpit)*

I want you to consider the same question about your life this morning: Are you just fitting in, or are you following Him? Are you living out the ways of God in your daily life, or are you allowing the ways of the world to rule your heart?

Now don't misunderstand what I am saying. I'm not saying that all of you should be up here preaching the sermon. This is God's call on *my* life, to be an ordained minister. But what I *am* saying is that your life is a sermon. Your life and the way you live it is a message to other people.

Today in *The Story* we meet some individuals who are faced with this very question: Will I fit in, or will I follow Him? We meet a young man named Daniel. Daniel was one of the Jews who was captured in Jerusalem and exiled to Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar, who was king of Babylon, took notice of Daniel and three of his friends and desired to train them as court officials in his kingdom.

I have to share something funny with you. Someone told me that she is reading the Old Testament *Story* as we go through this series, but she has great difficulty pronouncing names like Nebuchadnezzar and Ashpenaz and Belteshazzar, and so she has just renamed them Bob, Moe and Larry. "Is that OK?" she asked. I told her, "As long as you can keep the cast of characters straight, more power to ya!"

So *The Story* says that King "Bob" took notice of "Moe, Larry and Curly" and invited them to be trained in the royal ways of the Babylonian empire. Then, after three years, they would enter into the king's service. As a little extra enticement, the young men were told that they would be invited to daily dine at the king's table with all of the delicious delicacies of food and wine. We're talking shrimp cocktail, lobster, filet minion, garlic mashed potatoes, freshly baked rolls with *real* butter. And you could wash it down with a fine merlot, and the best chocolate cake you've ever eaten. This is what was offered to them. It was King Nebuchadnezzar's brilliant attempt to convert them from the Jewish faith to the ways of the worldly Babylonian empire. He even went so far as to give them Babylonian names, which instantly removed their Jewish identity.

King Nebuchadnezzar was ruthless, and Daniel and his three friends had a choice to make. Would they remain true to Almighty God, or would they succumb to the ways of the worldly Babylonian empire? Would they choose to fit in, or would they follow Him?

When you think about it, with the position that they are in, to remain true to their Jewish identity and to the one, true God seemed rather pointless. They were a gazillion miles away from their Jewish homeland. Their holy city of Jerusalem was totally destroyed. The God who had claimed them had allowed punishment and shame to fall upon them. I'm sure they asked themselves, "Is there anything left of our Jewish faith? Is it even worth it? Is the God of our ancestors even with us anymore? Is there a future waiting for us if we *do* continue to put our hope and faith in Almighty God?"

But then they remembered the promise proclaimed by the prophets sent by God: "Return to God, and he will return to you." Yes, God seemed absent right now, but God had promised all along to honor a heart that was fully devoted to him. And so this is what Daniel and his friends did. They very politely enrolled in the training program, but asked to

be provided with a different menu – food that would not go against their Jewish dietary laws.

Uh-oh. That request was a clear, defiant sign that if they were forced to choose, they would choose to serve Yahweh, King of the Universe, over King Nebuchadnezzar. The king's attendant tried to belittle them saying that if they only ate vegetables and water, they would become pale and thin and would bring disgrace upon the king. They would need their strength for their training, and so eat up!

Daniel, being the wise man that he was, struck a deal. Allow us to eat what we so choose for ten days, Daniel requested, and at the end of that period, see how we compare to the other trainees. Well, of course, Almighty God honored Daniel and his friend's devotion to him and made them healthier and stronger than all of the other young men eating the king's delicacies. Score 1 for God!

Surprisingly, this made the king sit up and take notice of Daniel's God. Take note: four young men who remained faithful to the one, true God, were drawing the heart of King Nebuchadnezzar closer to God. This was the game plan of God all along, remember? That God's faithful people living out the ways of God in their daily life would draw the attention of the other nations, and ultimately bring them into relationship with God the Father. God's game plan to save the world was still in play.

A number of other events – such as Daniel interpreting dreams and then reading the writing on the wall (literally!) – kept grabbing the attention of the Babylonians. They wanted to know more about Daniel's God who had blessed him with so much authority and wisdom. This made the king feel threatened and so he built a massive, solid gold statue in his likeness – not 10, 11, or 12 feet high, but **90** feet tall! Do you think he felt a tad threatened?

