

**Preacher:** Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

**Scripture:** Daniel 6:1-5, 14-28

Former President Jimmy Carter told this story in a lecture to a group of Candler Seminary students about his calling into politics. *Homiletics Magazine* reports the story: "It seems it came as a result of a 1962 revival at Plains Baptist Church. An evangelist from Columbus, Georgia, came to preach both the morning and evening services. During the revival, Carter confessed to the evangelist that he was feeling called to run for state senator. At that time, the Georgia political establishment was threatening to close down the whole Georgia public school system if one white child had to sit next to one black child.

The evangelist said to Carter, "I don't think it is really a good idea for a Sunday School teacher and a Baptist deacon to risk compromising himself by getting into the dirty arena of politics." Carter's answer was and is a classic.

"How would you like to have a church with 75,000 members?"

"What do you mean?" the evangelist asked.

"I believe that I can serve human needs and be a minister of compassion and justice to my district as much as you can with your congregation."<sup>1</sup>

When I stumbled upon this story about President Carter this week, I had to share it. Not because I necessarily agree with its sentiment completely, but because I think it depicts perfectly the complicated and messy relationship that Christians have with politics and government and state. It's a messy one and it ought to be. We should be wary of the power and yet as Carter notes there is also a power to do good.

There are two things you're not supposed to talk about at the family dinner table. What are they? Politics and Religion. Well, when you come to church, we break one of those rules on a regular basis as our religion is all we talk about—in particular our religious leader, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But even at this gathering of spiritual kin, we try not to talk so explicitly about politics. Politics is more dangerous than religion. Yet, Pastor Audrey and I, while we don't promote specific candidates, nor specific bills, nor complete party platforms, we do speak to issues that are discussed in the political realm. We speak of those things from a perspective of our faith. We speak of them in terms of morals and ethics, rather than a politician's agenda. Then, we just leave it often to you all to do the fuller discernment.

But today's story of Daniel in the Babylonian court is extremely political in nature and unavoidable. So, I may not shy away from these themes of religious persecution and how they relate to our experience in the world today. Bear with me and don't be angry with me by the end. If you have questions, let's consider them together over a cup of coffee. I'm always game for good conversation. I also am reminded of a quote from one of my seminary professors who said that Sunday Morning is already one of the most political times of the week because a bunch of followers gather to proclaim Lordship in Jesus Christ above any local government, and this political movement happens around the world. So, this got political when we showed up to proclaim Jesus is Lord.

Let's consider the story of Daniel. Daniel along with three other Israelites are chosen to serve in the Babylonian court and be educated in their practices. They are living in the land of the enemy, employed by the King who just annihilated their homeland. And as if that wasn't bad enough, they are given new names, Babylonian names—Daniel is called Belteshazzar and his friends are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Then they are given food that it would be

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration\\_search.asp?item\\_topic\\_id=2214](https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=2214)

against their religion to eat. Some in power might call this assimilation, but those without power might call this harassment. But things get far worse.

The four young Israelites prove themselves useful to the empire, largely due to Daniel's ability to interpret dreams, but eventually King Nebuchadnezzar declares that all people should worship a golden idol, which the Israelites refuse to do and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are thrown into the fiery furnace. You know the story. God protects them and saves them and reveals his greatness in Babylon. But apparently God's greatness is forgotten for a new edict is established making it illegal to pray to any God other than the King of Babylon. Daniel is discovered praying to the one true God in his home and is thrown into the lion's den, where once again he is protected by God. What the Babylonians saw as penalty of law, the Israelite men felt as religious persecution. Daniel and his friends are asked to do something that goes against the tenets of their faith and they cannot. So, the empire seeks to punish them.

I think you all know that religious persecution is not something isolated in time but rather has perpetuated throughout the ages and across faith traditions. The Egyptians, Assyrians, and Babylonians—superpowers of biblical times—were notorious for the ways they persecuted the Jews because of their faith and heritage. But after the days of Jesus, the Romans persecuted Christians because they saw them as a threat to power. When Christians took power around the world, we also had factions which persecuted minority religions—think about Catholic Spain in the 1400s removing all of its Muslim and Jewish neighbors. It was other Christians who persecuted the Brethren in Germany in the 1700s which forced us to move to America, or consider the bizarre religious slant that led Hitler's Nazi Party to exterminate Jewish people. It seems whenever religion and political power mix, tolerance disappears.

The same exists today. The Muslim Extremists called Boko Haram continue to wreak havoc on Brethren Christians in Northern Nigeria. In a few Sundays on April 6, we will have Samuel Dali from Nigerian Church leadership with us to explain some of what continues amidst our Brethren there. Just this past week in New Zealand, a man gunned down Muslims worshipping at a local mosque. But also, in China, Christianity and other religious minorities are forced underground at risk of violence. Here in the United States, the separation of church and state has helped to limit religious persecution spearheaded by the state. Individual citizens and groups still persecute and act hatefully and violently toward one another. But I want us to think about those matters of conscience which we would continue to practice under threat of violence or refuse to do in violation of law. What are those matters of conscience for today's Christians—those lines you will not cross or compromise?

I am interested in what the book of Daniel might speak into our American understanding of religious persecution. Daniel and his friends had to decide where their lines were for matters of conscience. Those things that compromised their faith too much that they had to resist. They decided they could not compromise on their food, that they could not pray to an idol, and that they could not worship the King of Babylon. Those were their lines and at stake was their very lives. However, there were things that they were willing to compromise on. Daniel and his friends didn't put up a fight in working for the King of Babylon and coordinating his affairs. Daniel had no problem interpreting his dreams. This is the King of Babylon, the ring leader of the group that just destroyed his temple and exiled his people. I wouldn't have blamed Daniel if he had refused to serve such an oppressive regime. But Daniel chose to draw his line on matters of conscience in a different place.

How do we decide how far is too far to compromise our religious beliefs and practices? Young pacifist Brethren men during World War I decided they could not serve their country in

war and so they went to prison or worse. It was a matter of conscience. A court clerk decided she couldn't sign a marriage license for a gay couple because for her it was a matter of conscience. Some Brethren and Mennonites today refuse to pay a portion of their federal taxes which support things like drone strikes; this is a federal offense, but it is a matter of conscience. We can debate each and every one of these, justifying them or tearing them down, but the overall point is that people decided that they could not do something that our democratic government demanded of them due to their religious beliefs.

When we make this choice, we count the cost. Sometimes the cost of following conscience is high—like if you're a Christian whose life is threatened in northern Nigeria; or it might be low—you must pay a penalty in a civil suit or merely deal with judgmental glances. Daniel knew the penalty for not worshipping the King of Babylon was the lion's den and he accepted that fate. Those bold enough to defy the state know that consequences will come, but they also know that they serve a higher judge. When Christians gather around the world, we do not gather in solidarity with national governments, but rather in solidarity with a cosmic government, the Kingdom of God.

So, where are your lines that you refuse to cross? What are you willing to compromise on for the sake of continued influence? How tolerant of other religions or other Christian expressions are you?

In a tolerant democracy like our own, religious persecution looks different. It is more nuanced and complicated. As people of great privilege, sometimes we find ourselves as not the persecuted but the persecutor. How can we be more faithful? But all of us find ourselves in moments like Daniel, compromising some things and standing firm on others. How will you count the cost?