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Sermon 17 Jan 2021: With All Your Strength

Good morning church! Welcome to the second week in our sermon series called “Resolved”. Now you may remember, if you heard last week’s sermon, that in this sermon series, we are using the greatest commandment – which is actually two commandments – as a basis for thinking about those things that we as Christians, as followers of Christ might resolve to do in the coming year.

We saw last week that when Jesus was asked, which commandment—which thing that we should resolve to do – which resolution we can make - is the greatest? Jesus answers with 2 commandments: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength--and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. And we saw that we could divide those two commandments up into four resolutions. And we learned last Sunday that each of these four resolutions is connected to one of four aspects of human nature – the mental, the physical, the spiritual and the relational.

And so, this is a series in which, for four Sundays we are looking at passages of scriptures that contain the word “resolve” or “resolved” in English.

And as we look at those four scriptures, we are also considering the four resolutions that arise from the two greatest commandments. And so, in this sermon series, Pastor Steve and I want to challenge you—and ourselves—to make these commandments our resolutions as a church:

Let’s each of us resolve to love the Lord with all our mind--that addresses the mental component of a person, the intellect, our thinking

Let’s resolve to love the Lord with all our strength-- that addresses the physical component of a person—that bodily aspect

Let’s resolve to love the Lord with all our heart and soul--that’s the spiritual aspect of a person

Now Jesus doesn't stop there—He doesn't ONLY make these commands all about individuals and their association with God, because people are relational—we live in community with other people—and so finally, let's each resolve to love our neighbour as ourself—that resolution addresses the relational aspect of what it means to be a person.

Today we're going to explore the physical aspect of the greatest commandments, and we'll be looking at the book of Daniel this morning to help us better understand how to love the Lord your God with all of your strength.

But before we dive into Daniel, I'd like for us to spend a few minutes looking at the context of these greatest commandments in Mark chapter 12 when Jesus is overheard disputing with the Sadducees and he's asked, "Which commandment is the first of all" Jesus responds by reciting, the same words that for thousands of years, Jewish people have prayed morning and evening as a way of expressing their devotion to God. Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verses 4-5. The Shema. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And as for you, you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul and with all of your strength."

Now, the Hebrew word used in Deuteronomy that is translated as strength in English is Me'od (ma ohhd) but what's interesting is that the literal meaning of me'od conveys more than just strength in English. In fact, while strength in English is a noun, me'od is an adj or adv, a word or expression that modifies the meaning of other words. ~~The Hebrew word for strength is *koakh* (coke).~~ Me'od is used hundreds of times in the OT but it's rarely translated as strength. In the Shema in Deut. is one of those rare times in the Bible that Me'od is translated as strength. The most common meaning for Me'od is muchness, abundance. And it appears hundreds of times in this way in the Bible – for example, in Genesis 1, God looks at the world he's made and calls it good – six times - and on the seventh time, he calls it me'od good – much or very good. In the story of Cain and Able, Cain wasn't just angry with his

brother he was me'od angry. So me'od is a pretty common Hebrew word that doesn't mean strength – it means very or much. And if we look at how it's used in the Shema, we could possibly translate that as love the Lord your God with all of your me'od as with all of you “muchness” – with all of your abundance – with all that you are.

Now, let's look to Daniel for ways we can love the Lord with all of our strength, our me'od, our muchness.

Our story begins just after Babylon's first attack on Jerusalem. They have plundered the city and its temple and taken a group of Israelites into exile. The Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, had taken some of the vessels from the temple and we read that he's put these vessels in the treasury of his gods (that's god with a little g). He's also taken four young men, from the group of Israelites he's captured, these four are descendants of the royal family of David, they're handsome, wise, well educated, and Nebuchadnezzar has placed them in his service. These four young men – scholars seem to agree that they were between 12 and 14 years old, so these four YOUNG men are Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah – you probably know them better by their Babylonian names Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego, but we'll get to that in a moment.

The authors of Daniel tell us that these four young men are to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans – that is the language and literature, of the Aramaic-Babylonian people – so that at the end of a three year education, they can be stationed at the king's court.

So let's think about this for a moment. Daniel and his buddies have had their entire world turned upside down. Imagine the situation, a kingdom from a land far, far away invades their city and they, along with the city's governors, religious leaders, financial leaders, are put in shackles and chains and placed in a cart that for two months travels across the desert to a new city with a new language, new dress, new customs. And because they were part of the royal class of Jerusalem, they're recruited to

serve in the king's court, they're given Babylonian names – Daniel, is renamed Belteshazzar, Hananiah is renamed Shadrach, Mishael is renamed Meshach, and Azariah is renamed Abednego. And that's their new life – their new normal.

Now, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have been uprooted from their home, their traditions, and placed in a situation where everything has changed. And what's interesting is that Daniel and his friends, so far, have accepted some of the changes – they're accepted the situational change, the new language and education, even the name change.

