

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL

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Worship Series: *The Time in Between*

Service Theme: *A Time for Steadfast Faith*

Sermon Theme: *What Did You Expect?*

October 29, 2023—Daniel 6:10-12, 16-23

When it comes to sports, there are two types of fans. Hardcore fans, and fair-weather fans. Hardcore fans will still cheer for their team, no matter what, win or lose. Fair-weather fans though, are the kind whose favorite team always seems to be whichever team is most successful! But as soon as that team starts losing, they'll adopt a new favorite team—whichever one is winning.

When you think about it, the difference between a hardcore fan and a fair-weather fan is what they expect from their team. A hardcore fan certainly wants their team to win, but even if they lose, they'll still support them because their fandom isn't based on the expectation of a certain outcome. But a fair-weather fan always expects their team to win. And if their team doesn't meet that expectation, they'll cheer for another team who will.

Which means fair-weather fandom is anything but steadfast. By definition, "steadfast" means "***firm and unwavering.***" But the fair-weather fan's support is constantly shifting because it's based on the expectation of a certain outcome. However, the hardcore fan's fandom is steadfast, because it's not based on the expectation of a certain outcome but on a connection to that team unchanged by wins or losses.

I bring this up, not to pat myself on the back for my steadfast fandom of an NFL franchise that's largely given me nothing but three decades of mediocrity and heartbreak for my troubles, but because we can glean some valuable insights for our faith from those two types of fans. Namely, a steadfast faith life requires the proper expectations about our lives, and about God. We see what those expectations are in an event from the life of the prophet Daniel.

When the Babylonian Empire conquered Israel in 605 B.C., they deported some of Israel's best and brightest to Babylon; people like Daniel, and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego-- of fiery furnace fame. Teenagers at the time, Daniel and his friends were trained for leadership with the best resources of the day.

But 60 years had passed. Now, Daniel is an old man, probably around 80. He had served faithfully and exceptionally, now under his third political regime after the Persians conquered the Babylonians. And throughout, Daniel continued to earn the favor of his rulers. So much so that the Persian King Darius planned to make Daniel his second in command of the whole empire!

But as often happens in politics, the faithful work which earned Daniel's high position also brought upon him the hatred of the other Persian officials. So they decided to get rid of Daniel. After failing to find any misconduct or corruption they could pin on him, they did what enemies always do: they attacked what mattered most. To attack Daniel, these officials knew they needed to go after what mattered most to him—God!

Counting on the King's ego, and knowing Daniel's steadfast faith, the officials conned King Darius into issuing a decree that no one could pray to anyone or anything besides the King for the next 30 days, or they'd be thrown into the lions' den, a horrific death penalty. The trap was set.

That's the first necessary expectation to have a steadfast faith. As Jesus warns in today's Gospel, "***You will be hated by everyone because of me.***" As a Christian, some people will love you for your Gospel-motivated love and faithfulness, like how Darius valued Daniel. But Jesus tells us to expect people to hate us for our faith in him. How will that help us have a steadfast faith?

If we expect to experience it, then it won't surprise us or catch us off guard when we do. If we're watching a scary movie, and I tell you ahead of time when there's going to be a jump scene, it'll scare you far less than if you're unaware it's coming, right? Likewise, if we expect

to face hatred for our faith in Christ, it won't catch us off guard. Which is important, because when we face hatred or opposition for something, our natural reaction is to think we must be wrong, or jettison whatever causes such hatred against us. But if Jesus warns us in advance to expect opposition or persecution for our faith, we can face it boldly, because it's exactly what Jesus said would happen. Think of how that must have comforted Martin Luther as he faced the opposition of the entire Catholic Church for proclaiming the Gospel! When we expect it, we can also remember what else Jesus promises. ***"You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved."*** Expect to be hated for Christ. And when you do, remain steadfast, because Jesus said it would happen!

When Daniel learned about the King's decree, we're told, ***"He went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before."*** Daniel could have obeyed and stopped praying to God. Or he could have prayed silently in secret so no one would know. But for a man like Daniel, who always served God and wore his steadfast faith on his sleeve, to hide his prayers was tantamount to denying God.

So, when Daniel found out that praying to God was now a crime punishable by death, he went immediately to his house...and prayed to God. In front of his open windows, no less. But this isn't a "stick it to the man" reaction from Daniel, who faithfully and respectfully served three different foreign, wicked, unbelieving kings. Daniel's prayer was just a continuation of the steadfast faith life he'd always displayed.

And there are some important things to take away from Daniel's prayers. First, he gets down on his knees to pray. Rather than standing tall, head held high to highlight all the wonderful things he'd done to earn God's ear, Daniel drops to his knees in humility, acknowledging how completely undeserving he was to come to the Holy, all-powerful God with his prayers. And instead of immediately launching into pleas for rescue, Daniel prayed, ***"giving thanks to his God."***

Isn't that shocking? It would seem completely warranted if instead of giving thanks to God, Daniel had given God a piece of his mind. "I've served you faithfully for all these years! I've struggled...suffered...sacrificed, all for you! And now, you can't just let me ride out the rest of my days with some peace?" How could Daniel give thanks to God in a moment like this?

