DARE TO BE DIFFERENT
Daniel 1:1-8

I invite you to open your Bible to Daniel 1:1-8.

Today, we being a series called Exile Life. Last year about this time I preached a sermon called “A Letter to 21st Century Exiles” that stirred a lot of response in the congregation. Our text was Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Babylon. The Jews had fallen far from God and sinned against God about every way they could, so God judged them. It wasn’t like God didn’t warn them, didn’t call them back to Him over and over again for many years before the judgment fell. But they didn’t repent. They didn’t return to God. So in judgment, God allowed the Babylonians to ransack the place, set up a puppet government, and force march most of the Jewish leadership to Babylon.

Babylon was a strange place to those exiled Jews—different language, different customs, different religions, different landscape, different. The exiles heads were spinning. “What do we do now?”

There were false prophets among them who said, “Don’t unpack your bags. You won’t be here long. God’s just giving us a brief timeout.” They couldn’t have been more wrong.

So Jeremiah wrote them the truth: “Unpack your bags. Find work. Build homes. Grow food. Raise your kids, marry them off, and enjoy your grandkids. Pray for your city, and seek its peace and prosperity. This is no timeout; this is a re-location. You’re going to be in Babylon for about 70 years before God brings you home again.” Seventy years!

The Jews were going to have to learn how to live in exile, how to be a Jew in Babylon, how to be faithful to God in a pagan land. And our text is a story about some Jews who learned how to do just that. Hear the word of the Lord … (read the text).

I

Exile life—does that sound familiar? Daniel and his friends had to figure it out in Babylon. And we’ve got to figure out today. Anybody over the age of 40 or 45 feels like something of an exile in today’s America. Perhaps I
could say it this way: my grandkids are growing up in a very different America than I grew up in. That’s not to say that America was all good back in the day—it wasn’t. And that’s not to say that America is all bad today—it isn’t. But the culture has changed dramatically in so many ways. In the almost 58 years of my lifetime, I’ve seen America move from proudly Christian, to tolerating Christians, to ridiculing and even persecuting Christians. Our values are often mocked, our freedoms have been diminished, and in many places our symbols have been kicked out of the public square, and we’re not made to feel welcome there either: “Keep your religion to yourself,” we’re told. There was a day when American schools and even much of the media propped up our faith, our morals, and our values. That day is gone. There are still vestiges of our Christian heritage—the most noticeable is our nation’s generosity to people in need and politicians’ propensity to conclude speeches with the phrase, “God bless America.” But all in all, America is more pagan than it’s ever been, and barring some sweeping God-sent revival, I don’t see it changing anytime soon.

We are exiles. We are like the early Christians in the Roman Empire. Peter called those believers “aliens and strangers” (NASB), “sojourners and exiles” (ESV) in the land (1 Pet. 2:11). That’s us too. But don’t be discouraged; take heart. And don’t hunker down; step up. Stars always shine brighter against the inky blackness of a country sky. And Christ shines brighter in His people against the spiritual darkness of a pagan culture. We stand out. We don’t live in lock-step conformity with the prevailing culture. We are different.

Remember the text from Romans we heard earlier in the service: “And do not be conformed to this world but be transformed …”—different. The word transformed comes from the word metamorphosis, a word you learned in science class: the caterpillar becomes a butterfly—metamorphosis. What was one thing is now another thing—changed, different. I was that and now I’m this. In the words of Amazing Grace: “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” We don’t blend in to pagan culture like chocolate syrup blends into a milk shake; we stand out—maybe we’re more like the cherry on top—in the culture, but different.

Do you remember that scene in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade when the antagonists are looking for Indiana’s friend Marcus Brody because they think Brody has pages they need to find the Holy Grail? Indiana tells them: “He’s got a two day head start on you, which is more than he needs. Brody’s got friends in every town and village from here to the Sudan, he speaks a dozen
languages, knows every local custom, he’ll blend in, disappear, you’ll never see him again. With any luck, he’s got the grail already.”

Then immediately the scene cuts to the middle of a busy outdoor market in some Arab town. Brody is wearing a bright suit and a white hat, sticking out like a cat at a dog show, saying, “Uhhh ... does anyone here speak English?” Brody stood out in that culture. And we Christians stand out in our culture too—not like a wart on the end of culture’s nose but like a light shining in the darkness. We’re called to be different.

