

February 10, 2019

National Presbyterian Church

"Confident Pluralism"

Jeremiah 29:7; Daniel 1:1-15, 20;

Mark 2:13-17, 1 Corinthians 10:23-33

David A. Renwick

In our sermons this winter we're working our way through the story of the Bible, and we come to a period of time – c. 5-600 BC – when God's ancient people, the descendants of a man called Abraham, are no longer living in the Holy Land (now Israel and West Bank), but have been defeated by their enemies and carried off into exile.

Some from the north (a country known as Israel) have been taken away to Assyria (now the northern corner of Iraq); and some from the south, from a region called Judah, have been carried off to Babylon (central Iraq). And it's this exile – known as "the Babylonian exile," which lasts from about 600BC-530 BC – that I want us to think about this morning.

In some ways this exile was a remarkable time. Most scholars think that it was during this time that what we call 'the Old Testament' part of our Bible more or less came together.

So think of the 39 books of the Old Testament, first as oral stories told from generation to generation, mixed together with written records (writing is now known to be more ancient than once thought). Then they become the core of larger books (of various forms: scrolls, or bound papyrus): written, collected and edited by multiple authors, with different books or collections cherished by circles of believers (priests, scribes, prophets, scholars). These groups would have been scattered, and their sacred books scattered all over the country – not together UNTIL the exile! When the people found themselves together with their books, in of all places, Babylon where the whole story begins to come together in one growing book!

So here is this remarkable story of "good" emerging from this painful time. And it's really important to know that God does this kind of thing: that God is a redeemer – who can take the most desolating of circumstances and bring amazing good out of the pain and disappointment of a world that seems to be tumbling in. THIS is the kind of thing God does!

So in some ways, historically, the period of the exile was remarkable, and marvelous. But of course this 'good news aspect' of the exile in no way minimizes how difficult a period of time it was as well. It was a time when God's people had to learn not only "how to live" again – live with defeat and enormous loss; but also learn "how to live" within a foreign culture that generally had no clue or interest in them, and that at times actively opposed them.

Indeed, they had become a minority -- a minority with no power and no escape. And that was how they experienced life at this time.

And, of course, some of us may feel this way, too, about our lives and situation, or about our own heritage or culture: -- that we live as exiles, even in our own land

Maybe we're an ethnic minority, and racial prejudice is a regular experience -- whether it's slurs or expressions of hatred, or brazen injustice, or fear for our sons and daughters, or hearing the message (implicit or explicit) that somehow "we don't belong" -- this country is not yours, but ours!"

(Please know that none of this has any place in the church of Jesus Christ -- who dies for people of "every tongue and race; for people ALL made in the image of God)

OR maybe we feel as if we are "exiles" simply because we're Christian.

- We believe in a faith that fewer and fewer people around us share. So we're at work, and we're mocked or excluded from this or that conversation or party, or even from promotion, because of our standards about truth or the way we speak -- or for going to church.
- Or we're parents wrestling with soccer games, or other sports, scheduled on Sunday mornings -- when the coach says "no show, no play." And we don't know what to do that's best for our children.

SO -- for one reason or another -- even in our own land we too may feel like exiles. And the remarkable thing is that, through the Bible, GOD speaks specifically to people who feel this way -- who experience life this way.

And God does so, in particular, in the Book of Daniel: a book about a man carried off into exile in his youth (probably in his teens); and living his whole life in a place that he didn't want to be. Daniel is a person who lived and experienced life AS AN EXILE.

And it's as an exile that Daniel has to ask himself --

- OK, how do I live here in this situation and remain faithful to God?
- How do I live in a way that does not betray who I am?
- How do I live in a way that does not betray who God wants me to be? -- When I am different from those who live around me?

This is a BIG Question, that can become pretty complex, but from the book of Daniel, and its opening chapter, at least two truths emerge that seemed to guide Daniel, and can be a guide to us as well.

