

April 10, 2016

Animal Planet
Daniel's Lions
Daniel 6:6-23

Opening words: The 1921 Nobel Prize winner for literature was Anatole France. He once said, "*Until one is loved by an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened.*" As an animal lover myself, I can agree with that quote. There has never been a time when animals were not part of my home. You know it is true. As exciting as it is when they come, it is just as devastating when they leave. I have two pets right now. I have a long haired white cat, Madelyn. She is very smart and has us well trained. I also own the best dog in the world, my thirteen-inch beagle, Macy. She only has one outstanding quality: she loves everyone. She loves me when I don't love myself. Our family pets remind us that God cares about the details of our lives.

Animals are in the background of some of the greatest stories in the Bible. How many can you name? This list is far from complete: Adam named the animals in the Garden of Eden. Noah collected the animals before the great flood. The Egyptians endured the plagues of frogs and diseased livestock. Jonah was swallowed by a great fish. Jesus was surrounded by animals in the stable on the night he was born, and Jesus rode a donkey the first Palm Sunday. Between those two events, Jesus sent swine to their destruction. It is impossible to ignore animals. They have been part of our world from the very beginning. Our lives would be incomplete without them. For this reason, I have decided to dedicate my newest sermon series, *Animal Planet*, to my dog, Macy.

We begin this sermon series in the Old Testament book of Daniel. The author of this book was Daniel himself. He wrote it approximately 540 years before the birth of Christ. Daniel's literary form is historical narrative. The entire book is summarized in 4:17, "The Most High (God) is sovereign over the kingdoms of men." Our reading for today, Daniel 6:6-23, illustrates that point. Let me call this message *Daniel's Lions*.

Daniel 6:6-23 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 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.

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. ¹¹ Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God

for help. ¹² So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human being except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions' den?" The king answered, "The decree stands—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." 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. 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?" 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.

Let me begin by asking you a simple question. Have you ever been afraid? The answer is "YES!" Everybody is afraid of something at some point. The internet is filled with all kinds of lists that describe our most common fears. There are many lists, but they are all the same. This one came from SelfHelpCollective.com. This is their top ten list:

1. Fear of public speaking
2. Fear of flying
3. Fear of heights
4. Fear of the dark
5. Fear of intimacy
6. Fear of death
7. Fear of failure
8. Fear of rejection
9. Fear of spiders
10. Fear of commitment

One of the lists included zombies. According to them, 11% of Americans are afraid of zombies. That means, at least 11% of Americans believe in zombies. None of the lists included my greatest fear: women! Regardless, the question remains. Are you afraid?

If you will admit you are afraid of something, say, **"Amen!"** At the very heart of this morning's scripture lesson is the word fear. Let's look at the scripture lesson together.

We are in the sixth chapter of Daniel. Much has already happened. Daniel, who was a noble Jew exiled in Babylon, had already correctly interpreted a series of dreams. That gained Daniel popularity with the king, Darius. However, that popularity also gained Daniel some powerful enemies. Those enemies came up with a clever plan to bring Daniel down. Our reading for today is their sinister plan and the outcome of that plan. According to the plan, they got the king to issue a decree that no one should pray to any god or human for the next thirty days, except the king. Darius mandated the order, which could not be broken. The trap was set because they knew Daniel believed in the one true God. Prayer was part of his life; he prayed three times a day. It wasn't difficult finding him praying; it wasn't difficult to witness him breaking the law. With no other option, the king ordered him thrown into the lion's den, a cruel form of execution. But, you know the story. Daniel didn't die. God saw him as innocent and protected him. He shut the mouths of the lions. The good news is, Daniel lived another day. The bad news is, his enemies perished.

The story of Daniel in the lion's den teaches us various lessons. It teaches us both about prayer and proper priorities. However, it also teaches us about faith. There is no sign of fear in this story, because Daniel was a man of faith. People of great faith live fearless lives; people who lack faith live fearful lives. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, *"Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."* If you want to discover your faithfulness, then look at the way you live. Are you living fearlessly? Are you living fearfully? I can't answer that question for you, but I can make a general observation. I am shocked by the faithless cowards who make up our society. If Daniel could face the lions fearlessly, then you can face this day fearlessly. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** So let me ask you the question again: are you afraid?

Unpopularity

Are you afraid of unpopularity? Daniel wasn't afraid of unpopularity. The foundation of his life was God. He prayed to God three times a day. He had built God into his agenda every day. He had an appointment with God three times a day and nothing was going to change his agenda, not even the law. Daniel was uncompromising, and his enemies used his inflexibility against him. They knew he would keep his appointment with God and he did. They caught him, and he was ready to pay the price. There is no sign of panic in this story, because Daniel wasn't worried about social popularity. He was more interested in cultivating a relationship with God. That is a hard thing to do, because popularity is so seductive.

