

“Modeling Another Way”
Daniel 1:1-17/John 15:18-19

This morning we begin a sermon series that will focus on events in the journey of the Old Testament figure Daniel. According to the book bearing his name, that man’s life covered the whole stretch of time when the people of God were in Babylonian exile. Some of you are probably familiar with parts of his story it relates to time in a lion’s den or a furnace of fire. We will be reflecting upon both of those events as they arise in the narrative, but will spend our time over the summer allowing the larger story to unfold, too. We do so even though life in 21st century America could seem to have little in common with what those exiles faced 2500 years ago. Still, I am convinced that those ancient scenes have something to teach us as “the stories model how to negotiate a foreign culture without fully accommodating to it or rejecting it.” (Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible New Revised Standard Version*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 1249). As people of faith, we need lessons in such work still and begin today with the account of a struggle over food.

The opening verses tell of how Daniel and other exiles from noble families are placed in the service of King Nebuchadnezzar and start a three-year training process. The king assigns a daily ration of food and wine for all the men, but we read, “Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations.” He asks the palace master for a dietary exemption for himself and three friends. The servant is reluctant, but eventually agrees to a trial of ten days when their ration will consist of only vegetables and water. When that period of time ends, the four Jewish men have not lost weight, but appear in better shape than those who have eaten the prescribed diet. While that outcome may not be a surprise to any vegetarians or even my favorite registered dietician, it was a twist in the plot and the revised diet continued moving forward. “To these four young men,” our text concludes, “God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams.”

That final line offers a bit of foreshadowing, but on this day, we stop with its depiction of a challenge over food. We aren’t told what caused Daniel’s objection to the prescribed menu. Some have suggested the ration must have included items Jews were taught to avoid or food offered to idols. Others have speculated that for everyday citizens of the era, meat and wine were part of a meal only during festivals and otherwise were included daily only in the diet of the wealthy; thus, Daniel’s refusal was an act of solidarity with his fellow exiles. Any of those explanations could be correct. All we know is that he chose a different path as an act of faith.

Certainly, we live in an era with different challenges. Equally clear is that there continues to be disagreement about what composes a healthy diet, but what Daniel models goes beyond issues of food and instead demonstrates other situations that are part of the Christian journey. Namely, how do we live out our faith in a culture that often has different values or priorities? Put differently, how do we make choices that reflect the teachings of Jesus?

Several months ago, I purchased a television online. The day it was out for delivery, I received a text message saying it would arrive before 8 p.m. and that someone had to be there to sign for it. I completed my errands early that day and then began to wait at home. When late afternoon arrived, the package still had not, but the tracking info said it was on the truck. 8 p.m. came and went. I waited 30 more minutes and then contacted customer service who said I could pick it up at their distribution center the next day or wait at home again. I opted for the former.

The next morning, I arrived before any trucks left, but no one could find the package. Their records indicated it had been delivered the previous day. I assured them it had not. They

concluded it must still be on the truck and that it would be best to return home. Shortly after doing so, a car pulled up and a man I did not know started walking toward our door. He held out his cell phone and asked, “Is this you?” I looked at the screen and saw the photo of a shipping label bearing my name and address. “Did you order a tv?” he continued. When I answered “yes” to both questions he then told me it had been left at his house the night before. After learning his address--on my street but fifteen houses away—I soon pulled into his driveway, he brought out the box, and then told the story.

“When I got home last night, it was on my front porch. My first thought was that the last thing I need is another tv and when I took it inside my wife said ‘What did you do?’ I told her it was a mistake and that I would find you today.” He offered to help unload it at our home, too, but I thanked him and declined. Soon the new device was in place. Only then, did I stop to think about all the things that had or could have gone wrong. The driver had misread the address and had not gotten a signature. The first was a mistake, but the second was an intentional failure to follow protocol. His electronic notation that the package had been delivered to me could have meant the people at the distribution center would have ignored my explanation. That neighbor could have kept the television and no one would have been the wiser.

He and I never discussed faith in that encounter, but my neighbor was clearly modeling a decision consistent with the Biblical mandate against stealing. I’m equally certain that if he ever told that story to friends at least one of them would have said “You should have kept it or given it to me!” Some of Daniel’s fellow Jews surely would not have understood his stance on food either and probably encouraged him not to make a fuss. Both men reveal that when our actions cut against the cultural grain, there is always the risk of resistance or worse.

