

## McCabe United Methodist Church

Part 9, Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visions & Divine Encounters:  
2017 Summer Series

### ***A Vision of “Home”***

Sermon on Daniel 1 (8/12 & 8/13/17)  
Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

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Years ago, I read a book called *Searching for God Knows What*<sup>1</sup> by Christian writer Donald Miller. Throughout this book, Donald Miller plays with the idea that Christian faith should perhaps be *less* like following a prescribed set of rules and ideas, and *more* like developing a relationship... more like falling in love: with God and with God's people.

Related to this, Miller says:

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*“If somebody loves us we will do all kinds of things in their name, for them, because of them. They will make us who we are.”*

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Then he goes on to write about an interview he'd read in which Nobel Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison was asked how she had become a great writer.

The interviewer wanted to know what books she had read and what methods she had used to develop her writing practice. Toni Morrison then

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*“laughed and said, ‘Oh, no, that is not why I am a great writer. I am a great writer because when I was a little girl and walked into a room where my father was sitting, his eyes would light up. That is why I am a great writer. That is why. There isn’t any other reason.’”*

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, Donald *Searching for God Knows What*, Thomas Nelson; Expanded edition (May 24, 2010)

I love that: *“I am a great writer because when I was a little girl and walked into a room where my father was sitting, his eyes would light up.”*

*“If somebody loves us we will do all kinds of things in their name, for them, because of them. They will make us who we are.”*

So often we hear reports and statistics about how important it is for children to be surrounded by a loving environment – how absolutely crucial it is for them to know and trust that they are loved and cared for; that, when children and youth are surrounded by loving, encouraging environments, they will be more likely to flourish as adults.

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How often does someone's eyes light up when you walk into a room? What kind of a person might you be if, every time you walked into a room, someone's eyes lit up? What kind of person would you be if you knew – without a doubt – you were loved and cared for and encouraged?

Perhaps you would stand a little taller. Perhaps you would speak with a little more confidence. Perhaps you'd find it a bit easier to be brave in the face of adversity. Perhaps you would find it easier to be the kind of person you've always wanted to be. Perhaps.

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This weekend marks week 9 in our summer series called *Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visions & Divine Encounters*. In this series, we've gotten to know stories about biblical figures like Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Moses, and the prophets Elijah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel.

We've explored stories about times when God was particularly close to the biblical figures in a mysterious way... and we've explored stories about times when God gave visions to a particular person at a particular time to communicate a particular message.

Today's exploration of the prophet *Daniel* finds us within a most fascinating book of the Bible. And, as it always is when it comes to the Bible, *context* is important.

For those of us who have previously learned about Daniel, we probably learned about him through two particular stories: the story about Daniel's friends surviving punishment in a fiery furnace... and the story of Daniel surviving punishment in a lion's den.

These are memorable stories and they deserve our attention. But we won't understand these stories – and we won't understand the chapter of Daniel we just heard read – if we don't first have a bit of a history lesson.

In the very beginning of the Bible, God formed a nation of people: the nation that became the nation of Israel, the Jewish people. Through Abraham, the Lord God invited them to be faithful, Abraham said “yes” to the Lord, and, thus, the Israelites chose the Lord as *their* God.

Because Jesus was Jewish, the faith story of the Jewish people – of the Israelites – is also part of *our* story as Christian people.

Now. In exchange for their faithfulness to God and to God's laws, Jewish people believe God gave them the land of Israel. And much history since is a tale of the Israelites struggling to maintain their place in the land of Israel.

We learned about all of this last week, but it's very important for this week as well: at an early point in their history, Israel divided itself into two kingdoms: the Northern Kingdom called "Israel," and the Southern Kingdom called "Judah."

Around the year 720 B.C., political and military superpower Assyria overtook much of the Northern Kingdom.

Then, just over 100 years after Assyria took the Northern Kingdom and dispersed *its* people throughout the Assyrian Empire, another superpower Empire – Babylon – began overtaking Judah, the *Southern* Kingdom. And when Babylon overtook the Kingdom of Judah, they captured thousands of Judah's leaders and exiled them throughout the Babylonian Empire.

To imagine, this would be like someone invading The United States and, over the period of a decade, or so, kidnapping all government and military officials, as well as religious and community leaders – lawyers, teachers, medical professionals – all gone: held hostage in a foreign land. (If you fit into one of those categories, it may seem particularly poignant... I know it does for me.)

Once all the leaders were gone, Babylon's military annihilated Judah's Capital City of Jerusalem... destroying with it their temple. The holy shrine of the Jewish people. The place where they believed God literally lived on earth.

This was beyond devastating to Judah: it was devastating to those who were left behind, trying to continue life in their ravaged homeland... and it was devastating to those *leaders* of Judah who were exiled in Babylon.

Then, to add insult to injury, Babylon's king – King Nebuchadnezzar – decided to use Judah's leaders as leaders in Babylon. So, not only were these leading Judeans taken from their people, their land, and their God, they were also forced to become an integral part of Babylonian government and society. "Cruel" doesn't even begin to describe it. "Evil" gets pretty close.

*That* is the scene that is set for us in the biblical book of Daniel: a people and a nation, utterly devastated, wondering who they are... and wondering where their God is in the midst of it all. Enter: Daniel and his friends.

As our reading from Daniel chapter one indicates, at some point early on in the Babylonian captivity, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon ordered his staff to capture a good crop of young, handsome, intelligent Jewish men. He wanted them to be “indoctrinated” in the ways of Babylon.

