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Sermon Title: In the Lion's Den
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Scripture: Daniel 6:16-28

Daniel 6:16-28

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.

Then King Darius wrote to all peoples and nations of every language throughout the whole world: 'May you have abundant prosperity! I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel:

*For he is the living God,
enduring forever.*

*His kingdom shall never be destroyed,
and his dominion has no end.*

He delivers and rescues,

*he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth;
for he has saved Daniel
from the power of the lions.'*
*So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus
the Persian.*

Many years ago I went over to the Wingates' home. I walked in, and sitting there in the living room lined up against the wall were several of Brett's paintings. Powerful. Energetic. Bold. And full of faith.

For years I wanted him to exhibit at the Dogwood Festival. In fact, in recent years, I thought we could have a Dogwood Art Festival just with artists from our own Church. Alida featured one of Brett's a couple of weeks ago when I was away, and when I came back and saw them, I knew I wanted two for today: one from the Bible, "Daniel in the Lion's Den"; the other from Christian tradition, "St. George Slaying the Dragon."

Daniel in the Lion's Den is probably one of the most famous stories in all the Bible and requires some in-depth background. To make a long story short, 2,600 years ago Israel was conquered by Babylon, what is now Iraq. Later, they were taken over by the Persians, Iran. So when we look at the mess in the Middle East today, what John Stewart calls "Messopotamia," you see it goes back a long time. Israel, Iraq, Iran. Battles, wars, slavery.

Indeed, when Iraq conquered Israel, they carried off the Jews into slavery, tried to turn them into proper Babylonians and Persians, tried to get them to quit their religion, their culture, their traditions. Some, like Daniel, were given the privilege to prosper, to succeed, to assimilate, to become fully Babylonian-Persian-Iraqi-Iranian. In fact, Daniel and some of his friends rose to become powerful government officials, the John Kerry of Persia, or, if you prefer, the Henry Kissinger of Iran. He was big.

That set the stage for today's Scripture. Let's see what gets Daniel in the lion's den. The Bible tells us that the king wanted to shake up his administration, so he comes up with a sort of parliamentary plan. There would be 120 administrators to help administer the Persian Empire. Over that 120 would be three super delegates. They were the real power behind the throne. Daniel was one of the three. A Jew. An immigrant. A slave. A foreigner. Quickly he proved himself to be the brightest and the best; he became the head of the three, and the king was about to turn the entire empire over to Daniel. Nobody needed an election to tell which way the wind was blowing. Those Iranian bureaucrats did not want a Jew or a foreigner

running their country, so they tried hard to get rid of Daniel. But the Bible tells us no one could find any corruption, any wrongdoing, not a single mark against his name. Unless, unless they could put him between a rock and a hard place with God, and him, in the middle. It was easy. They appealed to the king's huge ego with a plan no one would dare oppose.

For 30 days everyone in the entire empire was to pray to the king . . . only. Let me repeat that diabolical plan: *everybody had to pray to the king only for 30 days*. No other God. No temples. No synagogues. No idols. No Judaism, paganism, nothing else; only the king. Now, that's a loyalty test. The whole country united, worshiping the king. Nothing new there. Let me give you a pop quiz: name five countries right now where one person says, "I'm the only one who can save you." I came up with 11. It happens today. It happened 2,600 years ago in Persia.

Daniel's enemies counted on one thing: Daniel's integrity. They knew he would not bend his knee, his principles, to anyone but God. They were right. Every day, three times a day, Daniel climbed to the second floor of his house, went to a big window facing Jerusalem, knelt down, and prayed to God for all to see, as the Bible says, "just as he had always done." The whole nation had given up their faith, had lost their backbone. But Daniel stands in his window for all to see and slowly bends down to worship God.

