

Unchangeable

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
November 25, 2018
Text: Daniel 6:1-23

As I sat down to write this sermon it occurred to me that the story of Daniel and the Lions Den could be seen as an odd choice for this particular Sunday, the last one before Advent begins. Liturgically, this Sunday is called “Reign of Christ Sunday.” It has a deeply theological rationale behind its establishment in 1925 by Pope Pius XI for the Roman Catholic Church in response to what the pope saw as a rising tide of secularism and nationalism. Well, we can relate to that, can’t we. This feast day in the Catholic tradition is intended to remind Christians that Christ is the ruler of their lives and every thing in it. In essence, or so the theological reasoning goes, your life is really not yours at all since Christ purchased your salvation for you with his life and this is the Sunday to pay attention to that fact. Well, okay. But we’re not Catholic, are we. So, what does it mean to us?

We in the Protestant tradition don’t look at this liturgical celebration in the same way but nonetheless, we do recognize its place on the calendar as the last Sunday before Advent. It has an eschatological dimension to it for us since it is to serve as a reminder that the fullness of Christ’s Reign will come at the end of time. This is why the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden

calls this particular Sunday the Sunday of Doom. How festive! But, no worries! For us in the United Church of Christ, this Sunday serves as a reminder that the church year is coming to an end as we prepare once again for Christ's coming into our lives as we recall the newborn babe of Bethlehem.

So, what the heck *was* I thinking when I chose the story of Daniel and the Lions Den for this particular Sunday? After all, Jesus is nowhere to be found in the story of Daniel and the lions. Jesus or no Jesus, I think this is still a compelling story for us, and one we seldom think about, if we even knew of it before today. Those of us of a certain age know this story because it was quite a popular Sunday School staple when we were little kids. I mean, why wouldn't you want to tell a room full of kindergarteners about a man being fed to lions, right? Geesh. But again, like last week's story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Fiery Furnace, when I first heard this story as a young child, it was no more scary to me than Little Riding Hood and the Big, Bad Wolf or Snow White or any one of a dozen Grimm's Fairy Tales that were more than a little gruesome. We didn't have Spider Man or Ant Man or the Transformers battling crazy, gigantic robotic villains to prevent the world's destruction. But, we did have Hansel and Gretel pushing the evil witch into her own oven! We did have the evil stepmother queen tricking Snow White into eating a poisoned apple! We did have the weird seven dwarfs, for heaven's sake!

So, what were all these scary stories in the Bible besides just another scary story, along side all the other ones in the books on our childhood bedside tables? At some point, somewhere along the way, some parents started to think these stories in the Bible and in Grimm's Fairy Tales were "bad" stories because they were so gruesome, depicting humanity at its worst. Surely this was no way to teach children about a loving God! The notion that these stories were intended as a form of "make believe" was lost, replaced instead with a relentless drive to sanitize stories into socially acceptable shadows of what they were intended to be. Concurrent with this movement among progressive parents was the movement among conservative parents to teach their kids that everything in the Bible was literally true at the same time they were teaching them that certain books, like the Harry Potter series, were evil products of the devil. In short, we managed to make even literature and the Bible polarizing and the subjects of endless rancorous debate. This is one of the reasons I was thrilled when our Deacons agreed that this Old Testament sermon series was a good idea. It offered a chance to see these stories for what they are in the grand scheme of life and faith.

So, here we are on this last Sunday before Advent begins and, coincidentally the last Sunday before the Bazaar, and before us is the story of Daniel and the Lions' Den. From my perspective, this is the perfect story for us to consider on this particular

Sunday! For one thing, like our Bazaar, Daniel's encounter with the lions was, at the very least, nerve-wracking for all parties concerned. Certainly, Daniel wasn't happy to spend the night with a pack of smelly lions, even though many paintings and drawings of this part of the story show the lions literally snuggling with Daniel! And we know the king was anxious all night, waiting to see if Daniel survived with his God's help. The satraps probably started out happy, since they were behind the whole plan, but as the night wore on, I'm betting they worried about what could happen to them if Daniel did survive. And, of course, let's not forget the lions, hungry for something to eat and knowing that couldn't be Daniel. What's a lion to do!

