

# Eat Your Vegetables

Daniel 1; Zechariah 7:4-10

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## *Introduction*

I have been preaching through the historical periods of the Hebrew scriptures discussing the lessons that we can learn from each of them. To review: we heard about the call of Abraham and Sarah to follow a God who can accomplish what seems to our human minds to be impossible. We listened to the story of the Exodus and God's assurance that God knows our suffering. Through the period of the Judges, and the story of David and Goliath, we learned to trust only in God and not give allegiance to flawed human powers, and in the prophet Jeremiah we were urged to write God's law in our hearts. Last week, we turned to the time of the Exile when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego taught us that the dreams we hold on to will shape who we become. We arrive finally today at the last period in the Hebrew scriptures, the period of the restoration which began in 539 BCE.

The Jews had been living in exile under the Babylonians until 539 BCE when Babylon itself was conquered by the Persians and the Persian King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return home. The excitement of their homecoming, however, was marred by the state of decay that they discovered when they got back to Jerusalem. Moreover, they were not allowed to re-establish an independent state but remained subject to the rule of the Persians. Whereas before the Exile, Jewishness had been both a political and a religious identity, during and after the Exile, that identity had to be re-accessed. Was Judaism tied to the physical geography of the land of ancient Israel or could you be Jewish living anywhere in the world? Was your Jewish identity tied to the Temple in Jerusalem and the rites that were practiced there by the Jewish priesthood, or was Judaism something that a lay person could live out in their daily life? Was Judaism an individual matter or was it a communal identity?

Those questions touch on matters for Christians as well and today's scriptures contain two competing opinions on those questions written by people living during this last period in our Old Testament. The first reading is from the book of Daniel and the second is from the prophet Zechariah.

Although the book of Daniel is set in Babylon during the Exile, it was actually written around 164 BCE, several hundred years after the Jews had returned and rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. The author used the stories of the exile to urge his own audience to stay the course during tough times just as Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had.<sup>1</sup> We have all heard the stories of Daniel in the lions' den and the flaming fiery furnace, but one story that you may not have heard from this book is the one that the author uses to introduce us to these four men and reveal their character.

## *Daniel 1:3-16, Message version*

[King Nebuchadnezzar] told Ashpenaz, head of the palace staff, to get some Israelites from the royal family and nobility —young men who were healthy and handsome, intelligent and well-educated, good prospects for leadership positions in the government, perfect specimens! —and indoctrinate them in the Babylonian language and the lore of magic and fortunetelling. The king then ordered that they be served from the same menu as the royal table—the best food, the finest wine. After three years of training they would be given positions in the king's court.

Four young men from Judah—Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—were among those selected. The head of the palace staff gave them Babylonian names: Daniel was named Beltshazzar, Hananiah was named Shadrach, Mishael was named Meshach, Azariah was named Abednego.

But Daniel determined that he would not defile himself by eating the king's food or drinking his wine, so he asked the head of the palace staff to exempt him from the royal diet. The head of the palace staff, by God's grace, liked Daniel, but he warned him, "I'm afraid of what my master the king will do. He is the one who assigned this diet and if he sees that you are not as healthy as the rest, he'll have my head!"

But Daniel appealed to a steward who had been assigned by the head of the palace staff to be in charge of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: "Try us out for ten days on a simple diet of vegetables and water. Then compare us with the young men who eat from the royal menu. Make your decision on the basis of what you see."

The steward agreed to do it and fed them vegetables and water for ten days. At the end of the ten days they looked better and more robust than all the others who had been eating from the royal menu. So the steward continued to exempt them from the royal menu of food and drink and served them only vegetables.

And our second reading is Zechariah 7:4-10 which says: "Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me: Say to all the people of the land and the priests: When you fasted and lamented in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink only for yourselves? ... Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another."

### *Sermon*

In the opening of the book of Daniel, Daniel and his three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have been selected for special training and one of the perks is that they get to eat at the Kings table. Most of the displaced Israelites think this is a pretty decent deal. The other trainees lift their glasses of wine to toast the generosity of their captor and then dig into rabbit stew, roast pork tenderloin, veal swimming in a sauce of cheese and herbs, broasted eel, and Nebuchadnezzar's favorite, lamb's head boiled in its own blood.

OK, I don't really know what Nebuchadnezzar served at his table, but I do know that all of the things I just listed were forbidden by Jewish dietary laws. When Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Daniel sat down to that Babylonian dinner, there were undoubtedly many things on the table which their religion forbid them to eat. Their fellow Jews shrugged off their traditional dietary laws and said, "Hey, when in Babylon do as the Babylonians do," but Daniel refused. He proposes to the palace master that he and his three friends drink only water and eat only vegetables for ten days, and at the end of the trial, the palace master can compare their diet plan to the king's and see which produces the fittest men. Now, anyone who has had a road trip where you ate exclusively at McDonald's for ten days can imagine what kind of shape the other students were in at the end of this trial. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, however, look pretty healthy after ten days of eating lentils and leafy greens, so the palace master concludes that eating one's vegetables is good for you. I can't imagine why this story isn't taught every year in our Sunday school curriculum.

“God gave us these laws,” the storyteller reminds his listeners, “because they are good for us. Following these laws will bring you greater health and happiness than anything that tempts you in the foreign culture in which you are living.”

