

“Making Faith Relevant”

a sermon by

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Text: “Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine...” (Daniel 1:8)

The story of Daniel addresses an interesting question: how is faith relevant to my life? It tells us a story about a young man who is willing to live differently because of his faith.

While ministering to young adults, I am asked the question of relevancy frequently. The questions they ask are:

How should my faith effect my work?

What should I do if someone at work wants me to act unethically?

How would Jesus have me parent?

These questions reflect how we are constantly trying to make faith relevant to the situation we are currently living in.

Let's be honest with ourselves, however. While some may call the Bible “Life's Instruction Manual,” the Christian story is not that effective in addressing these questions.

For example, if you were wondering how to soothe a newborn in the middle of the night, the Bible offers very little practical advice about it. Or, if you were wanting to know how to balance work and family life, the Bible would not be that helpful because the only married disciple we know about is Peter and never does scripture tell us about his wife; it seems that the story of the Bible is far more interested in describing who God is, then giving us step-by-step advice.

It is more interested in telling us about a group of people who were living a life different than the world around them and then inviting us to come and participate in this story.

The Christian story is filled with people who were not trying to make faith relevant to their lives, but to make their lives relevant to God.

When we ask, “How is faith relevant to my life,” we come at the question from the wrong angle; from the personal angle. The danger of looking at the Christian faith solely from the personal angle is that we will reduce the story of the Bible into something that reinforces the general trajectory of our lives.

We will make faith relevant by having God conform to us.

We would make the God of the universe into some puppet that simply repeats back to us what we want to hear and what our culture is already saying.

It is interesting to notice how the Christian best sellers currently for sale, whether it is Ten Steps for a Better Spiritual Life or 40 Days to a Better Marriage, are identical to the Seven Healthy Habits of Successful People, or 12-step programs. And that some ministers, who are able to fill arenas with an audience, are preaching more the message of the Power of Positive Thinking than the Power of the Gospel.

When we reduce the message of the Gospel into sound bites and simple steps that are identical to our culture's message, are we not just making faith convenient and easy?

If one were truly able to achieve a better marriage by doing specific tasks for 40 days, are we not relying upon our own abilities to fix things rather than allowing God to transform us from the inside out?

I believe this can be seen most egregiously in the way we now treat Scripture. Five hundred years ago during the Reformation, one of the major debates was regarding the translation of scripture into the local languages so that people could hear and understand God's word. Martin Luther wanted to take the Bible out of the hands of a select few to let the entire congregation read, study and grow from Scripture.

It is estimated that over 168,000 Bibles are now given away every day. Yet rather than building community, the Bible is becoming more of a commodity.

Amazon currently sells over 25,000 different English Bibles. There are Bibles for teens, for men, for women in the workplace... There is even a Bible for teenage girls that looks like a Cosmo magazine, so that—as advertised—you won't look weird reading God's word.

I have a Bible on my iphone, on laptop, in my car... I do not think this production of scripture is what the Reformers had in mind. In fact, a colleague recently put me onto a Bible you can order off of the internet where it will insert your personal name 5,000 times to make God's promises personalized to you.

The snippet they gave me reads like this: "Even when Wes was dead in sin, God made Wes alive together with Christ, by grace Wes has been saved..."

This does not make faith relevant... this making faith custom-ordered.

These are examples of what happens when we come to the question of relevancy from the wrong direction; when we try to make God conform to our lives; when we try to fit God nicely into the routine of our normal lives without disrupting it.

II.

The witness of the Bible, though is the exact opposite. God does not fit neatly into our lives, rather he radically changes it. You see the Bible is far more interested in transforming us.

Think back to the New Testament reading from the Sermon on the Mount. These Beatitudes are far from relevant to our normal lives. These statements call us to live in a way that does not come naturally. Jesus declares that to be a follower of God will not make you normal, but abnormal. To follow Christ means that we are to live in a way that is radically different than the world around us.

