

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Choices to Make

Annie Duncan

Disclaimer: This transcript was computer generated and may contain errors.

Scripture:

Daniel 1:1-21

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia^[a] and put in the treasure house of his god.

³ Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— ⁴ young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.^[b] ⁵ The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

⁶ Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷ The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Beltshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

⁸ But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. ⁹ Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, ¹⁰ but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your^[c] food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

¹¹ Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹² "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." ¹⁴ So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

¹⁵ At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. ¹⁶ So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

¹⁸ At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. ²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

²¹ And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Transcript:

Amen. Good morning, BelPres. Good morning and good morning if you are worshiping online. It is so great to be with you here this morning. My name's Annie Duncan. I'm the executive pastor here and always love being in worship with all of y'all. Because this past Monday was Halloween, I'm going to start off with this story. It has a bit of a tie in, but it's also a Halloween story. In the early 2000s, I think even like 2001, so real early 2000s, two of my friends from the Pacific Northwest, they headed down to Malibu to go to college.

Amidst my Malibu and stylish LA County, my friends from the Pacific Northwest, they stuck out a bit in their North Face fleeces and Birkenstocks, but they didn't really care because they weren't trying to blend in or anything. But on their very first Halloween in Malibu, they thought it would be funny if they dressed up as their Californian classmates. Reminder, this is early 2001. They donned like Chris Polo tees and short jean skirts and UGG boots up to their knees and they show up at this Halloween party. All of their LA friends, they were like, "Oh my gosh, you guys look so cute. I love your outfits," and they're like, "But where are your costumes?"

To which my friends said, "We are in costume. We're you, right? We're you. We're you, Californian classmates." Their costumes of choice were to finally give in and blend to LA fashion. Here's the tie in, as followers of Jesus, we always have choices to make. We can blend in with the world around us, or we can take some of those opportunities where we stick out a bit and don't always blend in with the world around us. We're in this sermon series right now called Be Thou My Vision, where we are following God during uncertain times. In those uncertain times, we know that God still place his vision before us.

For BelPres, we believe that part of that vision that God's calling us to for such a time as this is to be fully engaged disciples and to equip all of us to be fully engaged disciples, which is no easy task. Being a disciple, it is not an easy task. One of the marks of being a disciple is to obey Jesus as Lord through prayer and scripture, to obey Jesus as Lord. That is a hard thing to do, to always obey Jesus. In the passage that we're going to walk through today, we're going to really unpack that. The question that we're going to be asking is, how do we maintain our Christian identity in a pagan land like Bellevue and beyond?

How do we do that? How do we maintain our Christian identity? The key is staying close to Jesus, sticking close to Jesus. In the Old Testament, and that's the first half of the Bible, there's a book of the Bible called Daniel. In that book, Daniel, it takes place during very unprecedented times of uncertainty because the people of God have been taken captive and they're exiles in this foreign land of Babylon. Now, if you've ever read the Book of Daniel before, there are two unforgettable stories, the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the fiery furnace, and then the story of Daniel and the lions' den.

If you've maybe never read through the Book of Daniel before, or maybe you need a refresher, here are some quick cliff notes to those two stories. First, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they refuse to worship this 90 foot tall gold statue that the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, sets up. And because of that, they're thrown into a fiery furnace. But God is with them and God rescues them. They don't die in that furnace. You can read all about that story in Daniel 3. In a similar act of disobedience to the king of Babylon, Daniel, he's only supposed to pray to the king of Babylon.

But instead, three times a day, he gets down on his knees and he prays to his God, the one in true God, just as he had done all the days before. The punishment for that was to be thrown into a den of hungry lions. And again, God is with Daniel, he survives. You can read all about that story in Daniel 6. The repeated themes in these two stories though are Daniel and his friends and their acts of refusal. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they refused to worship any other God than God, and Daniel refused to pray to any other God than his God. How did they end up here?

How did Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego get to a point where they would refuse what their captors in exile were asking of them to do, even to the point where it risks their lives? How did they get to that level of obedience, right? To answer that question, we need to go all the way back to chapter one. Way back in chapter one, we see strategic and intentional choices that Daniel and his friends make that give us major insight into how they could even sustain a fiery furnace or den of lions, as well as how they survived in exile for so many years. We're going to walk through the first chapter together. You can read along with me.

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it. The Lord delivered Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his,

Nebuchadnezzar's hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he, Nebuchadnezzar, carried off to the temple of his God in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his God. Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility, young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace.

He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for the three years. And after that, enter into the king's service. Among those chosen were some from Judah, Daniel, Hanania, Mishael, and Azaria. The chief official gave them new names. To Daniel, the name Belteshazzar, to Hanania, Shadrach, to Mishael, Meshach, and to Azaria, Abednego. It's 605 BC and God's people, the Israelites, have been conquered by the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, and they're taken into exile.