The first is this: that Daniel JOINS IN -- where he can, even in exile: he joins in. In other words, by and large, Daniel plays his part, to the best of his ability within and as part of the foreign and pagan society around him.

And this is what we see in the very beginning of his story in our passage in Daniel 1.

The king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, selects Daniel and three friends (the brightest and best of the Jewish exiles), to be trained in the literature and language of the Babylonians, so that they could become part of his court: his inner cabinet; his principle advisers.

And Daniel and his friend DO THIS. In fact, this is Daniel's role for the next 40-50 years, throughout his adult life. Daniel joins in and in doing (whether he knows it or no) so follows the advice of the prophet Jeremiah (that I mentioned last Sunday)

LET ME READ Jeremiah's words to the exiles from Jeremiah 29:5

- ⁵Build houses and live in them; *(Join in!)* plant gardens and eat what they produce.

- ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; (*Join in!*)
- take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.
- ⁷AND seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, (*Join in!*)
- and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for -- in its welfare you will find your welfare.

In other words, “Join in wherever possible.” And this is what Daniel did.

Some people, of course, would have accused him of selling his soul for joining in, for associating with the enemy, and even helping the enemy to thrive (*remember, it was Nebuchadnezzar and his armies who had destroyed Jerusalem, and defeated Daniel’s people: the exile was HIS doing – he was the arch enemy! – and Daniel was now “advising” him, seeking his success!*)

But this, of course, is what they also said about Jesus, when Jesus would be a guest at the homes of pretty godless people:

- Tax collectors who worked for the enemy Romans, and cheated their own people out of their money, taking far more than the Romans required, and keeping it as profit.
- Or Women of ill-repute, who ignored God’s Law on adultery.

The objectors (mainly religious leaders) would have said, “*How can you do that? Eat with them without at the same time condemning them? You’re sending the wrong message! You’re betraying God’s standards! You traitor and heretic!*”

BUT, JESUS DID IT . . . He chose not to act all self-righteous; not to stand on the outside; not to condemn those on the inside (though, of course, those who condemned him, were roundly condemned by him!), But to risk criticism (and death) by becoming friends with both neighbors and enemies; by becoming like salt or light -- all mixed in with the tasteless or dark world of the day (what good is salt if it’s not mixed in? Or light, if there is no darkness?)

AND HOW desperately we need to learn to do this in our polarized world today: TO LOOK FIRST for ways to join together; to join in; to cross the aisle; not to fear contamination; not to stay apart. But -- WHEREVER WE CAN -- TO JOIN IN AS DANIEL DID.

But that, of course -- is only Half The Story:

Which is to say that, while for Daniel the complexity of the world and the potential accusation of compromise for joining in was not a show stopper.

Nevertheless, there were certainly times when Daniel CHOSE NOT TO JOIN IN. When to do so for him would have clearly felt like a betrayal of the values and faith that were the core of his heart and soul.

And this, too, is something we see in the first chapter of Daniel.

So – Daniel has just arrived in Babylon. He’s still young, and being trained in the ways of the Babylonians. BUT he’s determined not to compromise something essential in his faith, and for him, that something “essential” was not to eat food that wasn’t “kosher”: not to eat any food that wasn’t prepared according to the traditional laws of purity prescribed by Moses (in some of the books carried to Babylon).

But this was difficult – to eat “kosher” in a foreign land and especially difficult because the king wanted his advisers to be strong and healthy and happy, and only “the best food” would do! But “the best” wasn’t kosher. And so Daniel chose to resist

Chapter 1, verse 8: Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself.

What’s really important here is to note that Daniel didn’t create a scene, or come on strong, but politely and firmly asked the palace master if he and his friends could be excused from the King’s food: “let us give it a try for ten days, and if we aren’t healthy at the end of the trial, well we’ll see what to do next.”

So, for ten days they ate just veggies and water! And at the end they were all healthier and fatter than before!

