

Subversive Leadership

It's Who You Know

Daniel 1:1-7

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Is it possible to be a good citizen...and a good Christian...at the same time? This is a question that has stirred me in recent months. Because of our bitter political divisions...and a pandemic that has resulted in the loss of many of our liberties...I planned a New Year series from the book of Daniel on how to be a citizen and a Christian at the same time. We even had a catchy title: "Subversive Leadership."

Then came Wednesday. An assault on our capitol building. Five people dead. A national embarrassment. And I found myself wondering whether I should still preach this series. The answer, I decided, was ABSOLUTELY. More than ever. "Subversion," by definition, is the "undermining of an existing system or set of beliefs." And the gospel of Jesus DOES subvert the belief system of our culture.

Think about the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, blessed are the mourners, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are the persecuted"...THAT was subversive! Jesus was undermining a culture that idolized wealth, power, happiness and sexual license...and crushed dissent. When he spoke about the "Kingdom of God" on earth, THAT was subversive. When Christian martyrs refused to affirm that Caesar was Lord, THAT was subversive. The gospel DOES undermine our cultural values.

BUT...when Jesus' disciples took up arms, he condemned it! His was a non-violent revolution...and THAT was subversive, too. Violence in pursuit of a cause is NEVER permissible for Christ-followers. I condemned it last summer in Seattle and Portland. I condemn it in Washington DC, too. And I don't care

who's behind it. Last week a pastoral friend said, "It is not a donkey that will save us. It is not an elephant that will save us. It is the lamb that saves us." Surely, Jesus, the Lamb of God, calls us to something higher, something nobler, than the chaos we see around us.

In this season of political turmoil, pandemic, and anarchy, I believe the story of Daniel and his friends is more relevant than ever. It is the story of a handful of faithful Jews swept up when their homeland was conquered by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem was sacked and their nation decimated. The brightest and best of them were taken captive and transported back to Babylon where they would be reeducated to become productive citizens of their new empire.

But the amazing thing about Daniel and his friends is this: even though they were exiles in a pagan land that rejected their religion and subjugated them, God used those men to bless AND influence that culture without compromising their faith.

American Christians sometimes forget: WE ARE the Exiles! We may LOVE this nation, but it is not our spiritual home. We are citizens of Heaven. Our theme is "Subversive Leadership" because I think Christians ought to do everything we can to be a good, productive exile-citizens of the nation in which God has placed us...AND...I believe there are unholy aspects to government and power and culture that need to be subverted. The trick is to find the balance between being a good citizen of our community...and a better citizen of the Kingdom of God. And Daniel can help us. Ch 1.1

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.

Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The

king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

You might expect that young men, kidnapped from their land and forced into servitude, would become bitter and rebellious. But the punchline of Daniel is that, not only were they great citizens in their new land, they earned incredible influence over the king. Nebuchadnezzar, the ravager of Jerusalem, became a worshipper of Yahweh BECAUSE of the influence of Daniel and his friends. They were good citizens.

BUT...there were lines they would not cross. And our text reveals the pressures they faced navigating between the conflicting values of their earthly king and of their heavenly king. Here is how Nebuchadnezzar sought to bend these men to his will: He:

- Asserted his authority
- Diluted their worship
- Encouraged their dependency and
- Redefined their identity.

If we pay close attention, we might find some disturbing parallels for our present moment. As Christians, we cannot provide a courageous witness to Jesus unless we recognize and call out the ways in which earthly powers seek to displace God's authority in our lives.

The first thing Nebuchadnezzar did was to assert authority over the Jewish nation. Verse 1: "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it." Johoiakim WAS the king of Judah. But Nebuchadnezzar decided HE wanted to be king of Judah...and besieged Jerusalem until he had his wish. He wanted MORE power!

Power is addictive and corrosive and the thirst for power is unquenchable. Once it is attained, it is rarely given away. One of the most amazing moments in our history was when George Washington at the end of two terms as president, relinquished his power and returned to Mt. Vernon; to the chagrin

of many who wanted to make him king. It was an unprecedented voluntary surrender of authority. There's a reason that the idea of term limits never gets beyond a campaign stump speech. Once in power...few are willing to relinquish power. We ought ALWAYS be suspicious of the addictive and expanding nature of governmental authority.

