

## Lamb King (18Nov18) Daniel 6

This is kind of a funny story.

I mean, not funny haha. I especially hope you don't chuckle too much at the punishing, retributive part when those who have maligned Daniel suffer their own conniving scheme as, along with spouses and children, they are hurled into the lions' pit and gobbled up—torn to shreds—before they hit the ground. Not a light-hearted bit of the story, that.

Though before you take it too seriously and once again cast aspersions at the violence of the Bible (while disregarding the violence in our stories now or the ways the Bible isn't supposed to be a rosy picture but bears the hardness of real life), still that seriousness aside, it may be helpful to think of this like an old Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner cartoon.



This is a funny story because it's meant to be outrageous. Wile E. Coyote falls off a cliff, gets smashed by an anvil, has the stick of dynamite blow up in his face, and then the story continues along. Most of us don't finish that cartoon feeling TOO bad for Wile E. Coyote. If you can accept the cartoon without lamenting the injury too greatly, then let me explain why I make such an association with this Bible reading.

Some of the setting is real. Within the historical flow of the narrative, at this point many leaders and officials and muckety-mucks had been hauled away from the Holy Land into exile in Babylon. They'd been living there for almost fifty years under pressures of the Empire, but not as

captives in the way we'd think of a jail or a prisoner of war camp or anything, but in houses and with careers. raising families, simply not in the place they'd call home, where their temple was and had been destroyed.

They were trying to figure out life, and trying to figure out what to make of God, almost to the degree of wondering if God could still exist or matter at all if God's home had been destroyed. Maybe there's a hint of that conundrum as Daniel is insistent on prayer, and it's toward Jerusalem, a distant devotion.

So some of the setting and conundrum are real, but there's also some stuff here just for the sake of a good story, not least that the attackers have things flip on them and the dynamite blows up in their faces in good Wile E. Coyote fashion.

We could also note that the story was written maybe 200 years after this time period, when it wasn't the Babylonians, nor the Persians who came next, but some time later under the Greek Empire. But it's not as if we were telling stories of Napoleon or Genghis Khan with this King Darius the Mede. There was a King Darius, but he was later in the timeline, a Persian whose Empire helped the exiles return home and rebuild the temple. So it seems a King Darius in Babylon with the exiles didn't exist, except here. Yet in that way this character may actually help us see the story as flexible and able to speak to our own situation.

See, if this remains how one time one guy was persecuted for his faith—or, more accurately, that religion was a target for getting rid of the competition—and that one guy managed not to get eaten by a hungry pack of giant cats, well, that doesn't matter all that much to my life. I'm not likely to get thrown to the lions, and my faith in God isn't contingent on whether or not I'd get chewed.

It's similar to the story of another prophet we heard in our last shared MCC service: your religion is likely not determined by whether a giant fish could swallow you, spew you out onto the shore after three days, setting you on the way toward the enemy capital where a messianic,

divinely appointed worm would teach you a lesson. I don't need any of the details of that story to become my own factual happenstance in order to tell of a God who is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love, who redeems and reconciles and won't be confined to my national borders. In that way, Jonah is one of the truest books of the Bible.

So that makes me ask what's true in this reading today?

There's some easy parts of that: First, some people are jerks. They didn't like that Daniel was an honest hard worker and so manipulated to get rid of him.

Second, we should pause in our assessments and values. We know very little about Daniel in the story. Speaking just one sentence, he's almost a prop. His work ethic may or may not have related to his faith, but we shouldn't say being moved up the ranks was a blessing. It may have even been a curse, or at least caused a situation where his faith was tested.

Third, some leaders are obviously gullible and short-sighted. Again, nothing new here. This dolty King Darius got himself weaseled into signing a law he didn't really want and got backed into a corner by it.

Next: not all laws are good. There are laws directly intended to infringe on the wellbeing and practice of others. Contrary to that, we might think of the antiestablishment clause in this country guaranteeing freedom of religion, that there shouldn't be persecution based on faith. We could also notice that exiles in Babylon were, in actuality, given wide latitude to practice their religion. The Babylonian Empire had fairly strong religious tolerance, and—as we already heard—the subsequent Persians went so far as to help rebuild the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

What's that truth for us? While we encountered recent violent anti-Semitism and are mired in anti-Muslim bias that has even been written into law, and while we as Christians remain in a dominant position, even amid a secular culture, maybe our own kind of Christianity isn't. We may not want to be

associated with the others, or can be nervous about being too bold, about practicing this faith, about what it might mean when people recognize us in this religion.

That's an interesting detail in the story. It's not that Daniel is wearing it on his shirtsleeve. He's not up in anybody's business about it. There's an earlier detail where he'd only eat vegetables so that he didn't break his religious dietary laws. But here he's praying in his own private space, and still it causes difficulty for him.

There's truth for me in this story that even in a tolerant society and even without directly trying to get ourselves into trouble, still we should expect that our faith involves both a fair amount of civility, and civil disobedience. If we're getting along too easily and not any different than everyone else, we need to ask what we're missing, what we should be subverting, why our faith has turned out so unimportant.

If it's a truth about how we continue our practice and remain faithful even when it's not easy, I appreciate that truth. I have less interest or use if it's meant to be about my God beating other gods or my culture coming out on top.

We shouldn't presume it's a good thing when Darius declares that all should worship the God of Daniel. Becoming the official religion of Empire, it won't be the same resistant religion that had been able to speak truth to power and could engage differences with grace and understanding. It happened with Emperor Constantine of the Roman Empire or with this being the alleged religion of the American.

Finally, then, on this Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday, we are reminded that the one we follow is not about sparing us from danger, not about magic escapes from death, not focused on career advancement, not in for retributive justice, and certainly not about aspiring to power that shames others. The Lamb of God is not a conquering lion.

We call this a kingdom of God almost to be funny, to reset our assessments, since it's outrageous. Celebrating Christ as King is not for the triumph that all the enemies get tossed to the

lions, but with a history of sacrifice, of willingly being thrown to the lions. This religion at its truest won't succumb to corrupting influences that Might Makes Right and instead turns the whole imperial mindset on its head.

The direction of this kingdom of our crucified Lord is for "the freedom of those oppressed [and] comfort of all distressed," as we sang, the realm where the "Spirit chooses the weak and small to bring the new reign where mighty fall," as Jesus' mother herself sang before his birth, not of exalting thrones, but of bringing down the powerful. It is in that that we join our voices, sometimes in the face of opposition, at others amid acceptance. Sometimes it's entirely serious, but may be tongue-in-cheek, too. Sometimes when things are going easily and well, but occasionally when it involves risk. Sometimes when it feels lonely, and yet joining a billion voices and the song of all creation.

Hymn: "Soli Deo Gloria" (ELW 878)