

Faithful Witnesses in Fateful Days

Grace and Peace to you from Jesus Christ, the Faithful Witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (Rev. 1:4,5)

A man's enemies had contrived a devious plot against him. They had brought him before governors and kings to force him to stop worshiping and speaking in the name of the true God, but they couldn't silence the truth! Their last resort was to take him out, and so silence his faithful witness once and for all. But the end result was not as they intended--because the outcome of his story only testified more boldly to the truth he had been faithfully speaking all along. That truth was the Word of God.

Now here's the question! Whose story I am describing? Is it **A) God's Old Testament Prophet Daniel** as he was thrown to the lions by the decree of Darius the Mede, **B) Jesus the Son of God** as he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, or **C) Martin Luther** as he was excommunicated by the Pope and condemned to death by the Emperor? This is one of those questions where you need a letter **D) all of the above!** This story describes each of these men as **faithful witnesses in fateful days**, who faced temptation and faithfully testified to the truth.

This is the theme on which we focus today as we meditate on the story of Daniel and the lions' den and celebrate the 503rd anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. God has made his church-- that is, his body of all the true believers in Christ throughout the ages--to be **his faithful witnesses in fateful days**.

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus warned the Twelve disciples as he sent them out, **"Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witness to them and to the Gentiles."** (Matt. 10:17,18) No doubt, we see that promise fulfilled by believers throughout the ages, as in the case of Daniel hundreds of years before Jesus ever spoke the promise.

Daniel had been serving in Babylon for more than sixty years, since the Jews had been carried off to captivity. First under Nebuchadnezzar, the king who three Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in to the fiery furnace, then under that king's son Belshazzar, who die promptly after Daniel explained to him the mysterious handwriting on the wall. So when King Darius the Mede conquered Babylon, Daniel, now in his 80's, had quite the career. Once again, King Darius made Daniel one of the three top governors over the whole kingdom. Because Daniel so distinguished himself, Darius even planned to set him over the whole kingdom.

The stage is set! Queue the ravenous wolves, the other advisors that Daniel worked among. How could this foreigner get promoted instead of them! But they couldn't find anything wrong with him. So they had to contrive a devious plot to get him killed because of his religion. They go to the king with a plan to flatter him, **"the king should issue a decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions' den."** (Dan 6:7) And, your Majesty, don't forget to put it in writing so that it can't be repealed in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians.

So the wolves planned their ambush and waited for their opportunity to pounce, which wouldn't take long at all. Daniel was faced with the first commandment in the most dramatic way! The test--to save his own skin or serve his God and suffer death.

Long after Jesus gave his warning, another believer was brought before kings and rulers to testify, to face a similar 1st commandment test as Daniel. Martin Luther was brought before the Diet of Worms to face two basic questions. 1) Are these your writings? 2) Do you recant them...or else? Which would it be for Luther? Deny Christ and the truth he had come to know and rely on or stand firm? Save his own skin or witness faithfully for God and suffer death?

Maybe it's not so often or ever that these first commandment tests come to you and me as a matter of physical life or death; nevertheless, we face these tests often! How do you fair when God's most stringent demand—thunders from heaven to the throne in our hearts demanding, "No one else may reign here! Fear, love, and trust in God alone." The daily test—God or idol? God or self? God or phone? Who rules the throne?

May I remind you of the words each of us spoke earlier today, words describing our utter failures. *"For faithless worrying and selfish pride, for sins of habit and sins of choice, for the evil I have done and the good I have failed to do, you should cast me away from your presence forever."* Each of them is ultimately a 1st Commandment failures.

Then we look at what Daniel did in the face of temptation and we feel even more unworthy as our lives don't seem to measure up. And we see what Martin Luther did as he stood in the face of persecution and pressure to recant his faithful witness to the truth. How were both of these men able to stand so firmly and witness so faithfully in the fateful days in which they lived? Not by might or wit or willpower did they stand the test, but by falling on the mercy of the only God who saves.

"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 had done before." (6:10-11). We might see that and think, "Daniel, why did you pray in front of the open windows? Just pray where they can't see you, man!" But that is such a cool detail. Daniel bowed in prayer toward Jerusalem, the place where God had promised to dwell with his people, the place where atonement was made at the temple and pointed ahead to the coming Lamb of God would take away the sins of the world. Centuries beforehand, Daniel looked to Christ as he prayed for more than just safety, but salvation.

And centuries after the fact, as Luther stood before kings and rulers threatening him with death, he asked for a little time to compose his thoughts and pray. Back in his quarter that night, he fell upon the mercy of Christ, jotting down these words, **"So long as Christ is merciful, I will not recant a single jot or tittle..."** And the next he delivered bold words that have echoed down through the centuries **"My conscience is captive to the Word of God-- I cannot and will not recant... Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me!**

This is how believers like Daniel and Luther fearlessly faced ferocious lions, fierce wolves, and frightful persecution. These men looked to a merciful Christ, a rock of refuge, a Mighty Fortress. They entrusted themselves not to kings or rulers or politicians who cannot save, but to the only God who saves—the same God who let himself stand trial before kings and rulers, and be condemned by them all. So great was the measure of his love, that at the price of his own blood, he needed us to know the truth. Christ testified to the truth before Pontius Pilate, **"The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."** For the Christian, there is no other side! So these faithful witnesses listened to the voice of truth and they bowed their hearts and knees to God alone.

For Daniel, the sight of him on his knees praying was all the wolves needed to whisk him off to his fateful date with the lions. Notice how powerless the most powerful ruler in the world really is. First he's duped by his own advisors into condemning his right hand man. Then this so-called king doesn't even have the authority to undo his own foolish edict. So against his own wishes, he sends Daniel off to the lions with a pious platitude, **"May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" (6:16)**

Turns out the king suffered more that night than Daniel. He's ridden with guilt. To stressed to eat, no kingly entertainment. Straight to bed, but no relief there either—a night of tossing and turning! Early the next morning, the king rushes to the den to see what happened, **"Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" (6:20)**

Now notice the unlimited politeness of Daniel to the king who had just condemned him and let it be a lesson for us as we refer to our chosen leader this next week. **"May the king live forever! 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." (6:21)**

By faith, Daniel was innocent before God. By faith he carried out his job well and when the time came he testified faithfully before his ruler. The book of Hebrews says. By faith, Daniel **"shut the mouths of lions,"** and more than that, he opened the mouth of Darius the heathen king to proclaim about God, **"For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; (6:26).** So Daniel was saved by the only God who saves and his accusers were gobbled up by the lions before they hit the bottom.

And what about Luther, the man who was declared an outlaw and condemned to death in 1521 after he made his good confession? After 25 more years of fearless and faithful witness to the truth, Luther died in his bed of natural causes. His last words, **"Into your hand I commend my spirit; for you have delivered me, O Lord my faithful God." (Psalm 31:5)**

To this very day, by God's grace, we remain heirs of the Reformation and **faithful witnesses in our own fateful days.** Luther was simply pointing us back to the truth that Daniel was willing to die for, the truth of Christ the Faithful Witness. It's a simple truth, God alone saves! God help us! Amen.

Let us hold firmly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful and the one who stands firm to the end will be saved! Amen.