

This morning we come to one of the more vivid characters of the Old Testament in Daniel. Whether you know a lot or a little about Daniel, hang onto your hats because you're in for a wild ride. And when I think of Daniel, I think of someone who lived with a great faith...who stepped out and stepped up when opportunity presented itself to be bold and courageous for the Lord.

The picture that I'm reminded of is one we've all seen or personally been involved with, and I was reminded of this last week: A young child stands at the edge of the pool or the diving board, with mom or dad in the water waiting to catch them, and encouraging them, "Jump! You can do it!" **Here's a picture** of my youngest son when he was first learning to dive off of a diving board. Is there any holding back there? No. That is all in. I love this picture...and I love the visual metaphor it gives us of living by faith.



So, Daniel lived during Judah's exile in Babylon, that's where we are in this sermon series called the Story, **(Sermon Title Slide)** which is a chronological walk through the Bible, looking at the big picture message of God's creative and redemptive work. Based on what we know of Daniel's life, he probably was pretty young at the time of being exiled into Babylon – probably not much older than his mid-teens, and likely younger than that.

Daniel was taken into exile because he was part of the royal family – we're told that in Daniel 1:3. Royalty weren't the *only* ones taken out of Jerusalem and the other important cities of Israel, but they certainly weren't going to be left behind. Being in the royal family, we know that he's in the lineage of King David, though this is several hundred years later. He's put in service of the King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. (Btw, is ok if I just call him "King Nebby"?) Why? Was this a move of hospitality by King Nebuchadnezzar? Was this the way kings always treated the royal family of the country they just conquered? Was "King Nebby" just a really nice guy, or was Daniel

particularly charming?

Well, we don't have to guess: Daniel 1:3-5 says, **“Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king’s service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—*young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s palace.*” (Daniel 1:3-4 italics added).** Essentially, he and some others (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) were chosen because they were “young, without physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, and quick to understand.” In other words, they were like your typical pastor! 😊 Actually, probably more like Russell Wilson...but younger still.

Chapter one goes on to say that these guys were to be trained for three years in Babylonian culture, including language and literature. After the three year training period, here's what happened, **“At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service...the king found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom” (Daniel 1:18-20).** So Daniel and the other three rocked it. They're each like a combination of Thor, Harry Houdini, and Alex Trebeck (I know he doesn't answer the questions on Jeopardy, but he sure must be smart after all these years!).

So one night some time later, king Nebby has a dream, and it worries him greatly. He wants it interpreted. So he calls some of his guys who do this kind of thing to come and interpret the dream. But Nebby makes it difficult for them by not telling them the dream. He thinks that if these guys are really good at this, then they ought to be able to not only interpret the dream but even figure out what the dream was to begin with. The odds are stacked against them, like the Mariners trying to make the playoffs. Well, the Bible portrays King Nebby as a bit paranoid, and even suffering several years of insanity...and we see some glimpses of this when he tells them that if they can't do this, then he's executing all the other guys that are magicians/dream interpreters/palm readers/fortune tellers like them in the land.

Well, his best psychics can't access the dream, let alone interpret it. Daniel hears about the king's demands, and the consequences for his guys not figuring out the dream, and he goes to the king and asks for some time to know the dream and interpret it. Then he enlists his three buddies' help to turn to God in prayer and ask for divine intervention to give Daniel knowledge of the dream and what it means. And the Lord answers his prayer. Here's what happens next, which brings us to our main Scripture reading for the day:

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." 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."

The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar [his given Babylonian name]), "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?" Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, 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: (Daniel 2:24-28).

And then Daniel describes the dream in great detail, and interprets it for the king: that his kingdom has been a gift from God, but it will eventually give way to a different kingdom...and that will be followed by a couple more and then eventually God will establish a kingdom that rules over all of them and will last forever. So that's one event from the life of Daniel where he boldly stepped out in faith.

There's one other I want to mention. **Some years later, now under King Darius, Daniel refused to bow down to the king in worship.** An edict had been put out that everyone had to bow to the king in worship, and if anyone worshiped any other deity, they would be thrown in to the lions' den. Well, Daniel is devout in his faith to the Lord and he doesn't follow the edict. But

the whole thing is a trap set up by some other guys who are jealous of Daniel's good standing with the king. So they're keeping an eye out for him, and sure enough, they catch him worshiping God, and bring him to the King to have him punished. King Darius has to stick to the law he set up, though it grieves him. And as Daniel is put into the lions' den, the king says, **"May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" (Daniel 6:16).** And sure enough, the next day, Daniel is alive, as God kept the mouths of the lions shut all night long. Daniel gives all the credit to the Lord, the King rejoices that Daniel is safe, and he even issues a new decree that everyone in his kingdom must fear and have reverence for the God of Daniel. He doesn't go quite so far as to say that they must worship God...but it's pretty darn close, and the name of the Lord is made known throughout Babylon.