It is one where the poor are prioritized, where the outsiders are welcomed when, where the last are first and the first are last, where people take vacation time to go on mission trips, stay overnight to help the homeless, mentor and teach children, give of our time and our money. It is where persecution and suffering are a good thing. To live out God's kingdom means we have to do the exact opposite of what we would normally do.

That is why Jesus uses these two beautiful images of salt and light to describe the church.

We are to be like salt. We are to taste different to the world. We are to be a spice that adds flavor to the world. Salt is a symbol in the Bible that is used to represent God's preserving love. As salt, we are called to demonstrate that preserving love of God.

We are also to be a light in the darkness. Or more precisely, we are to be a city of lights, a collection, a community of lights that looks different to the world.

We are to be different—our lives should radiate something different than what the world around us is saying, showing and doing. It should radiate confidence and conviction of God's love for all people no matter the circumstance.

We become bearers of his light in a darkened world.

This is what the opening chapter of Daniel shows us, a man who is making faith relevant in a strange culture. Someone who is not willing to conform to the world, but to be transformed by God.

Here is a young man who has been forcefully removed from his home to a foreign land. He, like the rest of the exiles, was originally living in Jerusalem. He had his community, his family, his small group of friends, he had a temple to worship God in. Then suddenly their peaceful existence was radically changed by the King Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem was burned down and the Temple was destroyed.

Daniel would have been separated from the people he loved, the pressures of the world to fit in would have weighed down upon him, and he could have been bitter and angry for having lost so much.

It says that Daniel was part of the royal family and nobility and that he was a young man without physical defect and handsome. He was intelligent and competent to serve in the king's palace. He was educated for three years, so that at the end of it, he could serve in the King's court.

That is a pretty impressive resume. Daniel had a strong family lineage, good looks and intelligence. When he entered the King's courts he could have easily adapted to the world around him, trading in his ethics, his faith, in order to climb the ladder of success. He could have fit right in.

It is almost like Daniel was some young business professional showing up for a three-year internship with aspirations for making it a career.

Now if I were in Daniel's shoes, being forced into exile, and being given this incredible opportunity, I think I would fall in to line pretty quickly.

I might set aside my convictions, my faith, my beliefs of right and wrong—"Just to get my feet settled," I would tell myself. I would say, God has given me these talents, these good looks, these opportunities, why not leverage it for myself...then one day down the road I'll pay it forward. Of course that day always seem to hang far off on the horizon.

Or perhaps I would say that those things I had been told about the God of Israel—those were true back in Jerusalem, at the Temple. Now we are in Babylon, they cannot be true anymore. The Temple has been destroyed, Jerusalem is on fire. Those were childish stories that helped me sleep at night. But now that I have experienced the pain of losing my family, of being forced into exile—experienced the tragedy of life, clearly this God of my past is no longer valid...so why not conform to the world around me.

Daniel, however, does the opposite of these things.

He finds a small group of trusted friends—Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego—and they decide to live life radically differently.

The first action they take is to refuse the royal rations of food and wine. They refuse to partake in the luxuries and abundances of the new culture. Daniel refused to defile himself it says. That word, to defile, is a spiritual word...it means that he did not want to pollute himself. The opposite of this word would be "holy" or "consecrated" which means to be set apart.

Daniel therefore wanted to remain holy and set apart from the culture. He did not want to deviate from his faith.

He wanted his outward actions to reflect his inward faith.

Rather than trying to assimilate to the world, Daniel kept his loyalty to God as his primary allegiance.

That is what it means to make faith relevant: when our lives begin to reflect to the world who God is.

Faith became relevant to Daniel's life not because he changed his understanding of God, but because he allowed himself to be changed by God.

It was such a risky transformation that the palace master tried to convince Daniel to eat the royal food and wine because the King would be very upset if Daniel were to perish...But Daniel did not succumb to the pressures of the king.