No surprise then that all this building anxiety reminded me of the anxiety right here throughout Bazaar week. We worry about getting everything set up. We worry about getting everything torn down afterward. We worry about the food and the health department inspection. We worry about the Greens and the Baskets and the Silent Auction and every aspect of this major fundraiser! We worry about cookies, for heaven's sake! Will the people come? Will the people buy? Will the kitchen plan work? Will the rooms be set up on time? Will the baskets sell? As if... Anyhow, you get the picture. As bazaar week unfolds we are in a lions den of our own making! We are worried and anxious about every aspect of the week, including the hoped for and much

needed financial outcome. During Bazaar week, we know what it's like to be in that lions' den and the only way out is to make it through Saturday! Which, I will remind you, we always do...

But what I find so compelling in this story of Daniel and the lions' den is not the similar emotions it evokes to the bazaar. What is so compelling about this story, and why I think it's a part of our sacred text in this first place, is that it is a story of unchangeable faith. Daniel in this story is the epitome of unchangeable faith. His rock solid faith in God and God's intentions for him and his life are what made him such an exceptional person that he came to the attention of the king in the first place, ultimately landing him an important job. His strong faith continued on after he got this dream job, giving him a poise and self-confidence that caused the other government officials to resent him more and more. Even when their plot to get rid of him by tricking the king into making a law that punished anyone for praying to anyone other than the king came to fruition, it didn't stop Daniel from praying to God three times a day as he faced Jerusalem at his open window. He could have prayed in secret, behind closed doors so no one would know. But Daniel's faith in God was too strong to let the edicts of mere mortals stop his practice of faith each day. So, Daniel found himself tossed into the lions' den, with the king's apologies no doubt ringing in his ears. But, his faith remained unchangeable through the night,

keeping even hungry lions from attacking. And when morning came, he reminded the king that it was his unchangeable, unshakable faith that saved him. He was blameless before God and before the king, because his faith remained intact.

What a great story! Adventure, intrigue, evil villains, a clueless king and lions snuggling instead of snacking on the hero! Yes, Daniel gives us a picture perfect example of unchangeable faith in this story, but is there more to it for us than that? I think there is, much more. I think this story can be seen as an allegory for the challenges we face in life each day, and how faith can carry us through. Let me explain.

Daniel, of course, is the embodiment of steadfast faith, unchangeable despite changing and even scary circumstances. He gives us a wonderful approach to life we can aspire to, work to emulate. The king exemplifies what it means to be trapped in a bad decision of your own making, to be responsible when something bad happens to a good person because of a decision made or an action taken without thinking it through. Again, how often do we find ourselves in such a position? Too often, I'm guessing. Again our challenge is to respond as Daniel did, with faith and prayer. Moving on, the satraps and their plot to ensnare Daniel using his own faith as the cause of his demise remind us of all the short-sighted, mean-spirited people we've ever known. They are quick to be jealous, slow to offer help to

anyone and always in search of quick, easy answers to difficult situations. Even here Daniel's unshakeable faith proved the antidote, stronger than any negative outcome they had plotted for.

And, of course, we can't forget the lions. They embody everything we're afraid of, everything we worry about, every bad thing we've ever thought could happen to us. All too familiar, right? And God? Well, God is God, of course. Daniel knows God is God, knows God will be with him no matter what happens, no matter what short-sighted decision puts him in peril. No matter what petty, jealous people try to do to him, no matter what fears try to eat him alive, Daniel knows God is God. Daniel's relationship with God is unchangeable because his faith is unshakable. And the story of Daniel in the lions' den is intended to show us that we can be unshakeable in our faith too.

So, as Bazaar week stretches out ahead of us with Advent and Christmas falling right behind, I hope you will hold on to the story of Daniel and the lions' den as the lifeline it is. I hope you will not let worry and anxiety consume you, whether its about the Bazaar or life in general. I hope you will see beyond the sometimes petty silliness of people who should know better to find instead someone beloved of God in them in spite of how unlovable they are. I hope you will search for the possibilities in life each day leaving behind all that threatens to hold you back from the joy-filled, hope inspired life God intends for you. Most of all, I hope

you dare to believe that some portion of Daniel's unchangeable faith lives inside you, carrying you through and beyond life's difficult, scary and challenging moments. Just remember to keep a sharp lookout for the lions of fear so they don't get the better of you. And, above all, remember that with God, all things are possible! Happy Bazaar Week! Amen.