

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / May 30, 2021 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
Daniel: Faithful in Doubtland Sermon Series
Complexities in Doubtland (Daniel 6)

Sharing about Barry and praying

Good morning, how are ya'll doing this morning? I'm excited about God working through *Mission on the Edge* and our outreach to the pregnancy care center!

And I'm excited this morning that Barry Hannant from our church family is drawing while I preach! Thank you, Barry, for sharing your amazing artistic gifts that will help us more deeply engage with God's Word. If you're not in a seat where you'll be able to see Barry's finished work, you'll want to switch seats now. We'll highlight Barry's work at the end of the message, but now let's pray...

Relevance: A story shows relationships are complex today

About 5 years ago, I'm at a birthday dinner and end up sitting across the table from a man I hadn't met before. We start talking, and he asks me what I do; and I say that I'm a pastor. Immediately he asks, "What do you think about gay marriage?"

As I quickly ponder how to respond, some anxiety churns in me. We haven't even ordered our food yet, so we've got some time left across the table from each other.

I have no idea what he thinks about the subject. I don't know how much common ground we do or don't share when it comes to Jesus, the Bible, sexuality.

And I don't know if the question deeply impacts him personally or if he's just thinking about it because it's around the time of the Supreme Court's gay marriage decision. I don't know if he's been deeply wounded by a judgmental church, or instead stressed out about the ways our culture is changing.

I do know I'd prefer not to be part of a scene that leads to us becoming the poopers of the party ☺ So a simple question has become complex in a hurry.

In this series we've been talking about how there are many wonderful things about our nation, people, and culture, and about how America is becoming more of a *doubtland*. How each year the percentage of Americans who are part of a faith community keeps getting smaller. And how there are things going on inside the church, like hypocrisy, and also things outside the church encouraging people to doubt God and the goodness of His ways.

As we're becoming more of a *doubtland*, loving relationships with all of our neighbors has become more complex. That's not just true for followers of Jesus, that's true for all of us with the rich diversity of beliefs, experiences, and lifestyles around us.

Orienting to God's Word – Let's learn from seeing Daniel navigate complexity

As we look for help navigating relationships in our complex culture, we turn to Daniel. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the Old Testament book of Daniel, chapter 6. Daniel 6. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. If you're new to the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers and the little numbers are verse numbers.

The book starts with Daniel, a young Jewish noble, as a teenager. Daniel's home Jerusalem is taken over by the Babylonians in 605BC. The Babylonian king renames Daniel after a Babylonian god and forces Daniel to move to Babylon and serve his royal court as a governmental leader. By the time we get to chapter 6, Daniel has been serving at the highest levels of a violent, corrupt government for about 60 years.

So Daniel has to discern when and how to be an influence for good in a place of much bad. Daniel has to live well with people who think and live very differently than him, while remaining faithful to His God Who wasn't all that popular in Babylon.

Teaching: Complexities and costs in *doubtland*

It's hard to know... - So Daniel is in a complex situation made more complex as a new foreign empire takes over before chapter 6, and Daniel must figure out how to operate under the new regime. Imagine what Daniel is seeing as he works in governments that are shockingly violent, unapologetically oppressive to the poor, with dark occult practices. Daniel probably saw things daily that he disagreed with and disturbed him.

He couldn't take a stand against all of it for 60 straight years. So I bet even Daniel might have struggled at times to know when to just go along to get along and when instead to share about God and His good ways.

Our situation isn't as complex as Daniel's, but maybe you can relate. That it's sometimes hard to discern when it's best to listen well to others and just go along to get along, and when it's instead time to respectfully and lovingly share about God.

Maybe you're wondering if you should share about what Jesus is doing in your life with a friend who thinks it's wrong for Christians to try to convert anyone. If you share, there could be a cold response and a new awkwardness in the relationship.

Or you might face the challenge of deciding how to respond as another student blurts out a really inappropriate joke; complex situations. For Daniel, the complexity grows greater as he also starts to face opposition. We'll start in verse 1 of Daniel 6, as a new king named Darius¹ decides to promote Daniel. **(1-3)**.

