

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / May 2, 2021 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
Daniel: Faithful in Doubtland Sermon Series
God with Us in Doubtland (Daniel 2)

Relevance: Doubt is on the rise in America

Good morning, how are ya'll doing this morning? Let's pray...

Doubting God is on the rise. Polling company Gallup just revealed for first time in their 80 years tracking data that less than half of Americans belong to a faith community, like a church, synagogue, or mosque.

Gallup's most recent data shows that only 47% of Americans belong to a faith community, online or in person, down from 70% back in 1999. That's a big drop, and things are trending further that way, as only 36% of millennials belong to a faith community.

There are many wonderful things about our nation, people, and culture. I'm not looking to move anywhere else. Yet there are also things both inside and outside of the church that are encouraging people to doubt God and the goodness of His ways.

Like when in churches an abuse occurs, and it's hidden by leadership rather than brought into the light. Or like when leaders and churches misuse or even steal money given to serve God's kingdom. Or like when some Christians seem to care more about the agenda of their political party than they do about Jesus' agenda of love and disciple making.

As I heard another pastor say it, some of the younger people the church is losing today is not so much because those younger people want to be secular, but rather because they look at the problems in the church and believe that we're secular.

In addition, aspects of our broader culture encourage doubt in God too. To be clear, I'm not suggesting that everyone is out to get Christians, and I'm not talking about the Democrats or the Republicans. I'm talking about things in our culture that encourage doubt in God that a Democrat and Republican might agree on.

For example, imagine someone working at Fox News getting together for drinks with someone from MSNBC. I can imagine either of them saying, "Anyone who says you can't sleep with whoever you want, as long as there's consent, is close minded" as the other replies, "Yeah, life is about doing what makes you happy. Nobody has a right to tell me what's right and wrong for me."

These kinds of cultural ideas, that life is about fulfilling your desires, without regard to what God says or their impact on others, when they're heard over and over in conversation, and in media, and online, it can encourage doubt in God and the goodness of His ways.

Our culture also has thoughts that more directly question. Like someone saying, "Honestly, I don't know why anyone takes the Bible seriously with all the violence in the Old Testament" as another replies, "I know, and how could a good God even allow Covid to exist?"

So we find ourselves in a place where we hear thoughts that encourage doubt in God, and we see church failings occur, and we know that each year fewer belong to faith communities.

Taken all together, you might say America is becoming more of a *doubtland*, a place that encourages doubt in God and His good ways. Maybe you've been dealing with doubt, perhaps especially this past year. These kinds of things are paralyzing some people's faith.

Orienting to God's Word - Daniel and friends show us how to navigate "doubtland"

As we look for help with this, if there's anyone who can show us how to navigate our *doubtland*, it's Daniel, who faced a more challenging one. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the Old Testament book of Daniel, chapter 2. Daniel 2. And if not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Daniel's *doubtland* started with a disappointing faith community. As he grew up, most of God's people ignored God and lived in ways that went against God's plans for human flourishing. Then Daniel faced more temptation to doubt.

The book starts with Jerusalem, the capital of God's people, being taken over by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 605BC. God doesn't even defend His temple, as Nebuchadnezzar plunders God's artifacts and takes them to his false god's temple.

Along with plundering goods, Nebuchadnezzar plunders the city's young nobles, like Daniel and his three friends. Nebuchadnezzar forces them to travel 500 miles to live in Babylon and serve in his royal court.

In Babylon, the king renames Daniel and three of his friends, wiping away their Hebrew names that honor God. Daniel, which means "God is my judge" is renamed Belteshazzar, after the false god Bel, meaning "Bel's prince."

Next they were enrolled in “Babylon University”, forced to spend a few years learning Babylonian language, literature, and dark occult practices before entering into the king’s service. To really add insult to injury, as servants of the king, it’s very likely that Daniel and his friends were also made eunuchs.

In all this, the king created a *doubtland* for Daniel and his friends as Nebuchadnezzar took over their city and took them from their home where belief in God was common, and took away their freedom, and took away their godly names, and took away their ability to get married and have children, and tried to take away their language, culture, and faith through re-education at “Babylon U.”

In all of this, it would have been very tempting for Daniel and his friends to wonder, “Why is all this happening? Is God really with us?” You might be wondering the same.

Teaching: Is God really with us?

Wise men say the gods aren’t with us – Their temptation to doubt grows even bigger in Daniel chapter 2, starting in verse 1. **(1-4)**

2 In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. ² So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, ³ he said to them, “I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means.” ⁴ Then the astrologers answered the king, “May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it.”

So King Nebuchadnezzar has a disturbing dream that keeps him from sleeping. It’s possibly a recurring dream since verse 1 says “dreams” (plural). The king, here early in his reign, is thinking about the future, about how long his kingdom will last. As he drifts off to sleep, he’s sees a big awe-inspiring statue, like his big awe-inspiring kingdom. But the statue has feet with clay, a weak foundation, and then a mere stone comes in and knocks the whole thing over. He wakes up scared and can’t go back to sleep.