The king declared that anyone who did not bow down to his statue would be thrown into the fiery furnace. At the sound of the trumpet, the entire empire genuflected and worshipped the golden statue. Everyone, that is, except for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who refused to bow down. They refused to give their allegiance to anyone but to the Lord God Almighty, despite the death sentence awaiting them.

Well, the king goes into this tyrannical rage, orders the furnace to be stoked 7 times hotter than normal, and then he throws those three rascals into the fiery furnace. When the king looked into the furnace, he couldn't believe his eyes! Not only were the men not being burned alive, but he now saw *four* men inside the furnace dancing around, completely unharmed.

Since we have already covered most of the Old Testament *Story*, we should instantly recognize that mystery fella in the furnace. Think for a moment. In the Garden of Eden, as Adam and Eve are walking around, someone else is there with them. Who is it? That's right, God himself, walking in the Garden with Adam and Eve. Then, if you recall, when God

instructs Abraham to pack up his thing because he is about to take a long trip, Abraham asks, "Where are we going? How will I know the way?" God reassures him by saying, "I will go with you and show you the way." God walks beside Abraham and his family as they journey to the land of Canaan.

And don't you also remember that when the Israelites find themselves wandering through the wilderness, God is right there among his people by means of the Ark of the Covenant? Time and time again, God is where? Not way up in the heavens somewhere, but walking alongside his faithful people – watching over them, providing their daily bread, protecting them in their time of need.

So there's really no question about it. That fourth character that appears in the fiery furnace is none other than God himself, coming to the aid of his godly people, protecting them in their time of need. God is honoring their choice to follow Him rather than to fit in with the ways of the world. "Return to me," God says, "and I will return to you."

Ask yourself: How strong is your faith when it comes under fire? In difficult times, do you question God's love for you? Do you wonder if God will really come through like God has promised to do? Do you choose to be faithful to him, or do you just fit in? When the crowd is all going *this* way, can you take the heat of their ridicule and declare, "I choose to go this way. I choose to live by the ways of God and not by the ways of the world." When the crowd is using bad language, or watching a raunchy movie, or uttering racist comments, or perhaps just have become complacent in their Christian faith, do you go along with them? Do you fit in, or do you follow Him?

Or I could ask the question from the flip side: Do you **turn** to God when you are discouraged, sick, when your trials are great, when you are in the fiery furnace, so to speak? Do you turn to God in those moments? And can you in those moments, through the eyes of faith, sense the presence of God with you in the midst of your ordeal? God is there. That's the message of *The Story*. God is there. To those who put their hope and trust in the Lord, God will deliver them.

I remember leading an informal worship service at a nursing home. At the service, there was a woman in a wheelchair sitting about five feet in front of me, not really paying any attention to anything I was saying or doing. She would talk loudly to the man sitting next to her. She would wave enthusiastically to anyone new who would enter the room – all of this while I was trying to lead the service. But then, when the tune of "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" played from the piano, that woman stopped talking. She sat up straight in her wheelchair, and belted out every word of that hymn from memory with one of the sweetest voices I have ever heard. "Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me." In that woman's 80-something years of life, even with dementia ravaging her brain, it was the one thing that woman still knew to be true. The Lord is faithful. No matter how hot the fires of life rage, God is there. Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

Do we have that kind of faith? That no matter what the circumstance, no matter what our challenges might be, we can keep singing, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" and know that it is true. Just take a look around and you will see God at work in so many ways. God is with us. And ask yourself: "Do others see my faith at work in daily life?" When others watch you in action, can they recognize you as a person of faith, a believer in Jesus Christ?

The gospel is not just spread by proclamation, but also by demonstration. How are you demonstrating the faith in your daily life? Are you just fitting in, or are you serving Him? Ponder that question this week. As we step into this new week, let us commit to be more like Daniel, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Courageous. Committed. Not content to just fit in, but desiring to love and serve the Lord, bearing witness to our faith in daily life.

Wherever this new week takes us, let's make a commitment: I won't just fit in, but I will serve Him.

Let it be so, in your life and in mine. Amen.