

“Going Beyond with Faith”
Daniel 6:13-24

This past week about 55 children, youth and adults went through five days of a faith camp, also known as Vacation Bible School. Their theme this year was “To Mars and Beyond” with the idea of traveling through the universe while following God’s way and using the tools of faith. It is heartwarming to see such a wonderful group gather together to have fun and to learn about the ways of faith. This is so needed in our world today. When we look at the challenges of our world today, we could feel very discouraged and even become cynical. We could imagine that the powers of evil and hate are greater than anything we can handle, but that is exactly the kind of lie faith exposes. The powers of evil and destruction only win when we feel powerless and overwhelmed. Since VBS had a space theme this year, we are going to watch a clip from one of the Star Wars movies, “Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back” where the wise Jedi Master Yoda was trying to train Luke Skywalker to help him defeat the dark forces. One of the biggest challenges was what Luke believed in his head. He had to overcome his thoughts of defeat and fear. Here is a scene.

<https://youtu.be/uAwj1h7MTIY>

The greatest challenge to our ability to live our lives to their fullest potential is the temptation to focus on overcoming evil instead of focusing on the power of love and faith that is within us. In the movie Star Wars: The Last Jedi, one of the characters challenges another by saying, “That’s how we’re going to win. Not fighting what we hate. Saving what we love.”

This is what we experienced last Thursday when we visited St. Luke’s Mission of Mercy in Buffalo. As we drove into the neighborhood and saw the devastation of extreme poverty, I felt so helpless and overwhelmed. When we got to tour the mission and saw the shabby buildings, smelled the unpleasant smells, and heard the statistics of the economic realities of the neighborhood, it was hard to find any hope! Yet, our guide, Mike Tahiri, was full of excitement and energy telling us about all the things they are able to do to journey together with those who are suffering. What we perceived as overwhelming odds, he saw as real potential for healing. His faith gave him the power, the imagination, and the energy to find real and practical ways to be hands and feet of Christ. That is how faith works!

Focusing on winning and on victory often misleads us to use the wrong tools in life such as power, esteem, and control. It keeps us locked in a prison of fear. You can never have enough security systems or police if you are afraid of an attack!!! You can never have enough money in the bank to feel like it is enough! You can never have enough accomplishments, vacations, recognitions, awards, or relationship assurances to satisfy that inner need for peace and love. The invitation of faith is to live a different vision of the world and of life; a vision where we focus on what we love within our hearts and souls.

Throughout the week of VBS, our young people looked at several biblical characters who lived by this kind of wisdom through faith. Today, we will focus on one of them, namely Daniel.

The historical context for the story makes it even more compelling for us. The story is set in the time of the Babylonian exile for the people of Israel, but the actual historical events that the story was referring to were far too dangerous to be named. They had to use a historical setting that was different from their time in order to tell the story of their resistance. This was actually a later period for the people of Israel. This was the time when the people of Israel were under the rule of the Seleucid Dynasty around the year 164 BCE.

This was the dynasty that was left after the invasion of Alexander the Great of the land. One of the kings, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, was especially cruel to the Jews. He desecrated the Temple and did not allow any Jewish religious practices. As a result, the Jews started the Maccabean Revolt which overthrew the Seleucids. The Book of Daniel was written during those years of war. It was a book that said to the people that they will defeat Antiochus and will prevail as the people of God in their faithfulness to God. At its heart, Daniel is a book of resistance to a system of domination and oppression. It was a call of encouragement to the people to continue to be faithful to the values of God's love and not the values of the empires and kings. The pressure was on them to just accept the values of the cultures around them and to forget what God has called them to do and be. This was the story of Daniel in this book. Daniel, who was a Jewish man, became the second in command to the king of a foreign nation, Darius. The others around him were jealous and tricked the king into signing a law that would make it illegal for anyone to worship their own gods. The only one worthy of worship was to be the king. And the punishment for those who disobeyed was being put to death by being thrown into a den of lions. This is a very typical story in our human history when religious or ethnic difference is used to discriminate against people. It was like a parable about life. The temptation for Daniel in the story was to abandon his faith and his identity, but he chose to focus on winning through focusing on what he loved. He was not afraid for his life because he believed in the one who gave him life.

The message of faith was very clear and dramatic. They could not have missed the point! Stay focused on faith and that will be enough. Of course, this does not mean that people who stay focused on faith do not suffer. There are plenty of examples in the Bible of people suffering for their faith. What it does mean is that in the end what truly matters is faith. One scripture that I really love in times of fear is Romans 14:8 "8 For if we live, we live for the Lord. If we die, we die for the Lord. So in both life and death, we belong to the Lord."

Sometimes it is hard to remember this simple lesson of faith! We forget that we belong to God. We get tempted to focus on evil or the things that can never satisfy us. But if we let faith be our guide in life, we can go to wherever life and God call us to bring hope, faith, and love. Amen.