It's in these six verses, these first six verses in chapter one, that we see some of the first choices that Daniel and his friends make to obey God. Choices to make when we are in our own Babylon, as well as the choices that Daniel and his friends made in literal Babylon. First is this, don't withdraw. Don't withdraw. In exile, it would've been all too easy to just gather all of God's people together and form a community or form a commune and say, "Let's just hunker down and get through this together." But Daniel and his friends don't do that. They remain faithful to what God has said and continue to obey God and how God has directed them.

One of the things that a prophet prophesied over God's people many years before they even go into exile talks about the captivity that they're about to go into. Daniel and his friends listen to this. It's from Jeremiah 29 where it says, "Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters. Find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there. Do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Daniel and his friends do just that. They settle down and they take part in this recruitment process that the king is putting them through, right? Ashpenaz worked for the king to vet the most handsome, youthful, and smartest men from God's people. I mean, if that doesn't speak to the values of Babylon, as well as today, I don't know what does. He vetted from God's people. But not just all of God's people, but the men that came from royal family or noble birth. This group from the very beginning, it had status. This group was going to spend three years being trained to serve the king. Another word for that is indoctrination. They were given new names. They were in a new land. They were to learn a new language. But again, Daniel and his friends, they don't withdraw. They go as far as they could to live in a pagan, ungodly Christian government. I'll say this a few times today, but Babylon is a location, but it is also a metaphor. Babylon represents a pagan culture that's alien to God. Have we ever experienced a culture like

that before? Just me. Fun. Great. We see other kinds of Babylon as we look throughout history though, right? Where countries take over other countries or communities, and we see the negative impacts of colonization. I mean, the reason so many of our friends in New Hope speak French isn't because they like French food.

It's colonization and the impacts. It's in this alien to God community that Daniel and his friends don't withdraw, but they take part in everything that they can while still remaining obedient to God. But there is a point where they had to draw a line. Let's keep reading. But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. Now, God caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel. But the official told Daniel, "I'm afraid of the Lord the king who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

Daniel then said to the guard, whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hanania, Mishael, and Azaria, "Please test your servants for 10 days. Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." He agreed to this and tested them for 10 days. At the end of the 10 days, they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. The guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

I promise this isn't a sermon about being a vegetarian, though we all should be eating our vegetables, right? The second choice that we see Daniel and his friends make is know where you draw the line. Know where you draw the line. Here in this section of scripture, Daniel and his friends, they do, they have a line that they're not willing to cross. They're willing to go as far as they can within the king's courts. They'll get new names. They'll learn whatever they teach them. But when it comes to this rich, indulgent food and wine that the king is providing for them, they refuse. Why? Why did they do that? Endless goblets of wine, how bad can that be, right? Daniel answers this though in verse eight. But Daniel resolved not to defile himself. The food and drink that the king provided was unclean according to the ways that Daniel and his friends had been living faithfully and obedient to God. Some of the food that would've been served at the king's table, it would've been sacrificed to Babylonian gods. Some of the meat that was there at the king's table would've had blood in it, which according to the laws that Daniel and his friends were following, again, that would've been forbidden, but it also would've been repulsive to them, right?

Additionally, Daniel and his friends knew that to share a meal among these people was to commit one's self to friendship. Part of them choosing to draw a line was this awareness to beware of friendly captivity. Beware of friendly captivity. Because I mean, Babylon is plush. It is comfortable. It's glamorous. It comes with bottomless wine glasses. What's not to like? It would've been all too easy to eat the meat and drink the wine, which some of God's people

did. Some of God's people did. They just went along with it. They're like, "Hey, captivity isn't so bad." But Daniel and his friends don't fall for the Babylonian brainwashing.

They would tolerate their new names. They would tolerate the new land. They would tolerate the new language, but the food and eating with their captors, nope. Daniel and his friends remained obedient to God through it all, because God hadn't told them they couldn't have new names. God hadn't told them they couldn't learn a new language, but God had been very clear when it came to food sacrificed to other gods. Don't eat it. Don't eat it. That's where they drew the line. In Babylon and in Bellevue and beyond, we have an enemy that tempts us to say yes to the things that God has said no to. They had a choice and we have a choice.

I also think that Daniel and his friends and all that they saw in Babylon were able to see from a very close vantage point that while there were plush perks of captivity, captivity doesn't stay friendly for long. Daniel and his friends, they went from being attended to in the king's court to then a few years later being thrown into a furnace and thrown into a lions' den. Captivity doesn't remain friendly for long. And that didn't happen on day one of their exile, but it did happen years later. But their simple act of being obedient to the things that God called them to set them on this path of intentional integrity, sustained integrity that then helps them to face bigger obstacles in the days and years to come.

What starts with food in chapter one accelerates to questioning who they're going to worship and who they're going to pray to in chapters three and six, Daniel and his friends again know that they need to draw the line, remain obedient to who God's called them to be. They remain faithful to God because God was clear, you shall have no other gods before me. Between chapter one, three and six are these years of preparation and intentional decisions and choices to keep choosing to remain faithful to God. You're not going to survive the furnace if you haven't prepared for the fire. Daniel and his friends had prepared for the fire.