Because of his expectations. Daniel didn't expect that God would always make everything in his life happen according to Daniel's plans. Much like the hardcore fans, whose love for the team isn't based on the expectation of a certain outcome, Daniel's love and trust in God wasn't based on his expectations of certain outcomes in his life. Basically, win or lose, he wouldn't give up on God!

And that's the second necessary expectation for a steadfast faith. We can't have circumstantial expectations of God. I don't have to tell you how hard that is though, do I? Because we always have expectations in our minds of how we think God should act in our lives. And if we expect that God will always follow those circumstantial expectations, we'll end up disappointed. Because sometimes God allows us to get tossed into the lions' den. Or to get devoured by the lion of cancer. Or for the lion of addiction to tear our lives to pieces. Sometimes God allows a roaring housefire to consume our possessions. Sometimes God allows the people we love to fall prey to the insatiable appetite of death. Even though we prayed, and prayed, and prayed that God would spare us, or spare them, or take the trouble away. But God doesn't always meet our circumstantial expectations.

And that's why, in order to have a steadfast faith, we can't expect that God will. Because when he doesn't, it's easy to question God's love; or doubt God's goodness; or maybe even feel the desire to fair weather fan and follow a different "team," that will meet your expectations. The truth is, in the moment, the lions in that den weren't the most dangerous lions for Daniel. It was Satan, ***"the roaring lion, prowling around looking for someone to devour."*** In that moment, Satan surely attacked Daniel's steadfast faith to make it infirm and wavering. The

same is true for us. If we have circumstantial expectations for God, then all it takes is one unmet expectation to shake our steadfast faith.

That's why, for our faith to be steadfast, it has to be built on something unchanging. Daniel's faith wasn't dependent on being rescued from the lions' den. Rather, his faith was steadfast because it was dependent on God's unchanging, unfailing, unshakeable promises. Daniel certainly trusted that God could save him from death, otherwise his enemies wouldn't have caught him ***“praying and asking God for help.”*** He prayed to God for help, because he knew God's promises. He knew God was powerful enough to do something about his problem. But even if he didn't, God would still be good!

It reminds me of Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. When King Nebuchadnezzar threatened to incinerate them in a fiery furnace for not following his idolatry, Daniel's three friends basically said, ***“We believe God will save us. But even if he doesn't, we won't bow down to your idol.”*** Daniel certainly believed God could rescue him from the lions' den, but even if he didn't, it wouldn't shake Daniel's steadfast faith. Because even if God didn't rescue Daniel from this earthly death, he was going to rescue him eternally!

Even when he was arrested and dragged off to be thrown into the den of hungry lions, Daniel's faith could remain steadfast because he knew God's steadfast faithfulness and steadfast promises. What's interesting is that although King Darius knew he couldn't change the law he'd made, according to the verses not included in our sermon text, Darius did everything he could the whole day to save Daniel's life. But there was one thing he didn't do. He didn't say, “Daniel, let's trade places. I'll go down into the lions' den for you.” That would be insane, right? Who would ever do that?

That's why you can have a steadfast faith in God, even when he doesn't meet your circumstantial expectations. Because that's exactly what King Jesus did—for you. He willingly took your place in death and the suffering of Hell. He willingly put himself in the lion's mouth, so that he could close the roaring lion's mouth, the devil's power and accusations, once and for all! So that there's nothing Satan can do to

harm you. There's nothing he can accuse you of. There's nothing he can hold over you anymore. Because Jesus has rescued you for eternity!

In wider Christian circles, this account of Daniel is often interpreted as, “If God saved Daniel from his lions, then God will also give you success and victory over all the lions in your life too!” But that's not always true. God won't always give you victory and success over the “lions” in your life. Sometimes he lets them devour you. God could have allowed Daniel to be eaten by the lions, just like so many other Christians were killed and martyred for their faith in the early Christian church. But it wouldn't have changed the truth of this story! We can fully expect that God will keep his promises, in this life and the next!

God certainly could have prevented Daniel's feet from ever landing in that den, as he probably prayed God would do. But if God had never allowed this to happen, then Daniel, and we, would have never experienced this incredible reminder of God's power and promises, which still today reminds us what we should expect. That's the third expectation for a steadfast faith—to expect that God will keep his promises.

Expect that the world will hate you because of Jesus. And don't be a fair-weather fan, expecting that God will make everything work out in your life according to your circumstantial expectations. But expect that God will keep his promises! Promises to bless you and his kingdom in all circumstances. Promises to be with you always. Promises that eternal life is yours in Christ. When you expect God to keep his promises, then even in the ups and downs, your faith will remain steadfast.