

SLIDE 1

Resistance Is Futile?

Daniel 1:1-17

June 9, 2024 West Valley Presbyterian Church

I've never preached a sermon series on Daniel before. But when I went to the West Coast Presbyterian Pastors' Conference shortly after Easter, I got to hear Mark Labberton – who recently retired as president of Fuller Seminary – preach a series on Daniel, which just fascinated me.

When I studied Daniel in seminary, it was mostly from a historical point of view. But Dr. Labberton pointed out that the book is really about living faithfully as an exile; and that got me to thinking. We Christians in the South Bay aren't exiles from a political point of view; nobody marched us here against our will. But from a cultural point of view? Well, that can feel a bit exilic at times. We Christians are a minority – only about 40% for all varieties of Christian all bundled together. The majority have no religious affiliation at all; they are secular and work-oriented. So we Christians have to start figuring out how to be faithful to God as a minority. And there's a lot that Daniel can teach us about how to do that.

In the book of Daniel, the exiled Jews had to figure out how to live as Jews in Babylon. They were a very small minority, mostly slaves and servants, far from home, in a religious and cultural environment that was actively hostile to everything they had learned about God. Their Temple had been destroyed; they were hundreds of miles away; they couldn't go back to Judah. Their situation was much worse than ours – so we can learn from them how to be faithful to God in a secular society. I think that will help us, so I'll be preaching sermons from the first 3 chapters of Daniel.

SLIDE (PICTURE OF EGYPT, JUDAH, ASSYRIA, BABYLON, 600 BC)

We need to know at least some history to understand Daniel's situation. The big powers of the day were Egypt, Assyria (northern Iraq) and Babylon (southern Iraq). Judah was a tiny country by comparison, wedged between great empires. Egypt and Assyria were allies, and Judah was in between them. Babylon attacked Assyria, so Egypt came to its aid, and naturally marched through Judah. Babylon defeated Assyria and Egypt, and also conquered Judah while they were at it. The prophets had been warning the Judahites to turn to God or they would lose their nation; they didn't repent; they did lose their nation; and a large number of them were taken captive and marched off to Babylon. Daniel and his three friends were among them.

SLIDES 3 - XX

So now, hear the word of God as it comes to us from Daniel, Chapter 1, vv 1-17:

1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia^[a] and put in the treasure house of his god.

³Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility — ⁴young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.^[b] ⁵The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

⁶Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Beltshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

⁸But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. ⁹Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, ¹⁰but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your^[c] food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

¹¹Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹²"Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." ¹⁴So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

¹⁵At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. ¹⁶So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

¹⁷To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah had an incredible opportunity handed to them. They were sons of Judah's nobility who had been defeated in battle; but they were still alive. And they were recruited to become officials in the king's court. King Nebuchadnezzar was sensible enough to select educated young men from each of the countries he'd conquered – not just Judah. And he saw to it that they were trained to help administer their home countries. They were taught Babylonian language, law, religion and culture; and if they passed their final exams, they would become officials in the king's court. They would be assimilated, as Star Trek's Borg alien would put it – and resistance would be futile. But why would they resist? Becoming a royal bureaucrat is surely preferable to being sold as a slave to work in the fields.

But here's the problem that Daniel and his friends faced: they didn't want to be assimilated. They were willing to serve King Nebuchadnezzar - IF they could also be true to God. But how could they be true to God in a foreign land? Where they couldn't offer sacrifices to God or worship in

God's Temple? How could they cooperate and yet remain Jews? Can they resist being assimilated? Or would that just be futile?

Daniel and his friends were not allowed to keep their Hebrew names – the names that connected them to God. The first thing that Ashpenaz - who was the official in charge of their training - did, was to take away the names that connected them to God, and give them Babylonian god names instead. Daniel was no longer Dani-el (El means "God") – he was renamed Belteshazzar. Hanani-ah (Yah is the first part of God's name) became Shadrach. Misha-el became Meshach. Azari-ah became Abednego.

Daniel and his friends could not keep most of the commandments that God had given them. For example, how could they keep the Sabbath in a foreign land where there was no such thing as a day of rest every seventh day?

But there was one thing that they could do to resist total assimilation: they could control what they ate and drank. Daniel "resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine." It's not clear exactly what Daniel meant by "defile". Perhaps the meat had blood in it. Or perhaps the meat and wine had been offered first to the "gods" of Babylon before being eaten by the court. We don't know for sure. But we do know that Daniel and his friends were staying loyal to God in the only way they could.