It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom,² with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss.³ Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.

As Daniel serves with excellence, the king plans to put him over everything. But others in the crowd grow jealous, thinking, "Daniel is just like us, he shouldn't be in charge." But as they try to find some dirt on Daniel, they discover Daniel is not like them in verse 4. **(4-5)**.

⁴ At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.⁵ Finally these men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God."

Daniel has served amid corruption for 60 years and yet these rivals can't find one instance where Daniel got involved in something dirty.

When it's costly, is following God still worth it? – God has been working through His servant Daniel. So the schemers set a trap related to Daniel's faithfulness to God, in verse 6. **(6-9)**

⁶ So these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said: "May King Darius live forever!"⁷ The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown

¹ We may not have enough information to know Darius' identity. One possibility is that he is Cyrus. Kings used additional enthronement names and Cyrus had a Persian father and Median mother (Pierce, *Teach the Text: Daniel*), so he could be described as a Mede. If so, Daniel 6:28 says "...the reign of Darius, that is, the reign of Cyrus..."

into the lions' den. ⁸ Now, Your Majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.”

⁹ So King Darius put the decree in writing.

As King Darius establishes himself early in his reign, he likes the idea of everyone acknowledging him as semi divine by only praying to him. So Darius makes the schemers suggestion a law. For Daniel, the law raises a question. When it's costly, is following God still worth it? We love the earthly and heavenly blessings God provides, but what about when it's costly?

It's a question that Christians and other persecuted groups in some parts of the world must answer with life and death consequences, as Daniel does with the threat of the lion's den. It's a question we can face too, with lower stakes.

Like the administrators with Daniel, not everyone will like how you navigate our complex culture. To be clear, I'm not saying everyone is out to get Christians. And some opposition against Christians is appropriate, like when a church or its leaders hide abuse, or misuse money, or care more about their political party's agenda than Jesus' agenda of love and disciplinmaking.

So if you're ever opposed, make sure it's while serving people with integrity and love, like Daniel, not because you're doing what's wrong, or being a jerk as you advocate for what's right. And when we face some risk or even opposition for faithfully following God, it can feel like there's a metaphorical lion staring you down.

Perhaps it's wondering whether to speak up in a respectful way as your workplace enacts a policy against God's plans for human flourishing. Speaking up for what is good might lead to you being on the “outs” with others or losing the promotion.

It's tempting to seek safety (separation or assimilation) – Whatever it looks like in our individual lives, when it starts to get costly, is following God still worth it?

I wonder if Daniel was ever tempted to distance himself from the challenges and complexity of Babylon. Some Jews of Daniel's day did. God had told them all through the prophet Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 29, to live inside Babylon and seek the peace and prosperity of the whole city.

But some instead choose to fully separate from Babylon. Living outside the city, at a safe distance, they wagged their fingers together at “those Babylonians” and even hoped bad things for them rather than loving and serving the Babylonian people as God commanded.

Let’s be honest, whatever your beliefs, life can sometimes feel safer, more comfortable, less complex, if you only relate with those who agree with you, and keep everyone who disagrees, or might even oppose you, at a safe relational distance. It can be tempting to seek safety through separation.

When there’s complexity, and things start to get costly, another temptation is to seek safety through full assimilation. To be so agreeable about everything, and keep so quiet about issues, and live so similarly to everyone around you, that no one would even suspect you’re a follower of Jesus who’s different in any meaningful way.

If we’re being honest, life and relationships can also sometimes feel safer, more comfortable, less complex, if you always go with the flow and always keep quiet about what you really think as you avoid uncomfortable moments through full assimilation.

Daniel stays engaged and devoted, impacting the king – I wonder if now 80-year-old Daniel ever got so weary of the complexity and opposition that he wondered if following God was still worth it. Let’s see how Daniel answers that question here in verse 10. **(10)**

¹⁰ Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

Daniel stays engaged with people and devoted to God. Now Daniel’s life doesn’t tell us our exact ways to be engaged. Not everyone is called to serve in government. Not everyone is called to take a stand for publicly praying, like Daniel does here. Not everyone is even called to face the same level of risk as they follow Jesus.