This crop of young, handsome, intelligent Jewish men were to be treated like royalty: they were to be wined and dined on the finest food and drink Babylon had to offer – much of which was surely not allowed according to the dietary codes of Jewish religious law.

Four of these young, handsome, intelligent, Jewish men were named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Like the other young, handsome, intelligent Jewish men, they were being trained in the ways of Babylon and they were given the finest food and drink Babylon had to offer – some of it from the king’s own table.

Like the other young, handsome, intelligent Jewish men, these four were also given Babylonian names. Daniel was named Belteshazzar, Hananiah was named Shadrach, Mishael was named Meshach, and Azariah was named Abednego.

So, now, not only had these Israelites been taken from their people, their homeland, and their God, they had also been stripped of the very names that identified them as being Jewish. Despite this, however, Daniel and his friends knew who they were and where they had come from – they were not about to let Babylon strip them fully of who they were as beloved God's children.

So, they stood their ground with grace and creativity; They hatched a plan *not* to eat what the king put before them, but, instead, to eat what was faithful and appropriate for Jews. Daniel requested that the king’s staff allow him and his friends to eat only vegetables and to drink only water for ten days. If, after the ten days, they had not wasted away, they requested that the king allow them to continue with this diet... a diet that was in line with their faith and in line with the God they knew and loved. Wouldn’t you know it, after ten days on the simple diet, Daniel and his friends looked healthier than all the others who had been eating the rich foods given to them by the king of Babylon.

They had maintained some sense of themselves, at the risk of displeasing the king – for it was no small thing that Daniel requested a diet other than what the king himself put before them. Such a request alone could have gotten them killed.

So, despite the fact that Babylon had captured them and changed their names, Daniel and his friends kept their identity as best they could. They refused to allow Babylon to tell them who they were. Put a bit differently, Daniel and his friends maintained a sense of *home* while they were strangers in a foreign land.

The Jewish people trust fervently in God's steadfast love and in God's call to faithfulness. Daniel knew that being taken out of Judah and into Babylon meant nothing about God's love for him or about his own love *for* and commitment *to* God. Daniel knew that, no matter where he was, he was still loved by God and that he was still called to be faithful.

It makes me think of those quotes from earlier: Donald Miller's statement that, "If somebody loves us we will do all kinds of things in their name, for them, because of them. They will make us who we are."

And Toni Morrison's claim that she is a great writer because, when she was a little girl and walked into a room where her father was sitting, his eyes would light up.

Daniel and his friends maintained their sense of identity as beloved children of God... and, in so doing, they maintained a sense that Babylon was *not* their home.

I don't know if you caught it when our Scripture was read, but verse 17 of Daniel 1 says this:

*"God made the four young men smart and wise. They read a lot of books and became well educated. Daniel could also tell the meaning of dreams and visions."*

Almost as though it were a reward for his faithfulness, God made it possible for Daniel to interpret dreams and visions. And, in the very next chapter,

Daniel has the opportunity to interpret a recurring nightmare King Nebuchadnezzar had. It was a dream about the rise and fall of earthly kingdoms: kingdoms like Assyria and Babylon... it was a dream about the rise and fall of earthly kingdoms *and* it was a dream about how, ultimately, God was going to usher in an eternal kingdom that will never fall.

Imagine what it would have been like for Daniel to have interpreted that dream! Remember he had been kidnapped and exiled to a foreign land, taken away from the land of his people and his God. He had been stripped of his given name and he had been forced to become educated in the ways of his oppressors

Then the king had a dream about the fall of earthly kingdoms – a dream about God's intent to set-up an eternal kingdom that will not, that *cannot* fall. The dream was not good news for King Nebuchadnezzar... but it surely was amazing good news for Daniel.

Those who had stolen his people's land, who had destroyed their temple, who had exiled thousands of his people to a foreign land: *they would not win in the end... because God would not let them win in the end. Because, in the end, this God does not let evil win. Ever.*

That was good news for Daniel and his friends thousands of years ago, and it is good news for you and me today.

Even better is that we who put our faith in Jesus Christ, we put our faith in this same God, who also *raised Jesus from the dead* – the ultimate sign that good will triumph over evil.

Toni Morrison said she is a great writer because when she was a little girl and walked into a room where her father was sitting, his eyes would light up. And Donald Miller said, “If somebody loves us we will do all kinds of things in their name, for them, because of them. They will make us who we are.”

Daniel was someone who knew he was loved by a powerful God. His friends knew it, too. So, even in the midst of pretty extreme adversity, they were able

to live by their beliefs. They were also able to live with a sense of hope that their current, and deeply challenging, circumstances were not God's final word for them.

Even though they were not *home*, God reminded them their *true* home was with the Lord... and that Babylon would not hold ultimate victory over them.

For those of us who call ourselves Christian, we believe that we, too, are loved by a powerful God, that we are children of this same, powerful God.

God's love is the source of our identity, the source of our hope... and our ultimate vision of "home." Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

*Almighty God, thank you for the many and varied ways you speak to us in this life. Thank you for these ghost stories – these biblical tales in which you come so near to others, and these tales of our own brothers and sisters in Christ in which you communicate your presence so mysteriously. This day in particular, we are profoundly grateful that you are our true home... that we find our hope and our ultimate rest with you. Keep us attentive to your love in our lives... keep us faithful to your will for our lives...and guide us to help offer glimpses of your heavenly kingdom here on earth. We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*