

# Sermon Text for June 6, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

***Matthew 5:10-12, Daniel 6:10-24***  
***“The story of Daniel and the lion’s den”***

I wonder if I spend too much time up here giving you examples during my time when we served in Moscow. I don’t think I have done it recently, but it really serves as a great example for the Scripture that we have today in front of us. It is one of those Scriptures that we have all heard about at one time or another, but I’m guessing you have never heard about it in the perspective that we will look at it today. It isn’t just a simple story of faith persevering in the face of adversity, yes, that is the Sunday School lesson, but there is so much more to it.

They say when you step off the plane when you land in Moscow the moment you put your feet on the ground you have already broken 27 laws. It is impossible to live in Russia without breaking a number of civil laws that are established to make sure that you are always aware that the government can come down on you hard any time that it wants, but it just chooses not to. We had to have two passports while we were there because to stay in Russia as an American you had to, according to the Russian law, only stay for three months and then you had to leave the country for another three months. The US State Department gave us two passports so that we could leave the country after three months and then the next day, or once we flew to Finland and the same day, you can come back in on another passport and stay for another three months.

It was not legal in the eyes of Russian law, but the US allowed it and didn’t object to it. It was illegal in Russia to set up a clinic where you would give medical advice and treatment. But most of our members were from Africa and the hospitals refused to treat people of color. We called an ambulance once because one of our members from the DRC, the Congo, was in labor and the ambulance picked her up and then once they were out of our sight they forced her to get out and refused to take her to the hospital. So we started a medical clinic. We had doctors and nurses from over a dozen embassies involved in the clinic, which wasn’t legal, but because the very lives of the members of our church and other people of color in Moscow were at stake, we did it, knowing that we could be shut down and arrested at any moment.

Very quickly you learn to make a distinction when you live in Russia between that which is legal and that which is moral. We assume here in the United States that what is legal is also moral. If a law is passed then we follow that law not only because it is the legal thing to do, but

because we assume, it is also the moral thing to do. That line has become blurred and crossed more times over these past 15 months than probably ever before in your life.

Our Scripture today is an example where a law is passed that becomes the legal precedent, but it is wholly immoral. We find Daniel, a man of faith, knowing breaking the law so that he could worship God. Jesus tells his disciples that they are blessed if they are persecuted, arrested, beaten, ridiculed for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of righteousness. Daniel provides us with an opportunity not just to see faith conquering in the face of adversity, but also to understand what is our role as people of faith when legality and morality clash?

### **READ**

At some time in your Christian walk you may have heard a pastor or someone holding a Bible quote Romans 13:1 which states – “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” And my guess is that if you heard that it was probably in light of a topic that the person who quoted that Scripture agreed with. I have seen churches over this past year and a half move away from that Scripture simply because it does not suit them at this time. Let’s look at Daniel and understand what is happening. Daniel knew exactly what he was doing. We have to start with that. There is no innocence involved with him, like he didn’t know what he was doing.

Look at vs.10 of our Scripture where we read: although he knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house...to pray. He knew that what he was doing was now against the current law of the land. How did he know? Because he was the favorite leader of the king. We read in the earlier verses in this chapter that he was made one of three presidents and in vs.3 we read that the King was about to appoint him over the entire kingdom. This is not a nobody, this is a somebody who knew everybody. So he knew what had just happened, he knew the law requiring everyone to worship the king and only king had just been signed, upon penalty of death in the lion’s den. But he continued to worship God, in spite of his position and in spite of the illegality. It was the moral thing to do.

His opponents, the other two presidents set a trap for him and when they caught him they come to the king. Notice how they describe Daniel. That dirty refugee from the south, from Judah. Because you know all those refugees from the south are liars, and thieves and rapists, so they set him up in a way to the king, even though the king knew him and knew that this description of him and of refugees from the south was not accurate. The trap that they had set had caught not only Daniel, but also the King. The King loved Daniel, he looked for a way to get Daniel out of this for an entire day. But the King was a pawn in the world order and if he

went against the law then not only would Daniel die, but the King himself would be taken out of power and probably fed to the lions as well.