So that was his first act of resistance. And we’re told of one other in Daniel 6, when many years have passed by – possibly 40-50 – and a different king is on the throne (who still loves and trusts Daniel), towards the end of Daniel’s career.

In those days, the enemies of Daniel managed to get the king to sign an edict that they knew Daniel could not keep – that everyone in the kingdom was to stop praying to their own gods for 30 days, and to pray only to the King – as if he were divine – on pain of death by being thrown to the lions.

And Daniel, of course, couldn’t do it. He wouldn’t stop praying to God: the one true God, even though he knows this is actually a trap, and that he will be caught, and sentenced to death.

And so, with great courage and faith, he goes home and prays. Once again, he doesn’t make a big show out of it – there’s no self-righteousness here; no religious pomposity. He simply goes home – to the privacy of his home and it’s there, invading his privacy, where his enemies find him: **PRAYING!**

(would to God that not only our enemies but our friends would find us praying in our homes!)

And they bring him to the king for breaking the law, and throw him into a den of lions to die. Even though the king loves Daniel, realizes he’s been duped, and wants to save him, he can do nothing to save him! But God does. Daniel prays, and God intervenes. Let me read from Daniel 6:

²⁰When the king 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?”

²¹Daniel then said to the king, “O king, live forever! ²²My 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.”

And this is how Daniel did it

Living in exile in a place where he did not want to be

1. **He joined in** where he could
2. But he also **established the boundary lines** -- that he knew he could not cross
3. And when it came time to resist, he didn’t do it in a self-righteous way, but he did it clearly, and firmly, confidently, and with enormous courage.

And this is our calling too:

1. To join in where we can – even where some may accuse us of betraying our cause, and perhaps even betraying our Lord
2. But at the same time: to know where in our faith and way of life we cannot, and must not compromise.

I don't know where the line is that you cannot cross, where you resist the culture. In fact, I need to add that it's not always easy to know, because in every day and generation the actual boundary lines may shift

– not all of them: to pray to anyone but God is wrong always and forever: don't cross that line!

But this means that in every day and generation, we must be in touch with our maker in prayer (as Daniel was), daily asking for enormous wisdom and courage to know what WE are to do – when do we join in or hold back? And, how we can live like Daniel here and now.

For my wife Currie and me, one of our small acts of resistance – not joining in – is through tithing. For us: tithing (returning ten percent of income to God) is a deliberate counter-cultural choice in a consumer society: a choice not only to support God's work; but as an act of defiance and resistance to the consumer culture – to it, by decrease our income by 10% before we spend anything.

Or perhaps you remember the story of Eric Liddell in the 1981 movie *Chariots of Fire*. The story is set at the 1924 Olympic games in Paris, where Liddell is a favorite for a gold medal. But one of his races is on a Sunday, and despite pressure from the Olympic Committee, and even the Royal Family he refuses to run.

(In the Scotland my parents grew up in – and to a certain extent, for me too in the 1950's and 1960s – no one did anything on a Sunday: just church. This was God's way; God's law)

For Liddell, this was a line he couldn't cross.

Some Christian people thought he'd already crossed the line by "Joining in" the Olympics, in the first place, instead of choosing to be a missionary in China (which he would later become). But here he was – living confidently both as a joiner – and as an exile, setting a line that he would not cross. Marching to the beat of a different drummer

I don't know how far you go – when you join in with others, with the majority, friends or enemies, whoever they may be – but God knows and like Daniel, you must seek that involvement out in prayer. Maybe you've been on the sideline, and it's time to join in more!

And I don't know where the line is that you cannot cross once you do join in: the line where you resist the culture and save the integrity of your soul; remembering that you are never quite "in," always in some sense an exile.

But God knows – and you like Daniel must seek that line out in prayer.

May God give us all the wisdom and courage to make these decisions, to join in or to stand apart, sometimes all alone, and to live life with confidence and boldness in our pluralistic age. LIKE DANIEL

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2019 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/sermons>
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800