His enemies ratted him out to the king, but perhaps to our surprise, the king was reluctant to feed Daniel to the lions! Daniel had been the key to the Empire's success. The Jew, the foreigner, had been a huge blessing to the country. But, as he was reminded, the law is the law. And so Daniel is thrown into the lions' den. The next morning the king hurries to the lions' den and cries out, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God rescued you from the lions?" To the king's amazement, Daniel yelled back, "Yes! God sent an angel to shut the lions' mouths because I am innocent."

Is that believable? A bunch of hungry lions chose not to eat a tasty dinner like Daniel because an angel convinced them he was innocent? One thing we know, in the wild when an animal charges at you, don't freak, don't run, stay cool, stand your ground. And saying a prayer won't hurt.

Some years ago, a friend of mine was a Habitat volunteer in the Congo, working in the bush. One day, he was rushed by a gorilla. He stood his ground, didn't move, didn't run away in fear, didn't cry out. He just stood there as though he belonged, he and the guerrilla, face to face . . . the gorilla turned slowly and walked away. Did my friend's faith save him? Did an angel intervene? Did my friend's calm confidence convince the gorilla he was no threat? Had the gorilla just finished lunch? Was this gorilla a

vegetarian? I'm just saying . . . it happens. By miracle, by not showing fear, by quiet prayer, by following advice. And it happened in ancient Persia.

At that point, the king is thrilled. Daniel is released, his enemies are fed to the lions and, the Bible says, "Daniel prospered." What's more, the king decreed religious freedom for the Jews, even encouraging everybody to worship the "God of Daniel, the living God who rescues and saves."

What a story! All the world's problems right there: tyranny, jealousy, sycophancy, bigotry, vengeance, anti-Semitism, murder, cowardice, blood loss. And ultimately, the triumph of good . . . *the triumph of good*.

Why this story today? As you know, I just returned from three stunning weeks in Central Europe. To my amazement, I wrote about 100 pages there (that should alarm you since I've been beating you over the head with my last book since March). Two of those weeks I was with two of our children and son-in-law and grandchildren. My days were days of inspiration and splendor. I was in Prague, which is heaven for me, Vienna, and Budapest—not too shabby. Mornings in coffee houses, writing; nighttime boat rides down the Danube; daytime museums and palaces; living history all around, loving people and friendly waiters and spectacular views.

And opera cake. One day I had opera cake for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Have you never had opera cake? If you leave right now, you could be at JFK by noon and Budapest by 8 PM. You may never eat real food again. So given that slice of heaven I just lived for 21 days, why am I preaching about Daniel, about bad governments and stupid tyrants and conniving politicians and lions' dens? Or why show the other painting over there of St. George slaying the dragon? Two of the enduring motifs of Christian faith. Why? Well, along with the blue Danube, effervescent Prague, medieval towns, and opera cake, I also saw a lot of monuments, a lot of sculptures, a lot of memorials, all dedicated to God's victory. Victories over plagues, over enemies, over injustice, over evil of every kind.

Prague especially is home to lots of very ornate, gaudy, Baroque Churches, and they call out all the stops with a common theme: God, victorious over bad things. In one of my favorite Churches, a mammoth cavernous Church, the altar is ringed by four gigantic 40-foot-high statues of saints and bishops crushing snakes and dragons, with spears and swords in one hand, the Bible or the cross or both in the other. The message is clear: God wins, evil loses.

In several cobblestoned squares, we saw equally gigantic "plague pillars," monuments paid for by grateful citizens and noble benefactors when God ended some deadly plague. Tall, spiring, impressive, all pointing toward God,

“the God who rescues and saves with signs and wonders,” as the book of Daniel puts it, “*the God who rescues and saves with signs and wonders.*” Since medieval Central Europe and since the Babylonian-Persian Empires.