In 1997, the airways were filled with the song "MMMBop." You remember the song. It was sung by Hanson. The group was comprised of three brothers; Isaac, Taylor and Zac. It came from the album "Middle of Nowhere". I loved MMMBop because if you knew the title, you knew all the lyrics. Even I could remember the words. I remember

Hanson because they sang the national anthem at one of the World Series games. Everyone was crazy about MMMBop. Hanson sold 16 million records worldwide. It is amazing how time changes things. In 1997, nineteen years ago, we saw Hanson everywhere. Today, I can't find Hanson anywhere. I hear the three brothers are married and have eleven children between them. Can anyone tell me what Hanson is doing today? Maybe they are singing "MMMBop" at some child's birthday party? Maybe they are singing "MMMBop" at some grocery store opening? They say it is hard to go from that kind of attention to nothing. If you don't believe me, then ask Danny Bonaduce (Danny from the Partridge Family). (I think I once saw him cleaning a pool in Fort Myers Beach, Florida!) Maybe Hanson can try to jump start their career on Dancing with the Stars?

It isn't just true of faddish celebrities. It is true of all of us. We need to feel important within our own circles. One of the reasons we come to church is to see our friends. We don't want to lose them. One of the great fears in our society is the fear of rejection and loneliness. That is what made Daniel so amazing. He continued to pray regardless of the circumstances. He wasn't afraid of being unpopular. Do you fear unpopularity? How much are you willing to compromise to keep your friends? It is all a question of faith. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Sacrificing

Are you afraid to sacrifice? Daniel was not afraid to sacrifice. His prayer life was more than a private conversation with God. It was also a testimony to his world. In December of 2014, a 45-year-old man by the name Justo Jose, jumped into a lion's den in Barcelona, Spain. His friends said he was depressed because he had lost his mother, lost custody of his son and was divorced. Things did not go well in the lion's den. He was lucky to survive. He was admitted into the Intensive Care Unit at a local hospital. If you saw someone climb into a lion's den, what would you think about that person? What do you think about Justo Jose? (The brother needs some help.) Knowing the danger he was in, Daniel continued to pray to God. What does his behavior say about him and his priorities? Daniel wasn't afraid to sacrifice.

On Thursday, I am scheduled to officiate at a funeral for Dennis Buckley. I did not know Dennis; he died in 1951. His story is amazing. As a twenty-three-year old, he was taken prisoner during the Korean War. It was reported that he died as a POW, starved to death. For decades his remains stayed in North Korea, but during the 1990's our country signed a treaty with the North Koreans. One of the things we received was the remains of fallen soldiers. It took our country several decades to identify Corporal Buckley's remains. He is being laid to rest in the national cemetery in Rittman. I am humbled to do this service. I hope you will pray for me. Can anyone here question Corporal Buckley's patriotism? Can anyone here tell me he didn't sacrifice?

Are you afraid to sacrifice? Sacrificing is not giving away what is left over. Sacrificing is giving something that you need. There are people in our world who are sacrificing their

lives for the faith. How much are you willing to sacrifice? How much of your time are you willing to sacrifice? How much of your talent are you willing to sacrifice? How much of your money are you willing to sacrifice? How much are you willing to sacrifice? Or, are you afraid to sacrifice? It is all a question of faith. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Death

Are you afraid of death? It is clear Daniel was not afraid to die. Did you know, according to National Geographic, the average male lion weighs 420 pounds? Did you know the average female lion weighs 280? Both male and female lions are approximately six feet long. They are big-time predators. They eat any kind of meat, including human. When King Darius went to the lion's den, he expected Daniel to be dead. However, Daniel lived another day. There was no sign he was afraid of the lions, because he wasn't afraid of death. It is all a question of faith. Are you afraid to die?

Many consider Detrick Bonhoeffer to be one of the bravest men of the twentieth century. If you do not know his story, then you should learn it. He was born in Germany in 1906. He grew to be a Lutheran pastor and theologian. He earned his PH.D. from the University of Berlin. Yet, he will always be remembered for his anti-Nazi stance during the Second World War. In 1939, Bonhoeffer accepted an invitation to be part of the faculty at New York City's Union Theological Seminary, but returned to Germany to endure hardship with his people. By 1941, the Nazis no longer permitted him to speak publically or publish. He was even required to report his activities. By 1943, he got involved in a failed attempt to assassinate Hitler. He was arrested and imprisoned. On April 9, 1945, at the age of 39, Detrick Bonhoeffer was executed, weeks before the war ended. He could have lived his life out safely in America, but he returned to Germany because his faith wouldn't let him play it safe. Are you afraid to die? It is all a question of faith. If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, *"Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."* If you want to discover your faithfulness, then look at the way you live. Are you living fearlessly? Are you living fearfully? I hope I am wrong. I hope I am not living in a society of faithless cowards.

Will you pray with me?