II

At first hearing of our text, it sounds like Daniel and his friends do more blending in than standing out in their exile life in Babylon.

King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to do one of those American “win their hearts and minds” strategies on the conquered people, so he ordered his chief of staff to gather some of Israel’s finest exiles and train them to serve in the king’s palace. Now the king wasn’t looking for just any old exile. He was looking for young men with a royal bloodline or at least those from the noble, upper-crust of Jewish society. And he didn’t want any ignorant, ugly, or crippled ones either. He wanted the smartest, best looking Jews who were in the best physical shape. (America is not the only culture that has ever put extreme value on youth and good looks.)

And once selected, the king ordered that each of these exiles get a good Babylonian education—learn the language, study the literature—and eat a good Babylonian diet. You see what Nebuchadnezzar is doing, don’t you? Immerse those Jews in Babylonian language, Babylonian living, Babylonian diet, and Babylonian literature. Do that for three years, and chances are he’d make good Babylonians out of these exiled Jews. So the chief of staff hand-picked a few of these good-looking, athletic young Israelites and got them into training.

Our narrator introduces us to four of them. Their names are Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Those are good Jewish men with good Jewish names, and each name has a God-meaning behind it.

• Daniel means “my judge is God.”
• Hananiah means “the Lord is gracious.”

• Mishael means “who is what God is?”

• And Azariah means “the Lord has helped.”

What great names—good Jewish names rooted in Jewish faith and Jewish life and Jewish culture.

But Nebuchadnezzar and his chief of staff knew those names would never work in Babylon. Every time someone called them by name they’d remind these men who they are and who their God is and where they come from. It’d be too hard to make good Babylonians out of them if they kept their Jewish names. So the chief of staff took off their Jewish name tags and changed their names to Babylonian ones.

• He scratched out Daniel and wrote Belteshazzar.

• He scratched out Hananiah and wrote Shadrach.

• He scratched out Mishael and wrote Meshach.

• And he scratched out Azariah and wrote Abednego.

No more Jewish names for these Babylonian government trainees. They would carry Babylonian names just like everybody else in their class.

So Daniel and his friends took a pretty deep dive into Babylonian culture—they learned their language, they went to their school, they bought their clothes at the Babylonian Dillard’s, they took a job in their government. See what I mean? Daniel and his friends appear to do more blending in to culture than standing out.

We can’t help but blend in to some degree. In His prayer in John 17, Jesus prayed not that God take His people out of the world but that God keep us from the evil one in the world. The Christian faith is no escapist faith. We are in the world but not of the world. We are set apart from the world but sent into the world.
We have to live where we live. We have to live in the culture in which God places us. Daniel understood that. And he’s not the only one in the Scripture who did.

- In Genesis, Joseph assimilated to a certain degree into the culture of Egypt and worked for their government.

- In Exodus, Moses was educated in all ways Egyptian.

- And in Acts, Paul milked his Roman citizenship for every benefit it could bring him. He also studied the pagan and secular philosophies of his day and even used them in his preaching to try and build bridges across the cultural divide.

Even though there are times when many of us want to, we can’t completely escape the culture in which we live. And God doesn’t require us to. In our day, the Amish come about as close to doing that as anyone, but even they can’t do it completely. We can’t do it either. Our older Russian and Czech friends had to live in a communist culture. There are African Christians who have to live in a Muslim culture. And now we live in a post-Christian, even pagan culture. But the good news is that we can be in the world but not of the world. We can be in the culture but not conformed to the culture. We’re going to blend in some. Jesus understands that. Daniel and his friends blended into Babylonian culture in many ways.

III

But they stood out in some ways too. They dared to be different.

As we read in v. 8, Daniel and his friends decided to draw the line on the royal diet—on the king’s food and wine: “But Daniel resolved ....” Resolved is a strong word—it’s a line in the sand, a point of no return, a place where no compromise is allowed. There’s nothing waffling or fuzzy or iffy about this word. “But Daniel resolved ....” The King James translates it this way: “But Daniel purposed in his heart.” This was a settled matter for Daniel and his friends. They drew a line here. They would wear the clothes of Babylon. They would work for the government of Babylon. They would answer to Babylonian names. They would even earn their degree at Babylon U. But they drew the line on the king’s diet.
Why here? We do not know for certain. Certainly the Jews had some food laws they followed. Perhaps the clue is also in v. 8: Daniel “asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.” Daniel believed that the king’s diet had a potentially defiling, corrupting influence on him, so he drew a line right there. For Daniel that was a bridge too far. Maybe he believed that if didn’t stop his assimilation to culture right there, he would lose himself and his faith and his Jewish identity altogether. He knew where to draw the line.