As we walk with God, it's these simple acts of obedience that create sustained integrity for us when we face bigger obstacles in the days and years to come. How do we like Daniel know how to draw the line in our own lives? Because again, this isn't a sermon on being a vegetarian, right? We're okay now. We can eat meat if that's your thing. But how do we know where to draw the line in our own lives? How do we obey Jesus as Lord through prayer and scripture? One of the things that we talk a lot about here is those Holy Spirit nudges. I believe that the Holy Spirit is the one that is always going to be speaking to us that helps us set the line.

It's those moments when you're in a situation and all of a sudden you get a thought that isn't your own that's like, uh, uh, uh, you're not supposed to be doing that. That is how we know where to draw the line, is we have the Holy Spirit that's constantly going to be guiding and directing us. It's up to us whether we listen and obey. Again, this is part of our journey as disciples, to obey Jesus as Lord through prayer and scripture. Let's finish out this first chapter of

Daniel together. To these four young men, God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. Daniel can understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them and he found none equal to Daniel, Hanania, Mishael, and Azaria. They entered the king's service. Every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them 10 times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. Among the masses of God's people that were in exile, it's these four that are written about in the Book of Daniel.

In that last chapter or in that last section of chapter one that says, "and Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus," this means that Daniel spent his entire life in exile in pagan Babylon. He's a young man when he goes into exile. When he's thrown into the den of lions, he's in his eighties. Daniel spends his entire life in Babylon. Babylon, again, it's not just a location, it's a metaphor. It's a metaphor that's used all throughout scripture, as well as still today. It symbolizes a culture that's pagan and alien to God. Babylon shows us what it means to be oppressed, as well as what it means to be the oppressor.

As Christians, I think when we read this story, we place ourselves as Daniel and his friends, as disciples surrounded by a pagan culture, right? But history also shows us how the church has been the oppressor, forcing cultures to obey a certain way and indoctrinating them like King Nebuchadnezzar did. There's this fine line when it comes to how we deal with the Babylon of today. We aren't to be assimilated to our pagan culture, but we also aren't called to be the assimilators. God calls us to be like Daniel. And this brings us to our third point, to leverage your influence. God gave Daniel and his friends immense favor.

We see this all throughout chapter one, but we also see it in the chapters to come. Because of their choice to remain obedient to who God called them to be and to obey God, God blesses them. After Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego survived the fiery furnace, the king of Babylon makes a decree saying, "Therefore, I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble for no other God can save in this way." Isn't that a sweet little decree by a king? And then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to all these places of power within Babylon.

Similarly, after Daniel survived the lions' den, the king of Babylon makes another decree saying, "I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom, people must fear and revere the God of Daniel." But as nice as those decrees were by the kings of Babylon, guess what? They didn't exactly work. Babylon remained pagan Babylon, because God doesn't force us into obedience like an oppressor. God invites us into obedience because it's a relationship. He says to us, "If

you would follow me, if you would obey what I've written in my word, and if you would listen to me, I promise you a better life, a richer life, a fuller life."

That's what we see from Daniel and his friends. They're obedient. Because of that, they received favor, they had influence, and they got to see firsthand God do the miraculous. That brings us to the end of chapter one. It brings us to the end of chapter one. What about us, BelPres? Like Daniel and his friends, God's called us to leverage our influence and be his disciples in the Babylon that we find ourselves in today. He calls us to bring his love and his healing to the world around us. God has assigned us to the world, but the enemy has assigned the world to us. Let that sink in for a second.

God has assigned us to the world, but the enemy has assigned the world to us. The question is, who's going to win out? The rest of the story is ours to write, BelPres. This week, again, like weeks prior, your action step is to pray. It's to pray and ask God, God, where can I leverage my influence? Where can I be your disciple in the Babylon of Bellevue and beyond that I'm surrounded with? Not how can I be an assimilator, but how can I be your disciple? How can I be an influence to those around me? Pray that prayer this week.

God, we do, we ask that you show us ways where we can be like Daniel and his friends, where we can be obedient to you and not just blend in, but sometimes stick out, even look a little weird sometimes. God, we ask that you give us eyes to see. Nudge us with your Holy Spirit. Equip us with your Holy Spirit and help us to bring your love to a pagan world that so desperately needs you, Jesus. It's in your name that we pray. Everybody said together, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Icebreaker Question: How do you feel about pie? Love it? If so, which kind? Hate it? If so, what's your fav dessert?

Opening Question: Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Obedience sets Daniel (and friends) on a path of integrity. Years of faithful decisions create sustained integrity. What is something that you've been working on (or want to work on) so you can obey Jesus as Lord instead of going with the flow the world sets us?
- Where do you see yourself in this story? Are you an exile or captive like Daniel and his friends, engaged in culture yet faithfully obedient? Or are you the guard who had sympathy and let Daniel and his friends eat vegetables for 10 days? Are you a Babylon resident? Something else? In what ways are you leveraging the influence that you have to bring Jesus' love, healing, and justice to Bellevue / Babylon?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.