Next, Nebuchadnezzar diluted their worship. He pillaged the temple of its vessels of worship and "brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god." These were precious items of silver and gold used in temple worship. By absconding with them, the King made it more difficult for Israel to worship their God. And by placing them in HIS treasury, he asserted the preeminence of his gods over Yahweh. In order to subjugate a people, the king had to subjugate their god...and dilute the hope, faith and inspiration that they derived from their worship of him. We ought ALWAYS be suspicious of any outside attempt to control or define our worship of God.

The next step in in subjugating Israel was to encourage dependency. The King ordered the best of the Jewish youth to be set apart, educated and assimilated into Babylonian culture. They would be catered to; given the very best to eat and drink. They would become completely dependent upon the palace; wards of the state. And, after a period of three years, this process of cultivation and grooming would realign their loyalties away from Yahweh, away from Israel and toward their new king and his empire. We ought ALWAYS be suspicious of any attempt by government to make us completely dependent upon it to meet our needs.

Nebuchadnezzar asserted authority, diluted their worship, encouraged dependency and finally, redefined their identity. He stole their Jewish names; names that were a reflection of their faith in Yahweh...and replaced them with names devoted to pagan gods like Bel and Abu and Marduk. "Daniel," which means Yahweh is my Judge, became "Beltshazzar," which means, 'god Bel, protect the king.') "Mishael," which means "Who is like Yahweh?", became "Meshach" ... "Who is like Aku?" And so forth. They stole their names...and the spiritual identity that went with them and redefined them to fit into their new culture. We ought ALWAYS be suspicious of an attempt to squeeze us into the culture's definition of who and what we are.

So, with all these pressures, what chance did these young men have NOT to be completely absorbed into a new culture, a new kingdom, a new religion, a new identity? And yet...as we will see they DID resist. Although they were good citizens, they found a way to cling to their identity, reject a life of dependency, and persist in a vibrant spiritual life. How was that possible?

Well the secret's in verse 2: "And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand..." In that verse, we find the theme of this book: God is in control. Complete control. Over everything. Over kings...over kingdoms...over circumstances. Even events that appear to put the Jewish people at risk and the Jewish faith at peril...even THOSE are within the control of Almighty God. Nebuchadnezzar THOUGHT he was asserting authority over the people of Israel. But the ONLY reason that happened...is that Lord God Yahweh GAVE Jehoiakim and Judah into his hands. For a season of discipline and testing and purifying. We call this the sovereignty of God.

Do you want to live a balanced life? A life that supports and encourages what is BEST in our culture...and subverts what is evil and wrong about our culture? Well...the most important principal is this: It's all about who you know! Do you know the sovereign God of the universe?

When human powers assert authority in our lives, WE know the God who is really in control...over everything. When human powers dismiss or dilute the importance of worship in our lives, WE know the God who deserves our worship, defines our worship and empowers us through our worship. When human powers encourage unhealthy dependency upon governmental structures, WE know the God who is the sole source of all we require for life. And when human powers redefine our identity, WE know that GOD's definition of us is the only one that matters. And God has declared that we are his children, that he loves us, and that we are agents of his kingdom on earth.

Do you know this God? We just celebrated Christmas; the moment when Jesus, Son of God, came to earth to dwell among us. To reveal himself to us. To save us from every evil power and restore his kingdom on earth. It is through the spirit of Jesus that we can live honorable, productive lives as exile-citizens on this earth...while remembering that our real citizenship is in heaven. It is the Spirit of Jesus who gives us hope and joy and peace and love and courage to face these challenging times; to recognize and resist counterfeit

gods. The best way for us to be a great citizen on earth...and a better citizen of God's kingdom...is to acknowledge that all of this is in his hands. To surrender to our sovereign God. And I can think of no better way to begin this New Year than to bow before our sovereign God. Literally.