The author of the book of Daniel argues that God’s law — the rules by which the Jews are to live — is there to protect us from our worst inclinations. The person who reads the Ten Commandments for the first time may be put off by all the “do not’s” but it doesn’t take very long to realize that following those commandments will keep a person out of potentially explosive and dangerous situations.

“Do not steal, do not lie, do not kill, do not covet your neighbor’s stuff:” to give in to these temptations will lead to our own destruction. The author of Daniel reminds his readers that though there will be many times when we will be tempted to rationalize our way out of following God’s commandments, we will be far better off in the long run if we stay within the boundaries of God’s law. We will come to the ends of our lives happier and healthier people. We find this same sort of encouragement in the New Testament letters written to the young church following in the footsteps of its mother Judaism. The leaders of the church encouraged new Christians to live upright lives and stay away from the temptations of the pagan world in which they lived. It was not an easy calling. Those who maintained their commitment to remain ethically upright were praised: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith,” the letter of I Timothy says almost with a hint of amazement that he was able to accomplish such a thing. It is not an easy calling.

And yet, most of us would agree that an upright life brings us wholeness which is why we are here. We gather every Sunday to be reminded of the rules for living a good life and to find the support we need to adhere to God’s commandments.

“Don’t lie,” we remind one another. “Don’t covet. Don’t be gluttonous, lazy, envious, or give in to your anger. Maintain a purity of heart and humility before others.” We agree that these rules are good for us and if they don’t always build strong bones and bodies, they certainly build strong spirits and hearts. We know that our lives are better when we are able to stay the course and that adherence to these rules will save us from the brokenness and grief of our failings. In other words, just as Daniel proved at the King’s table, the rules make us better people.

Until they don’t.

Many years ago (many *many* years ago) I was the minister of another church before this one, a tiny church in a tiny town in northern New York where everyone knew everyone and knew everyone’s business. The year before I came, the church had been embroiled in a controversy over the sharing of communion. A young woman in the church had become pregnant out of wedlock and the head of the church’s Board of Worship refused to serve her communion. “She is a sinner,” he said, “and cannot receive Christ’s body and blood until she publicly confesses her sin and repents before us.”

The young woman may not have been married but she loved her boyfriend and wasn’t ashamed of her pregnancy. She refused to stand before the congregation and be rebuked as if she were no better than a prostitute. Her family and some church members supported her decision while the chairperson of the Board of Worship rallied other church members against her. Eventually, the issue was resolved only when the chairperson and his friends left the church in righteous disgust at the lack of concern for purity among the members.

The rules make us better people until our righteousness turns to *self*-righteousness and the rules become a fence that we use to keep other people from sullyng us with their sin.

While the book of Daniel urges his readers to remain stalwart in their righteousness, the prophet Zechariah from this same period reminds the people of the danger of *self*-righteousness. "... When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink only for yourselves? ... Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another."

Zechariah said that the rules God gives us are there to protect us against our own failings but they are also there to protect *others* against the hurt that we might do to them. God tells us not to lie, for example, not only because God is concerned with the damage that lying does to our own lives but because of the damage that we can inflict on others with those lies. Coveting your neighbor's stuff not only leaves you restless and spiritually dissatisfied but it also hurts your relationship with your neighbor by reducing that relationship to a competition. The rules are there to help us live better more fulfilling lives but also to create stronger community and save others from our worst inclinations.

The prophet Zechariah reminds us that God's salvation is not an individual affair. The quality of *your* life is not the only thing at stake — God is concerned with the quality of the entire community. That head of the Board of Worship who rejected the woman who had a child out of wedlock could not abide sharing Christ's table with someone who might sully him with her sin and so he left the church, choosing his personal salvation over the salvation of the community. So too, you might read your Bible diligently, go to church every Sunday, watch your tongue and never utter a curse, never lie, steal, or covet, but if you at the same time bar your heart from the gay man, or turn aside from the injustices inflicted on your neighbor, or refuse to welcome a sinner into your company, you are choosing personal salvation over the salvation of the whole, and in the end, the prophet says, no one will be saved.

The words of the prophet Zechariah became manifest for us in the life and teachings of Jesus. When the young man came to Jesus and said, "How can I get into heaven? How can I be certain that I am keeping myself pure and uncontaminated, robust and buff, fit for God's kingdom?" Jesus answered him, "Love God and love your neighbor. On these two commandments hang of the law and the prophets." Salvation, Jesus taught us, is not an individual affair, but can only occur where right relationships are more important than upright individuals.

I cannot be whole if my neighbor is broken.

I cannot be upright if I let my neighbor fall.

If we are to be healed at all, we must all be healed.

If we are going to be redeemed at all, we must all be redeemed.

We are all sitting together at the Lord's Table, and it is here that we will all be saved, together.

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Footnotes:

1. In 164 BCE, the Jews were under the rule of a Greek King named Antiochus Epiphanes or as the locals liked to call him, Antiochus *Epimanes* which means "the Mad One." He was a nasty and tyrannical man who had a perverse dislike of the Jews: he ordered the desecration of the Temple and forbid many

Jewish practices. It was his oppressive rule that caused the Maccabean revolt which is now celebrated by Jews during the holiday of Hanukkah.