

Text: Daniel 6:10–12, 16–23

¹⁰ Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. ¹¹ Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. ¹² So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: “Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or man except to you, O king, would be thrown into the lions’ den?” The king answered, “The decree stands—in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.” ...

¹⁶ So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions’ den. The king said to Daniel, “May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!” ¹⁷ A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel’s situation might not be changed. ¹⁸ Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep. ¹⁹ At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions’ den. ²⁰ When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, “Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?” ²¹ Daniel answered, “O king, live forever! ²² My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king.” ²³ The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. – NIV84

Prayer of the Day:

Gracious Lord, our refuge and strength, pour out your Holy Spirit on your faithful people. Keep them steadfast in your Word, protect and comfort them in all temptations, defend them against all their enemies, and bestow on the Church your saving peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Verse of the Day:

Alleluia. If you continue in my Word, you are really my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Alleluia. (John 8:31,32 cf. RSV)

Sermon Text:

Ah, Daniel and the Lions’ Den, it’s a Sunday School favorite right! It’s hard to have grown up in the church and not have heard this story a few times. I loved it as a kid, this one and the three men in the fiery furnace, two amazing accounts from that period of the exile of the people of Israel. It finds its way into the lessons for this Sunday on which we celebrate the Reformation no doubt because of the persecution the early reformers faced as they clung to the simple Gospel promises and if you’re anything like me it perks up your ears a bit maybe even in a slightly different way today than in years previous to this one. So permit me to riff a bit on the old lions and tigers and bears oh my made famous by the Wizard of Oz as God sets us on different path this morning. Today we travel **FROM LIONS, TO LUTHER, TO US ... OH MY!** And as we travel along well, may we see once again that **GOD WILL RESCUE YOU** so you can **SERVE HIM CONTINUALLY.**

Maybe we can start not with the lions but with the elephant in the room. Again, if you're anything like me you read this lesson and you immediately begin to wonder about lockdowns and the like in the current reign of king COVID in our society. Without getting into the politics, constitutionality, and the millions of other arguments on Facebook, the News and well the four to five flyers that land in my mailbox everyday lately, perhaps we can simply say while there are no doubt similarities as we regulate service quantities and times, Darius' wicked advisors did not issue this decree because of a public health crisis, nor did they ask for a period of "in-person" worship to cease. They tricked the King in His haughtiness to ban all worship, public and private, unless aimed at the King himself for one month. So, if our government would ban online worship, home devotions, and nighttime prayers, we'd be looking at an apples to apples comparison. Even then, note Daniel's response. It is not the picking up of arms, nor the formation of the Jewish Liberation Army in the land of the Medes and the Persians. Instead, he simply continued on with His regular daily practice of prayer and meditation on God's Word within His home, undeterred by the order of the King. In fact, Daniel is often cited as a wonderful example of the Christian engaged in respectful disobedience to His government.

Of course, that came with consequences. The advisors expected Daniel to do exactly as he did. They were waiting for it. They had issued the decree with this exact response in mind and without any wiggle room within it and by the time Darius figured out the foolishness of his arrogant decree, it was too late. Daniel went to the Lions as the law required not knowing if his God would use this incident as an opportunity to show the world His power or to bring His servant home to the perfection of heaven. And the rest well, as they say, is history. God, or rather angels sent from God shut the mouths of the Lions, and Daniel is unharmed. The next day Darius has him brought back out of the den and orders that the advisors take his place, and we find out the Lions were indeed very hungry and ferocious. God protected His servant Daniel and places him back in the service of Darius that he might continue to serve God's people in exile through his position there.

Let's change scenes now. It is after all Reformation Sunday here at St. Paul's. So fast forward out of exile past the most important event in all of history as God does not save His Son from the prowling lion of Satan but allows Him to die on a cross for us and our salvation that He might rise from death's dark den to the bright and glorious reality of the Resurrection promising victory for His people. Keep rolling to 1517 and that monkish professor in the city of Wittenberg, Germany who had become increasingly perturbed with the idea that one could buy their salvation with a few coins, or many, thrown in the direction of the church.

Luther saw what the love of money had done within the halls of Catholicism. A love of earthly things had eroded one teaching after another until the pursuit of anything other than God became the driving force at least in Rome, if not throughout the church at large in His day. He dared to ask for a debate to discuss these topics among the learned scholars of the church and hoped that Pope and princes would agree that it was not money, or talent, human action or even one's position in the world that mattered, at least not for salvation but rather that one most important time in the history of man, Christ and Him crucified and risen which promised heaven. God's work and it alone given by grace, believed because of the gift of faith, spelled out clearly in the pages of God's Holy Word, yes, because of Christ alone and to God's glory alone that grants us forgiveness of our sins, a life worth living in this world and which will last for all eternity in heaven. He did not seek to overthrow, but to reform the church, to get it back to its real roots from which it had walked away.

Of course, that came with consequences. It turns out the Popes and princes did not want to engage in such reform. They decided that there were “bigger fish to fry”: the armies of the Ottoman Empire pressing in from the East, the expenses that came with building up the grand and austere St. Peter’s Basilica and the Vatican city surrounding it. Luther was told to be quiet, and when he refused, requesting of all things proof from Scripture in regard to His folly, he was excommunicated, even made an enemy of the Holy Roman Empire. As a result, he too was exiled for a time, until it was safe for him to return to Wittenberg and resume the work of the reformation there. It wasn’t perhaps as impressive as angels in the lions den but God used history and political drama surrounding Germany to keep this little monk safe so that the truths of our Salvation could once again brightly shine in the world around us.

And now you and me. I don’t think we live in times as frightening as Daniel’s (not yet anyway), nor do I think our moments are probably as defining as were Luther’s (though who but history can ultimately determine such things). I doubt we will be fed to the Lions tomorrow, nor will we need to change our names and hide because there are bounties on our heads. But I do know that the fate of the church in our day clearly rests upon our shoulders and it’s often born not in the grand moments of life but in the simple things we do everyday. Daniel was an example to the people around him, not because a Jewish captive had made his way into the ranks of a respected advisor to the King, but because he was a man who took His God seriously, who trusted and relied on Him in every situation, who had been given a sincere and steadfast faith which relied on the Word of its God and would dare even to pray a prayer of thankfulness when he knew the wicked and jealous advisors of the very King he served were plotting his demise. Luther became a pillar in the church of His day, not because he was the biggest, boldest, brashest monk in the monetary, though he may have been all that. It was rather a humble heart that knew it deserved nothing from God and yet was led to rely on Him for everything because of the work of Jesus Christ his Savior and Him alone.

And so it is with you, dear Christian. A God who promises to be with and rescue us in His Holy Word. Who has already done so in what Martin Luther called the heart and core of Christianity, not our work but the work of our Savior Jesus. He is the one *who has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel* (2 Timothy 1:10). He is the one who has given *himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age* (Galatians 1:4). Yes, he is the one who shut the mouths of the Lions and served as Luther’s Mighty Fortress in tempest and trial. And in through His Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacraments, He remains with us having rescued us from sin, death, and the power of the devil, you and I can stand confidently in His power to guide and guard His church in every situation, whether in the petulance of pandemic or in the prosperity of peace. And though there will no doubt be days when following our God and listening to His Holy Word will come with consequences, we can stand confidently knowing that the God who stood with Daniel and with Luther will stand with us, whether He chooses to display His power through our lives or bring us to be with Him in the eternal glories of heaven. What were those words of our second lesson, *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery* (Galatians 5:1). Perhaps Darius said it best, “*May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!*” Dear friends, He has From Lions to Luther and He certainly will as His Word comes to us. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!