Am I right? The world has changed? Or not. For those of us who follow ISIS, they’ve used everything but a lion’s den to kill those who worship the wrong way. And plagues still come our way with fears along with them: AIDS, Ebola, Zika. But certainly our monuments are different, quite removed from the world of faith, little evidence of a population grateful to God for the defeat of some evil. In part, it may be that faith, or lack of it, is a double-edged sword. We Westerners are less inclined to blame God for bad things, so it makes sense that we are less inclined to thank God for good things. And another is our tradition of separation of church and state. We don’t do public God.

You may remember the controversy over the steel cross from the Twin Towers at the 9/11 Memorial. When the Twin Towers fell, the rescuers found a perfectly shaped cross made of steel girders, and it stood for months as a beacon of hope for all the first responders, the rescue workers, the survivors, and our mournful nation. When the 9/11 Memorial Museum was being built, people wanted to include the steel cross. But there was opposition. In a court suit seeking to block the cross, some agreed that seeing a religious symbol gave them “indigestion.” The court ruled in favor of the cross. That may be the closest thing we have to a “plague memorial,” thanking God for getting us through.

Truth is, our world still has dragons and lions’ dens that threaten us. After the recent killing of young black man in Milwaukee, and the ensuing riots, a prominent voice was Sheriff Clarke, the sheriff of Milwaukee. He’s a regular Fox News contributor, probably the most anti-Obama commentator I’ve ever heard. And yet, during the riots, he laid out a litany of plagues destroying his city that most everybody would agree with: lousy schools, few jobs, poor prospects, weak families, bad choices. All dragons at the gates of Milwaukee, a den full of lions ready to devour the poor of this city.

And you could just as easily join me in making a list of today’s lions’ dens and fiery dragons near and far: bitter divisions, racial animosity, savage terrorism; Syria, ISIS, the Middle East; addiction, moronic behavior, selfishness run amok; attacks on liberty, tolerance, faith; ineffective government, religion, economy. You can text me the ones I’ve missed, but there are enough right there to cry out for brave St. Georges and courageous Daniels; for people who won’t be afraid to declare that God is alive and at work, even in the midst of the worst.

These are trying times, dangerous times, there is evil afoot. There are fiery dragons nearby and lions' dens awaiting the innocent. But there are also those who trust in God for victory over evil.

I happened to be in Prague at the same time the pope was just over the border in Kraków for a huge gathering of Catholic youth from all over the world. Lots of those teenagers stopped in Prague first, and they made a scene—a wonderful, crazy, loud, faithful scene. At any given moment a handful of kids, along with two or three priests, would come marching through Old Town Square, carrying a cross and a big picture of Jesus, banners with the name of their Church, singing Christian songs, accompanied by guitars and bongos and horns. From time to time, they'd stop and gather a crowd and begin to preach: one kid would give testimony, another would pray, and they would break into joyous dance.

Kids from America, kids from Mexico and Spain, kids from Italy, all proud of their faith, all excited about God, all unafraid, Daniels in the lions' dens of the 21st century, proclaiming a God whose love was embodied in the Christ they carried, the smiles they shared, and the joy they lived. This is their generation, their century, their world full of dragons. And I tell you, given a chance, they would have built a monument thanking God for great victories.

Maybe the days of building great monuments for public spaces thanking God for defeating evil are over. Maybe we don't need gigantic statues of David and Alida crushing snakes and slaying dragons, the Bible in one hand and the sword in the other.

But within this little plain, un-Baroque, un-gaudy Church, we will continue to thank "the living God of Daniel who rescues us and saves us with signs and wonders."

Let's stand and sing our final hymn, "Rise Up, O Saints of God," No. 611.

*Rise up, O saints of God!
Have done with lesser things.
give heart and mind and soul and strength
to serve the King of kings.*

*Rise up, O saints of God!
The kingdom tarries long.
bring in the day of righteousness,
and end the night of wrong.*

*Rise up, O saints of God!
The church for you doth wait,
with strength unequal to the task;
rise up, and make it great.*

*Lift high the cross of Christ;
tread where Christ's feet have trod;
come sisters, brothers in the faith,
rise up, O saints of God.*