Daniel's act is one of civil disobedience. Under the law he was required not to worship his God. He dissents, three times a day with his body in his house. He is not a religious fanatic foaming at the mouth and standing at the street corner. He is not a terrorist storming the capital, he just keeps doing what he has always done, he prays and gives thanks. He doesn't ask to become a martyr, but he does go into this with his eyes wide open. He knew what he was doing.

Without a choice but to follow the law, the king seals Daniel in the lions den with these parting words, look at vs. May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you. Then he goes and fasts all evening long until morning. Then early in the morning he makes his way to the lions den, you should be hearing some similarities to another story that we know about, and exults over the fact that he is alive and that God has protected him. Being persecuted for your faith is inherently a political action, even if the king is on your side.

There are so many similarities between this story and the story of Jesus. Daniel, like Jesus, was arrested by the government and put to death. Both were political prisoners and put to death for their refusal to follow the law. One of Daniel's own people, his colleagues turn him in, just like Judas, one of Jesus' own. They looked for an opportunity to catch him in the act, just like Judas in the garden of Gethsemane. Daniel is taken as he prays, just like Jesus is taken while he asks his disciples to stay awake as he prays. Daniel had the sympathy of the king just like Jesus had the sympathy of Pilate and especially Pilate's wife. Once Daniel was thrown into the lion's den the stone was closed and sealed, just like the stone was rolled across the grave when Jesus was executed. Early in the morning the king makes his way to the lion's, early in the morning the women arrive at the tomb. Daniel is alive, Jesus is alive.

In this story Daniel is eventually saved, but there is no guarantee in Jesus' words in Matthew that as a Christian pursuing your faith, that you will be physically saved. Jesus tells his disciples that if they will be blessed if they are persecuted for their faith. But that blessing is not promised to happen on this earth. That is true for us as well. We will be blessed if we are arrested for our faith in Jesus and the justice that is required as a result of that faith, but that may be after we are thrown in prison, after our very lives are demanded of us. Very few of the early civil rights leaders made it out alive and unscathed.

If you pursue the kingdom for righteousness sake, and not for the sake of your own political agenda, you will be persecuted. Notice that Jesus' disciples did not take up arms and storm Rome. The miracle that happens in the story of Daniel is not only did the lion's mouth be

shut by the angel, but that the king came to know and love God. Later we read in Constantinian fashion that the Lord of Israel, the God of creation and redemption, is made the norm, the one who should be worshipped.

How do we know whether something is pursuing righteousness in this 21<sup>st</sup> century? It is pretty simple, is what we are doing putting God and our neighbor first? I know I have said this in the past, but it seems like as a pastor I have to repeat myself because there is a heresy that seems to be gaining momentum especially within the evangelical church. There is a Christian nationalism that is rearing its ugly heretical head more prevalently than ever in my lifetime. The evangelical community seems to be on the wrong side of both the spiritual and the political battle. God has not made us to be first in anything. Jesus addressed that directly. We are to be last, God made us to serve others first. Any theology built around a me first or my nation first is heresy and is Christian nationalism that has nothing to do with Christianity.

You are not being persecuted if the person next to you who looks different from you and thinks different from you has the same opportunities as you do. That is how society ought to work. That hasn't been the case, and still isn't the case, but when people different from us begin to get the same opportunities that we have enjoyed our entire life, that is the way it should be. That is loving our neighbor, giving those who were locked out of opportunities, opportunities. Daniel was persecuted because he prayed and he was arrested. He went non-violently. He did what he had always done. Jesus was arrested and killed because he had a message of salvation for all people.

In Jesus we believe that God will achieve his redemptive purpose without "breaking in pieces" the bones of all who sinned against him. On the contrary, he will achieve his purpose while bringing those very same bones to bow in repentance and adoration before him. May we be in that number of those who look to be redeemed in that way. Amen.