And as I read about these events in Daniel's life, there is one thing that strikes me about him, and that the Bible makes clear about him: **Daniel was a man who lived by faith, for the glory of God.** He wanted God to have all the credit, all the glory, all the honor, all the attention. And in order to bring glory to God, Daniel trusted God deeply. He took risks. He dove off the diving board with full abandonment.

So, Daniel is a great model for us of living by faith...of trusting God. And: **When we look at his life, or think of people – Biblical or more contemporary – who lived with that kind of faith, they are always people who took great risk.** No person who played it safe is ever called a person who really lived by faith.

And God calls us to live with that kind of faith...to live with a Daniel-sized faith.

This past week Elder Lissa



Taylor and I were at our denomination's annual National Gathering, **(Photos here)** which this year was in the large and very flat city of Houston. It's an annual conference for pastors, staff and other church leaders – really, anyone who'd like to go...and every year it inspires, challenges, and encourages us. There were a little over 1500 people at it this year. It's a major culture-setting event for our churches – through the general session speakers and many of the breakout session speakers, and this year's theme was "Renovate." **And**

the overall culture being established – and that has been from ECO’s beginning, 6 years ago – is that our denomination is one of living with a Daniel-sized faith. Our churches are called to live with a Daniel-sized faith, because safety does not lead to flourishing. Dana Allin, the head of the denomination, and who preached here in July of 2016 to commemorate our own joining of ECO, said this in his address to all of us, **“Some come to ECO so they can ‘stay the same’ – so they can be who they are without the confines/constraints/conflict of another denomination. But ‘staying the same’ is just switching denominational jerseys believing that that alone will cause us to flourish” (Dana Allin, ECO Synod Executive).** This culture of making flourishing disciples and flourishing churches is one of the main reasons we felt God calling us to join ECO when we made the change 18 months ago. Other denominations would have been a safer place to be. But we felt that “safety” was not what God was calling us in to.

I want to share with you three true stories I heard this week from three different speakers that I think will challenge and inspire us to step out of our places of safety, and live with a Daniel-size faith in each of our lives, and collectively here at Rose Hill.

The first story is from Ed Stetzer, now a professor at Wheaton College in Chicago, a once-a-month preacher at his church, and former pastor in a few settings. In one of his pastorates (I think an interim?), he served at an Atlanta-area church that had gotten older and smaller in the previous number of years, but wanted to reach young people. Sound familiar? I think they had about 120 in worship, if I remember right. So, they made some changes in their church. **The most radical change they made was that they transitioned their traditional worship service to be contemporary.** There was a process to doing that, but it didn’t take too long before they completely transitioned from one style of service to another. Over time, the church reached families with kids as it once had. The children’s ministry grew, the youth ministry grew, and the energy and enthusiasm that those people bring to a church returned and the church was completely transformed (or well on its way, at least).

On Ed’s last Sunday as pastor there, an 88-year old guy who had been at the

church a long time came up to him. This guy poked Ed right in the chest and said, “Preacher!...I want to tell you something.” Ed didn’t know what to expect. He said, “Preacher: I don’t like the music...and the kids are breaking stuff. *But it’s worth it all.*” And that happened because the church was willing to let go of the safety of their service. Handing the faith on to the next generation and seeing young people come to faith in Jesus was more important than holding on to a service that made them feel safe. That’s a Daniel-sized faith.

Another pastor shared about her church’s story. This lady was probably in her early 60’s, pastoring a small country church in Western Pennsylvania. It was a church that was mostly full of seniors, some of whom were old enough to remember when the church was started...in 1772. ☺ It was a church in decline, headed towards extinction in a matter of years. **A year ago, she and her church joined a “church revitalization cohort” – a group of churches who were all focused on turning things around, and would work with a church consultant to help them do that.** She said that the prescription for better church health that the consultant gave her church was the most “aggressive” of the eight churches in this revitalization cohort. She listed for us what they needed to renovate in their church in order to revitalize it: The worship services, the facilities, the culture of the church, the organizational structure, the budget, the staffing, discipleship, the fellowship...I think she named even more. As she said at the presentation this week, basically everything at their church was an obstacle to flourishing and needed to be renovated.

