

**Ben Lattimer**  
**Stone Church of the Brethren**  
**Sermon**  
**June 18, 2023**  
**Acts 10-11**  
***Lions and Elephants***

*Lions*

It was the great migration - wildebeests and zebras as far as the eye could see. One of the perks of living in Africa while serving in the Peace Corps is that natural wonders like the Serengeti Plain are close at hand. So a group of friends and I went on Safari. It was incredible. The wildebeest and zebra were migrating. The herds were massive. And with them came the lions...

We never saw an actual hunt - but we saw the aftermath. Prides of lions feasting. When one of the lions would get up to roam, or go down to the water for a drink. All of the other animals would give them a wide berth. They knew what the pride was capable of...

All of the other animals bowed before the kings and queens of the plain... All except one that is...

*Series Intro*

Over the next few weeks, we find ourselves in the book of Daniel, these strange tales from the latter parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. The book of Daniel is set during the Jews' exile in Babylon - in the 6th century BC, after king Nebuchadnezzar has laid waste to Jerusalem and taken its people captive. Certain promising individuals were chosen from among the captives - to be trained in the royal palace as government officials, helping manage the empire. 4 of these young men were Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego - or so the story goes.

When our story opens, King Nebuchadnezzar has set up a giant golden statue of ridiculous proportions. 90 feet high and just 9 feet wide. A statue destined to fall. But he's proud of it. And he calls together all of the officials - all of the chief administrators, ministers, governors, counselors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials [*big breath*] - he calls them all to assemble before the statue and makes a pronouncement: "Whenever you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument, you must bow down and worship the gold statue that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, have set up."

These lists, as W. Sibley Towner points out, lend the "story... an almost humorous tone, in that the little orchestra becomes the signal for a mass obeisance by all the toadies of the kingdom.... It [all] has the playful feel of a storyteller's elaboration on the basic plot."

But of course this playfulness covers over a dark threat: anyone who fails to bow down before the statue will be thrown into a fiery furnace...

### *History Time with Pastor Ben*

Now, here's the thing. The Babylonians were ruthless. But there's no evidence that they ever executed anyone for "religious non-compliance". That doesn't happen for the Jews until much later, under the rule of a Greek tyrant named Antiochus IV. *He* sets up a statue to Zeus in the holy of holies in the temple and commands everyone to worship it under penalty of death.

In fact - most all of the book of Daniel actually reads more like it's from the reign of Antiochus than the age of Babylon. The Jews recognized this. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the stories of Daniel are grouped together with the writings and stories, not with the histories or the prophets.

Daniel isn't written to try and trick people into thinking it's older than it actually is. This was just the convention for apocalyptic writings of the time - to tell the story in a historical setting, in order to give it some distance, to see more clearly the choices before them in their own time.

Whenever you place the *writing* of the book of Daniel, its *readers* in the time of Antiochus would hear very real echoes of the dark threat facing them as well.

The king in this story - as with Antiochus - is using worship as a way of consolidating power - trying to fabricate unity by enforcing conformity.

### *Back to the Story*

Faced with the king's edict, these three young Jewish exiles - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego - refuse to bow. They are faithful followers of the Lord, and they will not worship the king's graven image.

Other courtiers of the king see an opportunity to rise at the expense of their rivals. They report the three's defiance to the king...

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are called before the king. And he gives them one last chance. It would have been so easy to go along with it. It's the only action that makes sense. They are powerless. He is the king. And the whole empire has already fallen in step, bowing before the statue.

The pressure to conform is intense. I think of our own country in the midst of moments of nationalistic fervor, after September 11th for example, as the drum beat moved us inexorably toward war...

Where are the drum beats leading us now? Pressure to conform - to join in warring camps, this one or the other...

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are called before the king. One last chance... But still they stand...

### *Elephants*

We were out on safari. The pride of lions was menacing. All of the other animals would give them a wide berth. When there came the sound of a crashing through the brush - and out stepped a herd of elephants. As these mammoth creatures made their way to the water to drink, even the lions got out of their way.

I've often thought about that since. The elephants weren't predators. They weren't out hunting for a meal. They were just in control of themselves. They were sure of who they were - and even the lions were changed by their presence.

### *Conclusion - vision for us today:*

W. Sibley Towner again on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: There is something remarkable, "in the calm solidarity of the young men who have an absolutely firm grip upon their identity and who know clearly what they are commanded to do, standing before the towering, wrathful authority..." They hold onto themselves - they remember who they are - and do the right thing.

It would be easy to see this as a story about God's miraculous deliverance. It's an answer to the menacing threat of the king, "What god will save you from my power..." That hope is here... A hope that gives courage to our siblings in faith in Nigeria - for example - as church after church is attacked.

But here too is this declaration, right there at the center of the passage: The three young men reply, "We don't need to answer your question. If our God—the one we serve—is able to rescue us from the furnace of flaming fire and from your power, then let him rescue us. But if not, Your Majesty: we will still never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you've set up." Their faithfulness is not contingent upon their deliverance.

They stand against the king - stand against the nationalistic fervor. And ultimately their faithfulness changes the nation. They remain faithful to God, and God stands with them - even in the fiery furnace... Even the tyrant king is redeemed and ultimately the nation with him.

It's *that* hope that lies at the center of this story. The hope that our simple acts of faithfulness - even when we feel powerless in the struggle against the powers of this age, powerless against the tide of division and violence and darkness all around... There is hope. Hope beyond hope that our simple acts of faithfulness - and God's faithful presence - will yet transform the world.

May it be so.

Amen