And God sees them. He supports their efforts to remain faithful to him. Ashpenaz doesn't like Daniel's idea of eating only vegetables and water. He says that they have to eat what the king has assigned them to eat; because if they don't, Nebuchadnezzar would execute him for failing in his duties. But God moved Ashpenaz to show favor and compassion to Daniel. So he agreed to Daniel's proposal of a ten-day trial. Daniel and his friends would get nothing but vegetables and water for ten days; and then he would compare them to the other young men who ate the king's food, and decide accordingly.

God supports Daniel and his friends not only by making them stronger and healthier than all the rest – but also by making them brilliant. He gives them knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. Plus, he also gives Daniel the ability to understand visions and dreams, which we will hear about next week. The four of them are the very top of their class – ten times better than the court magicians and enchanters. Their resistance was not futile; it turned out to be far more successful than they could have imagined.

Now, the South Bay isn't Babylon. We won't be killed if we refuse to eat meat. We are free to observe the Sabbath and religious holidays if we want to do so. But we now live in a different culture, than the one we grew up in. How many of you can remember how things were back in 1954, when this church was founded? It was a lot different then, wasn't it?

In the South Bay culture of today, being secular is considered a virtue. Gathering for dinner and a Bible study in one another's homes used to be common, right? Not any more. In our secular culture, we socialize in restaurants and we don't do Bible studies. Our local governments try to stay neutral towards all religions, and not support any of them. On the one hand, I think that's a good

thing. I don't want the governments of San Jose, or Sacramento, to tell me what I can or can't do as a Christian; and you probably don't want that either.

But on the other hand, if our local governments are strictly secular, then those of us who take our faith seriously can feel that our opinions have not been considered when laws are made that would affect us. Or if all the cool kids are at the Farmers Market on Sunday morning – as they are in Japantown, where I live – well, then I guess I don't get to be a cool kid, because I worship on Sunday morning. Living as Jesus' followers in a determinedly secular culture can seem lonely at times, or challenging. So what can Daniel teach us about how to live faithfully as Christians in a determinedly secular culture?

First, we need to remember WHOSE we are. We belong to God! We don't have to assimilate into secularism. We are God's people, and we belong to him, even if we work in the modern-day equivalent of Nebuchadnezzar's court. Don't ever forget it: we belong to God. That being the case, resistance to secularism is not futile. Daniel wasn't assimilated; and we don't have to be, either. We can resist secularism. That's not futile. That's obedience to God, and it's a blessing.

Next, we need to remember WHO we are: we are Christians. Our identity is in Christ, the second person of the Trinity. We are his people. That's who we are. Jesus bought us with the price of his death; he set us free by his death and resurrection. We are sustained now by the power of the Holy Spirit within us. We are a free people. Jesus has set us free, so we are free indeed. We are NOT bound by the culture in which we live. We are bound only to God.

And since we are Christians, who belong to God, then how are we to live? Like everybody else? No! Remember the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5-7, where Jesus spells it out for us. For instance: we are not to be angry with one another; rather, we are to work it out, and forgive one another. In fact, we are to love our enemies as well as our friends and family. We are to give to anyone who asks, and trust in God rather than in money. We are not to live as people who belong to the world. We are to live as people who belong to God, while living in the world.

Daniel did not fight against the Babylonian court. That would have been futile. But he did resist in the only way he could: through his food and drink. And his resistance was not futile. Because he served God first, he could serve Nebuchadnezzar better than anyone else. And God blessed him, because he put God first. In the same way, our getting all riled up about our secular culture would be futile. It's much bigger than we are. But we can keep reminding ourselves of whose we are, and who we are. We can resist by staying connected to God and living as God's people. We can pray for our fellow citizens instead of cursing them. We can treat others as we want to be treated. If we could really do that, we could have a huge impact on the culture around us. We can make a difference if we learn from Daniel's example. Let's pray.

Speak to us, O God, for we your servants are listening. What can we do to ensure that you are first in our lives, and resist anything that would pull us away from you? How can we place you above our culture? Help us to live as Jesus taught us, and in that way, resist what our culture teaches us. Help us to love one another from the heart. Teach us to obey you as Daniel did, that you may be made known, everywhere that we might be. For it is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