And he knew where to draw the line because He walked with God and knew God’s word. In other words, Daniel and his friends resolved that God rather than the prevailing culture would shape their identity and their practice.

In spite of the fact that the king renamed them, they never forgot who they were or whose they were. On their first day of junior high, as I dropped my kids off at the entrance, I said something like this, “You’re going to have more fun than you’ve ever had, but you’re going to face more temptations than you’ve ever faced. Remember who you are. You are a McCallum. And even more, you are a Christian. Those are the names you bear. So lean on Jesus and carry those names well.” Daniel and his friends might have been given Babylonian names, but they never forgot who or whose they were.

Their lives were neither rooted in nor directed by Babylonian culture. Their lives were rooted in God and directed by God—the God who loved them and walked with them, the God who was their refuge and strength and very present help in trouble, the God who was working out His purposes in their lives ... and doing that right in the midst of a pagan culture. So as they interfaced with their culture and even the king’s commands, they didn’t jump just because somebody said, “Frog!” They passed it all through the filter of their relationship with God and His word.

And you know what? We have it better in our day than they had it in theirs. We live on the backside of the cross and resurrection of Christ. We live knowing that we are loved and our sins are forgiven and that the Holy Spirit of God indwells our lives. Our identity is in Christ and what He says about us: “You are loved, forgiven, saved, set apart, graced, free, secure, and no one can snatch you out of my hand.” Daniel was before Christ invaded our planet; we are after Christ’s death and resurrection. We have it better. And we have more Bible than Daniel. They had the Law and some psalms and proverbs. We have the whole New Testament. We don’t just have the promise of the gospel; we
have the gospel fulfilled. We can walk with God intimately in the power of His Spirit who is ever shaping, pruning, and disciplining our lives to look more and more like Christ.

Our relationship with Christ can help us know where to draw lines, how to stand out and dare to be different in our culture.

That begins with a **Jesus-orientation rather than a self-orientation**. The heartbeat of today’s American culture is the self—self-indulgence, self-absorption, self-serving, selfie, self as the center of the universe—look at me, entertain me, amuse me, cater to me, support me, give me my freedom to do whatever I want. Me. Me. Me. My truth. My feelings. My opinion. My way. It’s all about me. In our exile life we can really stand out here. What if we chose a Jesus-orientation? What if we learned how to actually say no to ourselves? What if we considered others more highly than ourselves? What if we loved God with everything we have and loved our neighbor as ourselves? What if instead of self-indulgence we practiced self-denial and self-sacrifice? What if instead of serving self, we served others? Well, we’d stand out in our culture.

Our culture is also says pretty much anything goes morally. Any kind of sex is okay with culture as long as it’s not sex with a child. Our culture says there is no absolute truth; you have to find your truth, and your truth may be different from my truth. So, what if we lived lives by God’s truth revealed in His word? What if we lived with a fixed moral compass instead of one that spins around, one and can never find North? And what if we lived that way not as holier-than-thou, better-than-you, moralistic snobs but with joy? Well, we’d stand out in our culture.

Our culture takes thinking cues and behavioral cues from whatever is most popular and culturally relevant at the time—thus media, celebrities, and the entertainment industry teach people how to think and how to live. But what if we who claim Christ take our cues not from culture but from Christ, not from Justin Timberlake and Taylor Swift and Tom Cruise but from Christ; not from The View or Dr. Phil but from Christ, not from Bill O'Reilly, Chris Matthews, or Anderson Cooper but from Christ; not from Gray’s Anatomy and Breaking Bad and reruns of Friends but from Christ; not from a textbook or Cosmo or Time or People or the latest public opinion poll but from Christ and God’s word? Well, we’d know where to draw lines on things that might defile us and we’d stand out in our culture.
Our culture says, “Keep your religion to yourself.” But what if we took the gospel into the world? What if we talked about Jesus with our friends because we love Jesus and we love our friends? What if we were not ashamed of the gospel but freely shared Christ every opportunity God gives us? We’d stand out in our culture.

