

“Food in Foreign Lands”

Reading: Daniel 1:1-17, 12:1-10

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

One of the things that I love about living in the Poconos is that, as many of you know, we live at this wonderful intersection of cultures from around the world. Within a couple hours of here you can find yourself deep in the Pennsylvania Wilds, or Pennsylvania Dutch country, or the Jersey shore, or the vast array of cultures in Philadelphia or New York. And of course I love meeting people from all of those different cultures, but what *really* gets me excited is all the food. I love that I can go to the grocery store and see all sorts of produce I’ve never heard of before, much less cooked with. I love that we can get to know one another through our food. It’s one of the great things about the time and place we live in, that we can be exposed to so many different ingredients and recipes that simply wouldn’t have been available to us ten or twenty years ago.

And it can be a very eye-opening experience to try the food of a culture you’ve never tried before. It’s not easy to prepare yourself for something totally new to you. I know that not everyone enjoys trying new types of food and some people have medical reasons for why they’re very careful of what they eat; just try to imagine how difficult and disorienting it would have been to be in Daniel’s position as a young man thrust unwillingly into a foreign culture. It wasn’t just a matter of Daniel and his friends being picky eaters, they were religiously obligated only to eat certain foods that had been prepared a certain way. Now their nation has been conquered, and they are hostages of sorts in the foreign king’s palace, where they are expected to look and act like good subjects of the king.

But we read their predicament in our first reading: they can’t count on the king’s meat being prepared according to Jewish law, it’s not kosher, but a vegetarian diet is probably okay. So they’re faced with this choice of where their loyalty lies. Will they be faithful to their heritage as servants of the Lord, or will they assimilate into their new identities as servants of Nebuchadnezzar? It seems like such a small thing, but they see it as a matter of their integrity. When we worry about what food to eat, it has to do with our budgets or our health or our preferences, but for them it was a matter of being faithful to God. And when their caretakers warn them that their vegetarian diet had better not make them look any less fit and impressive than anyone else, God provides for them, and they are saved in this seemingly small thing.

And that’s really the core of the whole story of Daniel. The book of Daniel might taste like “foreign food” to us today because there’s some very strange stuff in there, especially in the latter half of the book that we didn’t really read in our chapter of *The Story* for this week. This book with these wonderful Bible stories of Daniel in the lions’ den and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace suddenly morphs into an apocalypse, a revelation of terrifying monsters and spiritual battles taking place on a plane obscured from normal mortal eyes. There are some difficult things to interpret in Daniel’s story, and a lot of people have argued at length about what they mean.

But it’s really a story of coming to terms with foreign food. God’s people are living in exile at this point in the story, far from home, with little hope of return, cut off from their centers of worship and surrounded by people who neither know nor care about their God. What does this mean for their identity as God’s people? Are they, in fact, still God’s people at all, since He seems to be so angry with

them that He has destroyed their nation? How ought they respond when they are faced with threats and persecution? Will God save them in the midst of all of this foreign food?

And if we were to read through the book from its Bible story beginning to its bizarre, apocalyptic ending, we would see a series of stories in which God repeatedly saves His exiled people even in the midst of their exile. As we go through the book, they are faced with increasingly hostile enemies, and the stakes get higher and higher, but God is continually faithful. It starts with that seemingly small story of a group of teens who have to choose whether to eat non-kosher meat, and God keeps them strong and healthy in response to their faithfulness. Then there's a slightly more serious threat: the king has a dream that he wants interpreted, but since none of his wise men can explain it to him, he gets angry and threatens to kill all of them. Daniel is counted among the king's wise men by this point, so his life is in danger, too, but he prays to the Lord, and God gives him insight into the king's dream. Then the story shifts to Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who refuse to bow in worship before an idolatrous statue, even though their refusal will mean being thrown into a blazing furnace. And when they are thrown in to be burned alive, God sends them a divine protector to miraculously keep them from harm.

We get another story of King Nebuchadnezzar having a dream interpreted for him, and this one seems to come from God, and it results in the king eventually seeing that the Lord is God. And then the next king, Belshazzar, likewise gets a divine message from God reminding him who's really in charge, this time through a hand writing on the wall. And then Daniel, like his friends, faces a challenge to worship foreign gods or die, and his punishment is to be thrown to the lions, but again, God saves him. The rest of the book is an apocalypse, a revelation of the divine perspective on world events that can only be given through divine means. He sees inscrutable visions of the rise and fall of many empires, and behind their struggles for power are spiritual battles taking place in ways humans cannot see. And the book ends with what we read from chapter 12: though God's people will have to live through terrible times, God will provide for them in the end, and His righteousness will be enough to triumph finally over evil.

And in the middle of all of these swirling stories of threat and salvation is chapter 9, Daniel's remarkable prayer asking God to be faithful to a promise He had made earlier that His people would only remain in exile for 70 years. Daniel finds himself living at the end of those 70 years, and so he intercedes on behalf of his entire nation and asks God to remember His promise and forgive them. It's the centerpiece of the book, this powerful act of prayer that spurs God on to powerful action. The book shows God repeatedly saving those who are faithful to Him, and Daniel's prayer leads into the endgame of God's salvation. In fact, almost every act of salvation throughout the book — big or small — is preceded by or saturated with prayer. Daniel's story is a story about coping with foreign food, and the message is that when we are in that faraway, unfamiliar land of exile, we can still subsist on our Lord. He will still sustain us and save us.

What bearing does Daniel's story have on our stories today, on your life's story, and my life's story, and our church's story? Some of us weren't born in this land, and we have many vacationers who visit us from time to time, but I don't think any of us are really in exile like Daniel and his people were. But the reality is that God's people have pretty much always been in exile of one form or another. There was discussion among the Jews for many years after they returned to Israel from their exile in Babylon whether their exile had truly ended: were they in exile because of where they lived,

or were they in exile because of where they stood in relationship to God? And if that relationship hadn't been fully healed, even though they were back in their homeland, was the exile still continuing? God's people rarely fit in the lands where they live. In the New Testament, Christians are referred to as "sojourners" or "resident aliens;" we live here but our roots remain in God's kingdom. A sense of exile is normal for God's people until Jesus returns. We are citizens of another world and witnesses to the fact that that world is breaking back into the old world.

And there are times when we feel our exile more keenly than others. There are times of suffering and doubt when we wonder if remaining loyal to God is really worth it in the end, whether God really can save us from this foreign food. God does not always save His people from calamity, or they would obviously not have found themselves in exile. We don't always know why that is. Daniel had not done anything wrong, but there he was, faced with foreign food. And Daniel shows us how we live as God's people in our strange lands. We live as those who know that God is with us in our exile, even when we find ourselves in exile through our own wrongdoing. We live as those with hope of returning to our true home in God's presence. We live as those who expect foolish opposition from the kings of our world, but rather than bowing to their pressures or rising up in rebellion, we will remain faithful to our Lord. We live lives of constant communication with God through prayer, knowing that the only way to live in exile is to live in Him.

Our hope as Christians is a bit different than it was for Daniel and his friends. We know that God has already sent one through the temptations and sufferings of the fiery furnace for us. Christ has already done the mighty act of saving us from death and hell. Even if God does not miraculously save us from our challenges as He did for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and even when He does not send an angel to close the lions' mouths, He has already done what is necessary to save us. He has already given us the heavenly food of Christ's body and blood to sustain us instead of the foreign food of the world. Let's receive it and rejoice.



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