Instead he ate vegetables and water, and to the astonishment of the king and the world, these men were healthier, stronger and fatter. As a result, Daniel was awarded an esteemed position in the King's Court.

It is important to notice that Daniel did not refuse the royal wine and food in order to earn this position, nor was he given this position because he chose to live differently. He simply did it because of his faith conviction; there was no alternative motive, no promises made to him. All that his refusal did was to set him apart. The story of Daniel is emphatic that the credit was given not to Daniel, but to God for Daniel's success.

It is in this story of Daniel we see a man who made faith relevant, who lived out his faith conviction for the world to see.

He demonstrated Jesus' command in the sermon on the Mount to "let your light shine before men and women, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in Heaven."

III.

Rather than making God conform to us, are we willing to be transformed by God? Do we believe that Jesus can take the broken parts of our lives and change them? Are we willing to live lives that are radically different than the worlds? Do we truly believe Jesus' claims on the Sermon on the Mount that blessed are those who are persecuted, those who are rejected, those who do not quite fit into the world?

This is what we have revealed to us in Jesus Christ, because when God himself came into our world and put on human flesh, he did not come to assimilate to the culture. He came into the world to transform it.

He came into the world to transform the royal food and wine into the bread and wine of communion: symbols of abundance and luxury became symbols of sacrifice and service. Jesus came to take the broken parts of our lives, the ordinary things and transform them into the salt and light of the world. It is because of Christ's death and resurrection that we can have confidence of God's love for the world, that we may live in hope, joy and love. It is this story that transforms us.

It is this good news that gives us the faith conviction of Daniel. It is this good news that is the light which shines in the darkness. It is this good news that makes our lives relevant to God.

Rather than trying to reduce God to ten simple steps, or to make scripture about us—God is showing us that a relevant life of faith is when we are willing to be transformed. To live to benefit others; to radiate God's hope.

I actually had a powerful reminder of God's transforming power a few weeks ago. As some of you know, my wife and I have three week old triplet boys. In the months leading up to their births, we had tried to emotionally prepare ourselves for complications and extended hospital stays. Graciously, and amazingly, the doctors allowed us to take all three boys home when Lindsay was discharged...three days after their birth.

So when I was rolling our large stroller up to the elevator to go and pick up my wife and my three sons, I can honestly say, I was filled with fear, doubt and anxiety. I was wallowing in my own little world wondering how was I going to manage this at home.

I was not thinking about how for most parents, especially those of multiples who typically have weeks if not months in the hospital, the day that their children come home is a joyous occasion. Nor was I thinking of the families who have struggled for years to have children, and that I was taking home three healthy boys.

I was too stuck in my own doubts and fears, consumed with myself as I waited for that elevator. Just as the doors were closing, a woman sprinted to join me on the ride up.

In the briefest of rides, I told her about getting to take home the boys, and she in return shared that she was visiting her newborn grandson. She had a big smile across her face and kept saying that God is good. To me she was radiating joy, and then she surprised me. She shared that her grandson was born 3 months early at one pound and six ounces and that she visits him every day in the NICU to pray over him. She said this with such joy and conviction of faith that I was humbled and amazed. As the elevator doors closed behind her, she told me one more time "God is good," and I feebly mumbled "Yes, yes he is."

It was like a dagger through my heart, and my eyes were suddenly opened. God had transformed me through the witness of this woman. She was light radiating faith in one of the darkest situations. I was humbled, brought out of my selfishness and suddenly realized that life is not about me, but a merciful, loving, and gracious God who is good.

This woman and the story of her grandson will inevitably be intertwined with my story of taking home James, Jack and Thomas. I have found myself stopping frequently to pray for her and for him. Through this brief encounter on an elevator, I met a woman—who, like Daniel—was in emotional exile and rather than succumbing to the pressures of the world, she radiated the hope of God to me. The inward reality of her faith poured out of her life.

It is living like this that makes faith relevant. It is when we stop trying to conform God to our world, and we allow God to transform our world through us.

Let us pray.