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Echoes: Peculiar People

Daniel 6:1-23

Daniel 6:1-5. It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom one hundred and twenty satraps, stationed throughout the whole kingdom, and over them three presidents, including Daniel; to these the satraps gave account, so that the king might suffer no loss. Soon Daniel distinguished himself above all the other presidents and satraps because an excellent spirit was in him, and the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom. So the presidents and the satraps tried to find grounds for complaint against Daniel in connection with the kingdom. But they could find no grounds for complaint or any corruption, because he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption could be found in him. The men said, 'We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.'

I've been doing some fairly theoretical sermons recently – taking some story or prophecy or passage from the Hebrew Bible and extrapolating from it to talk about broad issues regarding church and society. Well, I won't apologize for doing some theory every now and then. Sometimes it clarifies our thinking. But eventually we have to bring it back to specifics. How does this theoretical concept relate to us? What should we *do*? So today, I want to ask the church and society question in a very precise way: What does it mean to be a faithful follower of Christ in a culture where that sort of behavior is, shall we say, *peculiar*?

First, let me repeat what I've said earlier in this series: there is no way that Christians in America qualify as persecuted. There are too many of us, with too much influence. That being said, though, there are certainly some contexts – especially at work and school – where dedicated Christians are made to feel out of place. We have people in this church who work in higher education, for instance. In that world, science and reason are valued above all, and the Christian who has faith in things that cannot be proven by reason may be treated as if she's a little backward. The Christian who works on a construction crew or in a Wall Street investment firm may feel isolated for different reasons. And any high school student who is known to be a Christian may face at least some mockery. It happens. Our culture, like *every* human culture, holds some values that are at odds with our faith.

Daniel, this Jewish exile who held a high position in the court of the Persian king Darius, knew what that was like. In fact, his peers, the other Persian officials, set out to get rid of him. Now, to be fair, they weren't jealous of him because of his faith; they were jealous of him because he got a promotion. But when they decided to get rid of him, it was his strange faith in just one God – a foreign God at that – that gave them their opening. A living faith, in every culture, including ours, can sometimes just be peculiar.

Lay Reader reads 6:6-10. *So the presidents and satraps conspired and came to the king and said to him, 'O King Darius, live for ever! All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counsellors and the governors, are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions. Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked.' Therefore King Darius signed the document and interdict. Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open towards Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.*

Here's a question for you. As a part of our United Methodist membership vows, every member here has promised to be faithful in his or her "witness." What does that even mean? How do we "witness" to our faith? I can tell you how that was explained to me as a Southern Baptist teenager. It meant making sure that I had told all my friends that they had to accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior, at once, or they were going to hell. The more bluntly the message was delivered, the better. I worked one summer at a gift store at a Baptist camp in Oklahoma. Our biggest item was tee shirts, and our biggest seller was a picture of the cartoon character Yosemite Sam pointing his gun straight out of the shirt. The slogan said, "Heaven or Hell. Turn or Burn." In my childhood church, to witness to my faith meant loudly making sure that everyone knew that we believed, and that they ought to. Move that mindset ahead a few years and put in your workplace, and you get that person who has Christian posters on his cubicle wall, a Bible prominently displayed on his desk, religious bumper stickers on his car, and an evangelistic sub-text for every break-room conversation.

Maybe you've worked with that person. If so, how did you feel about it? Speaking just for myself, I hated it. And that's me, also a Christian. That evangelist and I probably agree on 90 to 95% of our beliefs, and I still avoid the breakroom if he's there. You see, that witness just feel phony to me. All that overt faithiness operates like a shield, hiding the real person who, I assume, is somewhere in there.

Because these strident, aggressive witnesses are so off-putting, many of us take the opposite path. We hide the fact that we are believers at all costs, avoiding all discussions of religion, never doing or saying anything that might give us away. We become "stealth Christians" whom no one would ever suspect of having a faith. But that's not being honest either. That's just as phony.

So look at what Daniel did. On the one hand, there is no sign that he ever made an issue of his peculiar faith. He kept to himself, did his work conscientiously and well, and avoided confrontation. His primary witness to his faith was being scrupulously honest and above reproach. And yet he hid nothing: everyone in the court knew about Daniel's faith. They knew he had one, and they knew it was important to him. Somehow Daniel navigated a path between being an "believer in your face" and being a "believer in disguise." I think this is a balance worth seeking.

Daniel 6:11-23. The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God. Then they approached the king and said concerning the interdict, 'O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions?'

The king answered, 'The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked.' Then they responded to the king, 'Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the interdict you have signed, but he is saying his prayers three times a day.'

When the king heard the charge, he was very much distressed. He was determined to save Daniel, and until the sun went down he made every effort to rescue him. Then the conspirators came to the king and said to him, 'Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no interdict or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed.'

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 for ever! 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.

But make no mistake. Even if you manage to avoid being an abrasive, judgmental Turn-or-Burn Christian, those who allow their faith to be publically known may face consequences.

I have a friend named Greg, a project leader for a large company. Greg's a quiet, hard-working, devout Christian and family man – conscientious about his time with wife and kids, very active in his church. Like Daniel, Greg has proven to be an invaluable and utterly trustworthy employee, to the point that he is routinely appointed to head up every troubled and disorganized project. When things go bad, give it to Greg. If it can be saved, he'll save it. Meanwhile, over and over, Greg has watched people hired after him, people far less competent or experienced, get promoted above him. I asked him why he thought that was. He just shrugged and said, "Well, I don't go to the bars after work with the rest of the managers. I don't work Sundays. And I don't play golf; it takes too much time from my family."

Daniel was given a stark choice: either pray exclusively to King Darius for thirty days or risk death. Now, it's highly unlikely that any of us will face such a choice, but that does not mean we will have no difficult decisions. When we make our faith public and show by our lives that it matters to us, we inevitably put ourselves at odds with the prevailing culture. My friend Greg, by his life choices, made it clear that he regards other things as being more important than his career path and his company's profit margin. And he has accepted the consequences for that.

Every public area of our lives – work, school, even church – can pressure us to betray our faith. We face pressure to succeed by sabotaging others, to elevate ourselves by means of gossip and backbiting, to earn brownie points by flattering people in authority, to pretend to be someone we are not. It is how the world works – not just our culture, but all cultures. So when we live our faith, as Daniel did, as Greg does, we will stand out. We will be peculiar.

But it's so worth it. Every other option for a Christian is dishonest and destructive to our spirits. If we become like that in-your-face turn-or-burn evangelist, then we treat others as souls to save and we deny our faith in the One who never treated anyone as a means to an end. But if we hide our faith and become secret disciples, we live divided lives and deny our faith in the One who went to his death for the sake of his Gospel of love. Only by charting the middle path, as Daniel did, as Christ did, can we be truly whole, and that's worth any consequences you can name. Daniel got thrown in the den of lions. As it happens, this time God intervened, and all turned out fine. I can't actually promise that will always happen. Sometimes people stand on principle and lose their jobs. All I can really promise is that when you choose to honor Christ in your life, even when it would be convenient to do otherwise, God will be with you. God is with you. God go with you this week.