But like Daniel, God calls His followers today to love God and love people. So we’re called to be in relationships where we lovingly relate with people who disagree with us, having to discern when being a good friend looks like listening well and going along to get along, and when being a good friend looks like respectfully sharing about our life with God.

God also calls us to be salt and light. So like Daniel, we are to live and share distinctly enough that at least some around us know of our devotion to God, like the king mentioning twice in this chapter about how Daniel serves God continually.

So we must avoid the simplicity and safety of either fully separating from or fully assimilating to the culture around us. That's not loving God and loving people and it's not salt and light living. If God leads you to have a spiritual conversation with someone, and you're nervous because you might be labeled intolerant, let's be willing to face that lion.

For trying to live a risk-free life as a follower of Jesus brings its own risks. None of us wants to have at our core a life with no convictions, a life that doesn't value anything enough to be willing to take a risk for it. If you're wondering, I'm talking to myself here too. I'm not saying this as someone who is a risk taker by nature. I was an accounting major in college and fit all the stereotypes that go with it. ☺

When there's risk, when following God becomes costly, what's a relationship with God worth? Daniel says that relationship with God is worth everything. I'd rather be eaten by lions than stop praying to God kind of everything. I'm willing to put everything on the line because I want my king and others to know how amazing my God is kind of everything.

We don't yet know how things will work out for Daniel as the shady administrators now report Daniel's illegal prayer to the king. But notice how the king has already been impacted by Daniel's faithful living starting in verse 13. **(13-18)**

¹³ Then they said to the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, Your Majesty, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day." ¹⁴ When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him. ¹⁵ Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, "Remember, Your Majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed." ¹⁶ So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" ¹⁷ A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. ¹⁸ Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.

Like Daniel, as we stay engaged with people and devoted to God, we might possibly be opposed. But like Daniel, we'll also build some great relationships with people who feel our love for God and for them. Notice in verse 14 how the king is greatly distressed and makes every effort to rescue Daniel, and says in verse 16, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" And is unable to eat or sleep in verse 18.

As you stay engaged and live a life of integrity, love, and devotion to God, even when you don't feel like it, you have the opportunity to change perceptions and make an eternal difference in people's lives. Like Daniel did with the king, who rushes to see God's response to Daniel's devotion in verse 19. **(19-20)**

¹⁹ At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. ²⁰ When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?"

From what I read this week, the lions in dens were kept on the verge of starvation, and lions hunt mostly at night, when Daniel is in the pit, so things look dark here at night for Daniel, and maybe in your life too.

As we show up, God often shows up – But as Daniel has shown up for God, at the first light of dawn, God's power is revealed as He shows up in verse 21. **(21-23)**

²¹ Daniel answered, "May the king live forever! ²² My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty." ²³ The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

Ironically, the king had the more difficult night than Daniel, as 80-year-old Daniel has been chilling, just petting lions. It wasn't guaranteed that God would deliver Daniel from the lions. God could have instead delivered Daniel through death to His presence. But as Daniel shows up for God, God shows up here, but only as Daniel is facing the lion, not before.

I don't know about you, but I often want God to show up and do something great in my life, or in my family, or in our church, or in our city, without me having to really show up like Daniel did. I wonder in your life, or in the life of our church, if God might be telling us, "If you

want Me to show up, then really show up. I'll show up in great ways once you're facing the lion, not before."

We see God's power not only shutting the mouths of lions, but in the loving way Daniel treats the king who foolishly signed the law that led to Daniel facing this ordeal.

As Daniel lived out his godly convictions in relationships, it did not include unrighteous anger, or a sense of superiority, or obnoxious behavior. Daniel lived out his convictions in love, as Pastor Dave also shared about last Sunday. And King Darius, whom Daniel loved and served so well, is so glad that Daniel is well.

