

Date: May 16, 2004

SUNDAY: Easter 6 (Children's Day Program)

MEDITATION: On Not Leaving It to the Lions

Text(s): Daniel 6:1-23; John 17:6-19

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You probably saw the article in the *Times Record* this week about the current trend in Hollywood to re-tell the stories of legendary heroes like Achilles and Hector in the movie *Troy* to name only one example. The gist of the article was that we live in an age devoid of heroes, where confusion about good and evil, right and wrong, leaves many people groping for someone to emulate, someone who can be a role model, and since there appears to be a dearth of contemporary heroes, the search is taking us back to the great epics of the distant past.

So the biblical story of Daniel comes like a breath of fresh air. We tell it to our children in Sunday School, and then eventually, they may tell it back to us as delightfully as they have this morning. Here is someone we can commend to our children and ourselves as a hero. He stood up for what he believed, even at great cost to himself. He would rather have been thrown to the lions than sacrifice his faithfulness to God because of political pressure and expediency. We have no hesitation saying to our children, "Be like Daniel. Stand up for what you believe, no matter the cost. Don't fear the lions; God will take care of you." Good stuff, isn't it? Soul-stirring stuff. Character-building stuff. We can even think of some modern-day Daniels, can't we—Dr. Martin Luther King, perhaps, or Archbishop Romero, whose words we heard again just last week from our El Salvador mission team, or the peace activists Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan in Northern Ireland.

The fly in the ointment, however, if we're thinking people, is that we're not sure that this old tale about Daniel is true. Does God always rescue those who are righteous and faithful from the lions' den? The three people I just mentioned certainly stood up for what they believed, and all

three suffered for their pains—King and Romero assassinated and the Williams and Corrigan whose children or spouses were murdered. A rabbi friend and I were talking some years ago, and comparing the things we were teaching our children in Sunday School and Hebrew school. When I happened to mention that almost every Sunday School curriculum with which I was familiar emphasized the Bible stories like Daniel in the Lions' Den, he said, "Oh, I never teach that one any more." When I asked why, he said, "Who could teach that story after the Holocaust? What did anyone's faithfulness matter in that lions' den? The lions ate their fill."

Well, that brought me up short. I didn't have an answer that could stand up to the facts, for the facts are, that as we look around the world, the lions do appear to be winning more than their fair share of the contests. Far from being miraculously stricken with lockjaw, the lions have, and are, eating their fill. Pretty hard to distinguish the Daniels from the lions in the Israeli-Palestinian den, isn't it? And in the mirror that the prisoner abuses in Iraq are forcing us to peer into far more deeply than we ever wanted to, it's pretty hard to deny that what we see looking back at us from that mirror are the faces, not of heroes of justice, freedom, and democracy, but very unheroic faces, many of them predatory faces with shaggy manes and sharp, bloody teeth.

However, I'm not quite ready to give up on Daniel, the brutal facts of life in our world notwithstanding, though I cannot honestly fault my rabbi friend for his decision not to teach that story to his Hebrew school children. Had my parents or grandparents vanished up the chimneys at Auschwitz or Treblinka, I'm not sure I'd be able to see the truth in the story of Daniel either.

But as I've thought about this story in the years since that conversation, I've become convinced that the problem with the story of Daniel in the lions' den is not that it is not true; it does tell us the deepest truth about ourselves and about God and about the way the world really works in the long term, while the gas chambers and ovens of Auchwitz and Treblinka do not tell

us the deepest truth, the ultimate truth, but only the more visible truth in the short term. The story of Daniel itself charms us into stopping at the surface, if we're not careful. We can fail get beyond the childhood level of its truth which appears to be the notion that God rewards faithfulness by rescuing us from danger or harm. And then when we grow up and discover the inadequacy of that childish faith, we are tempted to throw faith away altogether and only believe that evidence that confronts us on our TV screens.

The anonymous writer who wrote the story of Daniel wrote it precisely to give his readers a longer view of their own troubled times and the frightening political and social events that were happening around them and to them. A foreign conqueror was again trying to destroy the monotheistic faith of his Jewish subjects which he saw as an obstacle to their complete submission to him. So to demonstrate his power, he desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem by setting up a bust of himself in the Holy of Holies, an act that inspired the Maccabean revolt and suicide martyrs, though the king Antiochus Epiphanes IV would undoubtedly have seen them as terrorists rather than martyrs.

The writer of this story sought to give hope and fortitude to his people who were "in the lions' den" as it were. By reaching back to a hero of the past, Daniel, and Daniel's conflicts with another emperor who also demanded total allegiance, he already had the benefit of the longer view. He knew that, in fact, God's people hadn't been destroyed by the exile in Babylon or assimilated into the greater Persian empire. He knew that long after Babylon and Persia had fallen, Daniel's descendants had returned to their homeland, had rebuilt the Temple of God in Jerusalem, and had reconstituted themselves as a community centered around their faith in the one God. He, no doubt as much as we, knew that his fable of Daniel was not the way the world works in the short term. But it did, and does, tell the

truth about the way God works in the long term. It invites his readers to remember, to look back to the way their history has played out. And even though they are facing a new Babylon, a new Persia, and new lions, that longer view can give hope and courage to endure what must be endured, to resist what must be resisted to remain faithful to their covenant with God, and to trust God to see to the ultimate outcome.

How do we get that longer view? Where do we come by the lenses that will help us peer beneath the childhood moral lessons in this story, which often appear to be contradicted by the brutal facts that leap out at us from our newspapers and television every day?

The same way Daniel did— by being faithful in prayer and by trusting ourselves into God's hands, come what may, even when the lions are roaring hungrily at us. It is by living faithfully in the midst of the unfaithfulness around us, by always refusing to let the short-term threat or the short-term gains deflect us from being faithful to God, that we gain the ability to see beneath the confusions of current events to the ultimate realities that govern our world. Daniel was probably as surprised as anyone that the lions developed lockjaw. He probably expected to become their lunch. But he remained faithful anyway. He had committed himself to Someone greater than King Darius and to a greater, deeper law than the law of the Medes and Persians—the law of justice and righteousness upon which the God of Israel has founded the universe. In the short term, it may seem that God has gone on vacation, leaving his servants to the lions. The long-term view, a view only accessible by faith and prayer and fully visible only in hindsight, tells a different story.

True faithfulness to God, the faith of Daniel, is to commit oneself to taking the long view of our encounters with the lions. To trust that the short-term facts are not the ultimate facts about our lives and our world is what the people of God are called to demonstrate by their lives,

and particularly their life in community. That's the point of that wonderful prayer of Jesus for his disciples in our gospel lesson. *"And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."* The trust in his Heavenly Father that carried Jesus through his own disastrous encounter with the lions to the resurrection beyond is the pattern for our faith as well. To trust God is to be drawn into the same intimate oneness with God that Jesus had— a oneness that we experience in community with others of like faith. And in that experience of unity, of solidarity, we discover that we, like Jesus, are ultimately protected by the same power that raised him from the dead.

To live in such a community of faithfulness is to live in hope and to become a sign of hope to all the threatened Daniels, all the arrogant Dariuses, and even, ultimately, to the lions as well.