And so they dove off of that diving board. They adopted a new mission statement, **“MPC is committed to reach the lost at any cost.”** Of course a mission statement is only good if you’ll let it actually influence what you do...so every single decision they made was filtered through that mission statement. Every decision was made to “reach the lost at any cost.”

One of their decisions concerned their facilities. They realized, and these were her words to us this week, that “the building is a tool, not a sacred space.” There is sacred stuff that happens in it, but the building itself is essentially a tool for ministry. So they transformed their annex into what she

called a “mid-kids place and crossroads café.” Clearly, designed to reach kids and their parents. And their sanctuary – which was the other building they own – has been renovated into a multipurpose worship space with chairs replacing the pews. It gives their sanctuary a more familiar feel (safe!) to people who come for the first time (where else but churches are pews used?) and gives them the flexibility to use their sanctuary for a variety of ministry opportunities. It hasn’t been easy. Some people haven’t liked the changes and have left...but their church has momentum in a new direction now, and they are showing signs of flourishing. They let go of the safety of the familiar and leaped off of that diving board with a Daniel-sized faith.

Lastly, Marnie Crumpler, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, PA (has a new name now, actually...can’t recall) shared about her church. Just this last fall, they became an ECO Church. The denomination they left got contentious about the building and endowments that church members had given to the church and had been a part of the church for decades. It was not pretty. And so after negotiating with their former denomination for a couple years or so, this church of 1800 people, with about 1100 in worship on a typical Sunday, walked away from their building *and* their financial safety net. **They are now worshipping in a Catholic High School gym on Sundays, and their ministries, meetings, choir practices, etc., are taking place throughout the community.** Just a few weeks ago, while worshipping in this gym, they had their highest attendance ever for Christmas Eve worship services. When they had their last service in their former church building, 13 of the remaining (living) 14 members who helped build that building decades ago, led the processional from that church building to the High School that would be their new temporary home. They have stepped out in faith as they’ve completely stepped away from the familiarity of a church building that had been home for decades, and stepped away from the comfort of knowing that they had money to bail them out whenever it was needed. That’s a Daniel-sized faith.

None of these pastors, nor anyone else who spoke this week, said that it was easy. But they all said they’d do it again. They wouldn’t change a thing. Jesus himself never promised that living by faith would be easy. But it leads to abundant life, the life that our resurrected Lord and Savior promises for those

who live by faith in Him.

I want to close with one final story. Dr. Condoleezza Rice was one of the keynote speakers at the conference this past week. **(Pictures here)** Did you know, in addition to being a provost and professor at Stanford, and the first woman to serve as Secretary of State and on the National Security Council, that she's a world-class piano player, is on the college football playoff selection committee, and she is a part of an ECO church in the San Francisco Bay area? In fact, her dad and grandfather were both Presbyterian Pastors. Also, she has 12 doctorates: one earned doctorate, and 11 honorary doctorates. And in particular, one statement she made summarized things pretty well. Here's what Dr., dr., dr., dr., dr., dr., dr., dr., dr., dr., dr., Condoleezza Riceⁱⁱ said: **“If we recognize that doing**



something hard is more fulfilling than doing something easy, we can renovate our churches” – Dr. Condoleezza Rice. In fact, it's the Christ-like thing to do, because Jesus was willing to do whatever it cost to save the lost and renovate our lives. He went from eternity to earth to live among people, die on the cross – taking our sins with him – and then being raised from the dead. That was hard. And from 2500 years ago, the life of Daniel confirms it, as well: that stepping out in faith, taking risk, is hard, but much more fulfilling. So: Where do you need to do some renovating? We've done quite a bit of renovating here at RH the last four years or so...but there's more that needs to be done. And we can step into that hard renovating work in our lives and in our church...or we can play it safe. Let's dive off of that board in full abandonment like a kid diving into a pool, and trust that God will be faithful. Because, while living in safety is easy, it never leads to flourishing. And building flourishing disciples and flourishing churches who make disciples of Jesus is what ECO, and our church, is all about about. It's hard work and it takes a Daniel-sized faith, but it is so much more fulfilling and more Christ-like than doing what's easy. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Today's sermon correlates to Chapter 18 in “The Story.” We took orders for copies of the book, “The Story” at church, but now you can get a copy of the book on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for “NIV The Story Bible” at their website.

ⁱⁱ I can't take credit for this. John Ortberg, Senior Pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church introduced her this way. ☺