But having the seen the conspirators for what they are, the violent king destroys them in the way they tried to destroy Daniel in verse 24. **(24-28)**

²⁴ At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones. ²⁵ Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth: "May you prosper greatly! ²⁶ "I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. "For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. ²⁷ He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions." ²⁸ So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

Next Step

This morning we've seen that following God in *doubtland* is complex. It's sometimes hard to know when it's time to go along to get along and when to share convictions, and how to share them well.

When following God is complex and starts to get costly, we may want to seek safety through fully separating from or fully assimilating to the people around us. But like Daniel, we're not to separate, we're to stay engaged. Like Daniel, we're not to fully assimilate, we're to stay devoted to God. Like Daniel, even when we'll face a lion, our next step is to show up for God.

We're still talking about Daniel today, over 2,500 years later, encouraged by his life to show up for God in our lives. Encouraged to believe that it'd be better to be eaten by lions than to stop praying to God.

But enough about Daniel, what about you? Maybe you're just checking things out this morning, and you don't yet identify as a follower of Jesus. Maybe what God wants for you this morning is to know how He has shown up for you.

That Jesus stepped into human history for you. Like Daniel, Jesus was framed by evildoers, arrested while praying in a private place, and had a government leader unsuccessfully work for His release.

But unlike Daniel, Jesus was not saved from the lions. On the cross, Jesus was mauled to death as He took the penalty for all our sins. Then He was buried in a tomb, and like Daniel in the den, a stone was laid at the mouth of it. But like Daniel, Jesus was still able to emerge. In His case, rising from the dead.

Jesus showed up for you: dying for you and rising for you so that you could come in faith and receive forgiveness, adoption into His family, and the hope of knowing that death cannot hold you, as it had no hold on Jesus. That's how Jesus showed up for you.

If you follow Him, where is He leading you to show up for Him? Maybe during this message God has already made that clear to you.

If not, maybe it's time to take the risk of having a conversation about Jesus with someone near you, even though you're not sure how it'll impact the relationship, or maybe you're afraid they'll point out your hypocrisy if you share.

Or maybe instead as you've been hearing about the opportunity to join our kids Sunday School team, God has been stirring something in your heart. But you're hesitating because you're afraid you don't know enough about the Bible or because it'll cost you some time and energy to show up for kids on Sundays.

Or maybe God is saying, "Take the risk of trusting Me with your finances" as God leads you to give a generous gift to someone in need or start giving regularly to His church.

Or maybe you've had an awkward encounter with a neighbor, like say you set a godly boundary, and your neighbor didn't understand it and told you that you're weird. And God is calling you to keep loving them and seeking relationship with them even though it feels safer to avoid them.

Or maybe God is saying it's time to start praying out loud with other followers of Jesus, or with your spouse, even if that intimacy feels risky and uncomfortable.

Or maybe God is saying it's time to open up to a safe person about a sin issue or a mental health challenge you're struggling with; that it's time to take the risk of no longer pretending that everything is good, when it's really not.

As you show up and face that lion, think of how God might work in your life, and also through you to bless others, as you show up.

When Daniel showed up for God, God showed up. The story started with a plot to destroy Daniel and a decree that everyone could only pray to Darius.

And like a day later this same Darius is expressing something close to prayer in God as he says, "May God deliver you." And then Daniel experiences God shutting the mouths of starving lions. And Daniel gets to see the impact on Darius, as Darius makes a new decree giving testimony of God's glory to the whole kingdom.

In a sec we'll turn off the lights and focus on Barry's drawing. As we spend a minute reflecting on it, let's put ourselves in the place of the person in the drawing facing a lion. And then let's ask, "God, what lion are you calling me to face?"

After asking God that as we look at the drawing, I'll close us in prayer. Now, let's turn off the lights and each ask, "God, what lion are you calling me to face?"

Think of how God might show up as you show up. Let's pray...

Dismissal – You're dismissed to go show up for God.