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Daniel and the Lion's Den
"First Thing First"

"I love these shoes!" "I love the Minnesota Vikings!" "I love that new TV show!" "I love my iPhone!" "I love this cheese dip!"

How often do we catch ourselves saying things like this? Pretty often I imagine. We find ourselves in a moment of excitement declaring our devotion for our favorite new toy, food, or other small item in our lives. We don't mean it do we? I mean if we really examine what we're saying, we don't really love our cheese dip the way that we love the things in our lives that we truly love. Like the way that we love our parents, our spouse, or our kids. We don't place sports teams, apparel, or favorite foods on that same level, do we? But maybe some other things that are the object of our devotion do indeed capture too much of our hearts.

So, I'd like to ask us this morning, what are we devoted to? Because this is truly at the heart of what is going on in the Daniel text this morning. Daniel is a faithful Jew, living in a hostile empire, who is utterly devoted to God. He is triangulated by a group of rival court officials and given a life or death choice – will he bow to worship King Darius along with all the other subjects of the empire, or will he continue to worship God? Knowing full well the consequences – death by being tossed to the lions – Daniel chooses to continue his daily practice of praying in his open rooftop room, three times per day, with his body facing Jerusalem.

Why? Why didn't Daniel just pray in secret, behind closed doors? Why didn't Daniel just go along to get along? After all, all the other subjects of the king were doing it.

Why? Because Daniel knew and loved God. By this time in his life, we surmise that he was probably in his 80s and had served at least 3 different Babylonian and Persian emperors. He had been taken as a young boy from the

Kingdom of Israel, and carted off by the conquerors, and trained to serve in their courts, but he'd never lost sight of God. He'd never lost his faith.

No doubt he knew the great commandments of the Law of Moses. He knew the first and second of the 10 commandments, "6 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 7 you shall have no other gods before me. 8 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 9 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, 10 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments." (Deuteronomy 5: 6-10). No doubt Daniel recited the Shema daily, "4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6: 4).

But it wasn't out of fear that Daniel worshipped God and God alone, even unto the fear of death. It was out of devotion. It was because of love. Why?

He was devoted to God because of Grace; because of God's loving us first. The Apostle John writes in 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us." Daniel had seen this at work in his life. He'd seen a God who had guided him and protected him all his life. Despite the fact that he'd been taken as a young boy, despite the fact that he was serving in a foreign king. God had been faithful to Daniel and given him the ability to interpret the dreams of kings, to read the writing on the wall, to protect Daniel, and serve the cause of the Jews in the Babylonian court. This was God's grace at work in Daniel's life, shepherding him, preserving him, loving him, and guiding him. How could Daniel forsake or abandon God in these final days of his long life, after God had loved him and preserved his life so faithfully thus far?

And God does these same things for us. Our lives, all that is in them are a gift from God, David wrote in Psalm 24, "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." All of this is evidence of God's grace for us. God is loving us, is devoted to us, is caring for us even before we anticipate it. This is the definitive revelation to us in Jesus, correct? That "God so loved the world,

that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16). So when we’re loving God, when we’re showing our heartfelt devotion to God, we’re merely reciprocating the love God’s already shown us.

Second, Daniel showed steadfast devotion to God because his priorities were in the right place. Let me explain what I mean by that – if our lives are a long list of things demanding our attention and devotion, and we have a choice about how we order and organize that list, where is our devotion to God on that list? It’s pretty clear that for Daniel nothing could misplace God as number one. There was nothing above his devotion to God. And despite the fact that he had opportunities to turn away to preserve his own life, he didn’t forsake God.

We may not be facing life or death by hand of a king with our lists, but don’t we make subtle and not so subtle choices about our devotion all the time as well, don’t we? Why is this important? Why is it important that we place God at the top of our lists? Why are called by God to “love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might?”

Because everything in our lives is in its proper place when it is ordered around God. Because God is the anchor, the proper center of our lives. Because God is the most important person on the list of who matters. Because all of the other things on the lists of our lives are under God, and through God, and because of God:

- Our families: Under God, through God, and because of God.
- Our vocations: Under God, through God, and because of God.
- Our worries and anxieties: Under God, through God, and because of God.
- Our money and possessions: Under God, through God, and because of God.
- Our nation: Under God, through God, and because of God.

I think that with the approaching Independence Day holiday that that last one is critically important. Don’t we say in the Pledge that we are “One nation, *under God*?” That last part is essential to be able to articulate the pledge without defying our devotion to God. But we have lost sight of this in our current state of politics. It used to be maybe that we had this straight at different times in the life of our nation. Now, maybe not so much.

Here's where I see problems playing out – this is what this looks like: Our nation cannot save us. Our political parties cannot save us. Our devotion to a politician or president of whatever political stripe cannot save us. Despite our fervent defense of the cause, despite our devotion to our political talking points. All of this is devotion to our political causes is vain and empty in comparison to our calling to be devoted to God above all else. When we're called to bow to the king or the empire, our calling is as clear as it was in Daniel's day: We are to love the Lord our God above all these things.

Why? Because God is eternal. Those other things are not. Nations come and go. Politicians rise and fall. Empires expand and expire. But as the prophet Isaiah wrote, "The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever." (Isaiah 40:8). And all these earthly things that we are tempted to place above God, and occupy the space of God in our lives, they cannot save us in the end. Only God can do this. The prophet Zephaniah says, "For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior." The Proverbs say, "The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe." (18:10).

When we expect things other than God to do this for us, our lives are disordered. Competing factions develop in our lives and nation, each believing that they have the answers, and discord and strife erupt.

What would it mean for a nation of people to have devotion to God the core of their lives? What would it mean for God to come first in our lives? What would it look like to have a nation of people who are living out the Greatest Commandment as the first thing in their lives – to love God and love their neighbors as themselves? What would it look like to have people committed to God's commitments to "Doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God"? (Micah 6:8).

I imagine that the world would be a very different place. But it's possible, only through God, with God, and in God.

May we have the faith of Daniel. May we be devoted to God above all else. And may we serve and love God while doing so.

Alleluia and Amen.