So the king brings in his “wise men”: the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, astrologers and wants them to tell him the meaning of his troubling dream. Perhaps Daniel and his friends are still in training, or viewed as too inexperienced to be brought in here with the senior magic squad ☺ before the king. They tell the king in verse 4, “Tell us your dream, and we’ll interpret

it.” But the king, alarmed by his dream, and perhaps seeing how it could be used to justify rebellion, wants to play this one differently in verse 5. **(5-6)**

⁵ The king replied to the astrologers, “This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. ⁶ But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me.”

Notice the violence in this *doubtland*, as the king plans to destroy his whole magic squad and their homes if they can’t tell him his dream. Verse 7: **(7-9)**

⁷ Once more they replied, “Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it.” ⁸ Then the king answered, “I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided: ⁹ If you do not tell me the dream, there is only one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me.”

The king, stressed and perhaps fearing that they’re plotting against him, tells them to quick stalling and tell him his dream, or face death. Verse 10. **(10-11)**

¹⁰ The astrologers answered the king, “There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. ¹¹ What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans.”

The magic squad objects that the king’s request is impossible because the gods aren’t with us. So some today say that God isn’t with us. And you, or others you know, might be tempted to believe them, as it’s hard to keep the faith in *doubtland*.

But in these verses we see the limits of worldly power and false religion, as the most powerful king of his time and his “wise men” are helpless. The king is not happy about it in verse 12. **(12-13)**

¹² This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. ¹³ So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death, and men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death.

Daniel and friends experience God is with us – Imagine being Daniel, having already faced so much, about to unjustly die because of this king’s murderous decree. Rather than respond to

hardship by concluding that God isn't with us, as the magic squad had with their gods, Daniel responds with godly wisdom in verse 14. **(14-16)**

¹⁴ When Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact. ¹⁵ He asked the king's officer, "Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. ¹⁶ At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him.

As Daniel operates with godly wisdom, the king senses that there's something different about his request for more time compared to the other's stalling. But circumstances are still dire, so Daniel urges his godly friends to join him in prayer in verse 17. **(17-18)**

¹⁷ Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ¹⁸ He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.

Like Daniel, his three friends were renamed with Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But in the context of seeking God in prayer, the author refers to them by their Hebrew names that show their relationship with the God Who is with us.

Like Daniel, we need friends in relationship with God if we're going to keep the faith in *doubtland*. My care group just went on a weekend retreat together, and it greatly encouraged everyone's faith.

These friends all pray, and then Daniel discovers afresh that God is with us in verse 19. **(19-23)**

¹⁹ During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven ²⁰ and said: "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. ²¹ He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. ²² He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him. ²³ I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors: You have given me wisdom and power, you have made known to me what we asked of you, you have made known to us the dream of the king."

Turns out the king's magic squad was wrong, God is with us and gives us wisdom as we're in relationship with Him. So Daniel praises God in verses 20-23, as the One with wisdom, knowledge, and power Who is in control of the future and Who is with us; important truths for

those in exile. And I need to know that God is with us, and I bet you do too, if we're going to make it in *doubtland*.

Daniel shows the king that God is with us – Next Daniel hurries and asks for an audience with the king in verse 24. **(24-30)**

²⁴ Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, “Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him.” ²⁵ Arioch took Daniel to the king at once and said, “I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means.” ²⁶ The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), “Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?” ²⁷ Daniel replied, “No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, ²⁸ but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you were lying in bed are these: ²⁹ “As Your Majesty was lying there, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. ³⁰ As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than anyone else alive, but so that Your Majesty may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind.

The king's servant may have been trying to take credit in verse 25 by saying he found a man who can interpret the dream. But Daniel in verse 28 gives God the glory, saying, there is a God with us Who reveals mysteries, and in verse 30 Daniel nails the point home by saying that he, Daniel, has no greater wisdom than others.

Daniel is not impressed with himself, even while impressing the most powerful man in the world. No, Daniel is captured by the greatness of God, and wants the king to also know of His God Who is with Us. Daniel has a heart for and a good rapport even with the oppressive king, wanting him to know that God is with Us. And Daniel doesn't just say it, he shows it as he shares the dream and its interpretation starting in verse 31. **(31-36)**

³¹ “Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. ³² The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, ³³ its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. ³⁴ While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human

hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. ³⁵ Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth. ³⁶ “This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king.

So the dream involves an enormous, awe-inspiring statute made of various quality materials that is then smashed into oblivion by this mysterious rock that then fills the whole earth. But what does it mean? Starting in verse 37, Daniel explains: **(37-43)**

³⁷ Your Majesty, you are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; ³⁸ in your hands he has placed all mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds in the sky. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold. ³⁹ “After you, another kingdom will arise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. ⁴⁰ Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others. ⁴¹ Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay. ⁴² As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. ⁴³ And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay.