Jesus spoke of that reality in our New Testament passage. It comes from a night when he offers a long stretch of instruction to the disciples while gathered for their last meal together. As part of that evening, he gave them a new commandment “that you love one another” and promised to send the gift of the Holy Spirit after he departed. He told them, “You are my friends if you do what I command you” and called upon them “to go and bear fruit.” Lest they thought that the journey ahead would be easy, though, he then speaks the words we heard minutes ago.

“If the world hates you,” Jesus says “be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.”

Jesus is naming the challenge that has always been present for disciples who act upon their faith; namely, times when the culture resists the choices one makes on account of one’s commitment to Christ. So when you choose not to cheat on an exam even if others do, you can be ridiculed because you are making them look bad. If you decide to give of your time or treasures to the church others in your household may push back since that means you are complicating their schedule and budget. If you make the choice to support legislation because of your faith convictions instead of what party leaders decree, you can be accused of being disloyal. Jesus recognized such possibilities while at the same time urging his disciples not to go along just to keep the peace. Rather, as one scholar put it, this teaching “challenges the contemporary church to reject the way the world does business and to present the world with an alternative, an alternative grounded in the love of God as revealed in Jesus.” (O’Day, Gail R. *The New Interpreter’s Bible: The Gospel of John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 767).

Bishop Michael Curry first came onto the world stage three years ago when he was the preacher at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. As the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church it was certainly fitting that he be invited to participate in that Anglican

ceremony given the historic connections of the two denominations, but as an African-American with an exuberant style of preaching his words and spirit that day created a new admirer in me.

Lori and I recently led a Growth Group on his book *Love is the Way: Holding Onto Hope in Troubling Times*. It is mostly autobiographical and draws from his story to speak to how it is that we can model a better way in the world. At one point, he tells of how that message became real for him again in an unexpected way while serving a congregation in inner city Baltimore.

“I was in my office in the church one day when I answered a knock at the door. It was a young guy, in his early twenties, whose face I didn’t recognize. Apparently he had seen our group singing spirituals on the corners. In fact, he was one of the dealers staring at us from across the street. He asked me if we could sit down and talk. I didn’t show it, but I felt myself stiffen with anger. I had spent years now trying to keep kids safe from crossfire, to hold them tight so that the magnet of the streets couldn’t pull them away...He represented everything I was against: selfishness, violence, and exploitation as a way of life. I took a deep breath and reminded myself what I believed, what I said in so many ways every Sunday. Church was the one place where everyone was welcome...I invited him to sit, but it was an intellectual decision. My gut was still screaming at me that this guy was no good and undeserving...Still another part of me was nervous that we had ticked someone off, and this guy was here to deliver the message.

“‘I want out.’ These were the exact words he used,” Curry continues “They tumbled out of him the second he sat down. I said, ‘Tell me what you mean by *out*.’ Eddie, we’ll call him, wanted out of the drug world and wondered if I could help him...I naively asked if he could enter the Witness Protection Program. He laughed and shook his head, saying, ‘You’ve been watching too much television.’” Thus began a process of months of meetings where Curry learned Eddie’s story. “The more I came to know his background and to know him, the more I realized that we weren’t very different at all, and it became harder and harder to dislike him. Eddie wasn’t a drug dealer; he was a person, a child of God, like me. I was now in a relationship with him—and the result was love, whether or not I saw it coming or even wanted it.”

On one of those visits, Eddie asked about Jesus. “We began a deep exploration of the Christian faith. We read and studied Scripture together. We walked through parts of the New Testament, reading the key gospel passages that help reveal a real picture of Jesus. Then we worked through what it meant to follow him. Eddie had never been to Sunday school or church, so he hung on every word. It was all completely new to him—and that made it new for me...One day he said, “‘OK, what do I have to do to seal the deal?’...He asked to be baptized, understanding that renouncing evil would require significant life changes. Because he didn’t want it to be public, we planned a private ceremony. I had done very few adult baptisms, and this one required of the recipient a level of courage that I had never experienced in a church before. Here was someone who was making promises that could put his life in jeopardy...Never before had I trembled or felt myself tearing up during baptism, but I did that day. Never before had I looked into eyes gazing at me with such intensity.” (Michael Curry, *Love is the Way: Holding onto Hope in Troubling Times*. New York: Avery, 2020, pp.155-159)

Seeing a child of God in the form of a repentant drug dealer, actively seeking the intended owner of a new television, refusing to eat certain foods, all of those choices and countless others can be ones that reflect our faith and thus open us to criticism or worse. Yet it is that path to which we are called all because we have committed our lives to one whom, at times, the world still hates.