This is not a life for wimps. Daring to be different and standing out in our culture is a lifelong adventure that will include some epic fails and some resounding victories, but Christ will walk with us in it all and through it all. He will forgive our sin, be strong in weakness, give us grace sufficient for our needs, and when it’s all said and done, He will get us all the way home.

Let’s stand out in our culture and dare to be different.

IV

Let me tell you a story about some Christ-followers who dared to be different. On the morning of October 5, 2006, in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, 25 Amish children were studying in the local one-room schoolhouse. At 9:51 a.m. Charles Roberts, a 32-year-old milkman, burst into the schoolhouse. He carried a 12-gauge shotgun, a 9 mm handgun, a .30-06 bolt-action rifle, about 600 rounds of ammunition, a stun gun, and two knives. He also brought tools and some building supplies. He had given this much thought and came prepared.

He ordered the young girls to line up quickly in front of the chalkboard. Then he demanded that the teacher, Emma Mae Zook, take her 15 male students, a pregnant woman, and three mothers with infants outside. Once they were gone, Roberts used the building supplies he brought to barricade himself inside. Next, he used flex ties to bind the hands and legs of the young girls, who ranged in age from 6 to 13.

Roberts took his time. He called his wife on a cell phone to confess, in partial explanation of the suicide notes he had left at home, that he had molested two young relatives 20 years before. That tale seems to have been a delusion. He also spoke of his grief at the death of his infant daughter. When the Amish girls asked him why he meant to hurt them, he said he was angry at God.
Things quickly began to fall apart for Roberts and the girls. Teacher Emma Mae Zook, ran to a neighboring farmhouse and called the police. Nine minutes later the police were on the scene. They engaged Roberts in conversation via a loudspeaker. He said if the ground wasn’t cleared in two seconds he’d kill everyone.

Demonstrating an incredible courage and love, Marian Fisher, the oldest of the girls spoke up. She pleaded: “Shoot me and leave the other ones loose.” Marian’s 11-year-old sister, Barbie, asked to be next.

But Roberts began firing, spraying bullets into all ten girls as quickly as he could. The police rushed the building but didn’t get in before Roberts turned his gun on himself.

Five children survived. Marian’s sister, Barbie, was one of them, which is why we know some of the details of that dark day in Pennsylvania.

Charles Robert’s death seemed sad only in that he was no longer available to prosecute.

But that’s where the story takes an unexpected turn. The entire Amish community followed young Marian Fisher’s lead of sacrifice and love of neighbor. While Roberts chose to unleash his anger on the innocent, the Amish chose to bestow forgiveness on the guilty. Many of the Amish men and women attended Robert’s funeral in the graveyard of his wife’s Methodist church. They insisted it was not their place to judge him. Amish leaders even asked their community to refrain from thinking of Roberts as evil.

The Amish also reached out to Marie Roberts and her children. They invited the family to attend the girls’ funerals – for the Bible says to mourn with those who mourn, and the Roberts family was mourning their own loss. As money poured in to address the medical bills of the wounded girls, Amish community leaders stipulated that a fund be set up from these resources to take care of the killer’s widow and three children.¹

Marian Fisher and the entire Amish community dared to be different from the culture and they drew a line at self-centered revenge and hate.

Our culture says, “It’s all about me—my feelings, my opinions, my needs, my wants.” Marian Fisher said, “Think of others more highly than self, and greater love has no one than this, that he’d lay his life down for his friends.”

The culture says, “Exact revenge, somebody’s got to pay, file a wrongful death suit and profit from your tragedy.” But the Amish community said, “Love your enemy. Mourn with those who mourn. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ forgave you.”

Daniel and his friends were in their culture in many ways, but not of their culture—they knew where to draw the line and be different. So did these Christ-followers from Pennsylvania, and it was about much deeper things than riding buggies and not using power tools and technology. Folks like this remind me of what Harry Fosdick once wrote about Christians, “They walk through this world as though they were keeping step to music from far above it.”

Do you hear the music? Then even in this exile life, keep step to it ... and dare to be different.

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John Scott McCallum II

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