Having now had the benefit of seeing history unfold, there are a few common interpretations of the statue. The gold head represents Babylon. Some think the silver chest and arms represent the Medo-Persian empire, while others think it’s just the Medes. From there some think the bronze belly and thighs represent Greece, others think it’s the Persians.

Some think the legs of iron that will break others represent Rome, others think they represent Greece. Some think the divided feet of iron and clay represent the weakening and dividing of Rome, while others think it represents Greece after Alexander the Great. Whatever kingdoms the statue covers, eventually every human kingdom ends, and all that is left is God’s kingdom, which Daniel wants the king to know about in verse 44. **(44-45)**

⁴⁴ “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to

an end, but it will itself endure forever. ⁴⁵ This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. “The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy.”

In the dream the rock that’s cut out, but not by human hands, represents Christ’s kingdom. As this violent king is so stressed about his kingdom that he’s about to murder all his wise men, Daniel bravely shares that the only lasting legacy is the kingdom of God.

All these other kingdoms of violence and oppression will one day be replaced by God’s kingdom of perfect peace and justice that will fill the whole earth. Keeping this perspective while in *doubtland* is so important for Daniel and for us. In the presence of such revelation, the king can’t help but respond to Daniel and his God in verse 46. **(46-49)**

⁴⁶ Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. ⁴⁷ The king said to Daniel, “Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery.” ⁴⁸ Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. ⁴⁹ Moreover, at Daniel’s request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court.

This king, who had done so much to deconstruct Daniel’s faith, can’t help but now bow before this junior wise man, honoring him and his God Who is with us. Then Daniel and his friends are promoted. So as two more groups of Jewish exiles are sent to Babylon in the coming years, there are godly leaders to help them to keep the faith in *doubtland*.

Next Step

Daniel and his three friends experienced quite the *doubtland*, growing up around religious hypocrisy, experiencing the horrors of invasion, and being exiled to a place trying to deconstruct their faith. I don’t think our *doubtland* is nearly as intense, but we too see hypocrisy in parts of the church, and suffering in our lives and world, and aspects of our culture discouraging faith.

I wonder what Daniel might say about our struggles if he were with us today. Perhaps he'd share that the hypocrisy of others is never a good reason to give up on our faithful God. Perhaps he'd share how it's hard to accept, but his faith, wisdom, and intimacy with God grew most in the pressure of problems, not in the ease of blessings.

Perhaps Daniel would share about how, with the support of a few godly friends, he experienced in his problems over and over that God is with us. How the people of his day would have never dreamed of the powerful, pagan king bowing before an exiled Jew and acknowledging God's greatness, until God brought it to pass.

Perhaps Daniel might also give us vision for how, when a nation moves away from God, as they did in his day, often years later the people see their need for God afresh. And how that return to God often begins through a faithful remnant, like Daniel and his friends. For in *doubtland*, people need to see godly examples of loving, wise people with the presence of God in their lives, who keep the faith that God is with us, even in *doubtland*. Godly examples like Daniel and his friends, the kinds of examples in God's power that we can be in our culture today.

Even if that cultural return to God is slow coming, as Daniel experienced in 70 years of exile, Daniel might remind us that in the waiting, God is with us, and that in the end His kingdom of peace, justice, and love alone will stand. So may we join Daniel in having faith that God is with us. That's our next step this morning Northwest, have faith that God is with us. As you have that faith, what difference might that make in how you live your life this week?

Lord's Supper reminds us that God is with us

As you think about that question, one way we'll practice our next step is by taking the Lord's Supper. Here we remember that Jesus stepped into human history to be with us and do what was necessary to be with us forever. "When only love could make a way, Jesus gave His life in a beautiful exchange."

Lord Jesus invites everyone to His table, to His supper, but we must respond His invitation with faith, trusting that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead to bring us to His table.

If you've responded to Jesus' invitation, you're welcome to eat the bread and drink the cup this morning. Deacons, please see if anyone needs a bread and cup as we prepare our hearts by praising Jesus, Who gave His life in a beautiful exchange. **Song**

Explanation – One of the names for Jesus is Immanuel, which means, “God with us.” Jesus came to earth to be with us and to make a way for us to be with Him forever. He dealt with our sin and death problems through His death and resurrection, so that we can now warmly eat with each other and with God.

Bread - This bread represents Christ’s body, broken at great cost, for us. Eat it in joyful remembrance.

This gets even better. All who believe in Jesus also receive the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God in our lives. God with us, helping us to know God and working through us so that more can also know that God is with us, as we look forward to Jesus returning to fill the whole earth with God’s kingdom.

Cup - This cup represents Christ’s blood, spilled for us. Drink it with joy, knowing God is with us, and one day we will feast at His eternal table. Let’s pray...

Dismissal – You’re dismissed, go in peace to love and serve the God with us.