They haven't said "everything that's Babylonian is evil and needs to be rejected" nor have they said "we have to go along with everything in order to get along in this new normal". But as this story unfolds, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego will be faced with situations that could compromise their faith, situations where the controlling powers attempt to make them forget their former region and country and religion. Situations, even life threatening ones, that try to eradicate their faith, to wipe out who they are as people of God.

And one of those situations is what's next in our story– and brings us to our scripture this morning:. As part of their assimilation, the king also assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine

Daniel 1, verse 8 tells us: But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself.

Daniel resolved. The Hebrew word for "resolved" that's used in verse 8 is *way-yā·śem* which means "to put, place or set" This is the same word used in Genesis 2:8 when God set man in the garden. Also the same word used when Isaac set his son on the altar to be sacrificed in Genesis chapter 22. But when you read that, it doesn't seem to fully explain – Daniel set what or placed what? Where? The original

phrase used here is Daniel set in his heart – the Hebrew for heart is lab (labe) – which also means inner man, will. So in our scripture, Daniel set in his heart, gave his whole self to the determination – the resolve - that he would not be defiled.

So Daniel asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself. The palace master said, look, Belteshazzar, I'm scared of the king. He'll have my head if he should see that you're in poorer condition than the other young men of your age. But Daniel didn't take no for an answer. He went to the guard, whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel and his friends and he said – please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. After the 10 days have passed, compare us to the others and then you deal with your servants according to what you observe – in other words, you decide if the diet is working or not.

So the guard agreed and we all know the story – at the end of 10 days, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego appeared better and fatter (fatter is a good thing in this story) than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations.

Now, we've all heard ways that this particular story has been used to encourage healthy eating – perhaps even a vegan diet. In fact, the Daniel diet exists – and there are tons of books written on just that. Don't get me wrong, diet is certainly important. One of my favourite authors on the subject is Michael Pollan who in his book, *In Defence of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, breaks it down into seven words "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." John Wesley believed that the love of God required his followers to seek the good health of both body and mind for all– and he certainly advocates healthy eating and healthy lifestyle choices – even though some are a little dubious - in his medical handbook called *The Primitive Physic*.

But what's important to note here is that in Jewish culture, diet was and still is a major indication of identity and so the most obvious reason that Daniel refuses to eat the king's rations is that those royal

delicacies were probably sacrificed to Babylonian gods (that's god with a little g) and eating food offered to idols was forbidden. So to eat the king's diet would have been a fundamental violation of his beliefs.

Now we know that when we get into the NT, and past the covenant that is reliant upon the law for righteousness, Paul specifically addresses food sacrificed to idols in his letter to the Corinthians. But even Paul cautions his audience - and his point is this - be careful of your witness - be an example and do not cause others to stumble. Remember Paul also tells us to consider ourselves a living sacrifice holy and acceptable unto God. And certainly Daniel considers himself a living sacrifice and also is mindful of his example to others, not least among them, his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Now, if we look a little more closely we see that Daniel does not refuse the training of the king or the adoption of a new name, but he does draw the line at the eating the king's food - perhaps this is because it is a public declaration of dependency on the king rather than on God.

And that's exactly where Daniel drew the line in the sand. He chose to accept certain things that didn't compromise his faith - the change of language, the change of dress, even the name changes. But when challenged to do something that went completely against their faith - something that would compromise their physical being, their very identity - their bodily testimony - something that announced to the world that they were reliant on the king instead of God - Daniel resolved - he set in his inner being that he would not defile himself and trusted his body - his physical strength - his muchness - to God.

Daniel's story goes on to show us that, while there were adjustments and compromises with the powers-that-be that Daniel was not opposed to making, when it came to the consumption of those things that Daniel knew would be a betrayal of his heritage and identity as a member of the people of

God, Daniel said No. This far and no further. Like Martin Luther centuries later, he declared, “Here I stand—I can do no other.” And having declared that he was set in his place, that he was resolved to focus upon things that are higher, things that are nobler.

Throughout his life, Daniel is placed in a position of vulnerability, in a place of peril—he was ripped from his home, forced into slavery, assigned a new name, and as we see later in chapter 6 – put in the lions’ den—where he who had refused to consume the rations provided by the Empire finds himself in danger of being consumed himself. The power of the throne exerting itself by putting, setting, assigning, Daniel into places where he would be eliminated, eaten up, where he would be assimilated, even eradicated—

But the story of Daniel reminds us that kings and courts and earthly authorities do not have the final word. And so the divine authority of God’s almighty persuasion reached down into that lions’ den-- and just as Daniel had been commanded that there were some things that should not be eaten, so the lions’ appetites are amended, transformed, satiated—so that Daniel finds himself unharmed—a testament to the authority of the one true God, who keeps constant watch over those in his care—those who resolve to love Him with all their strength – with all that they are—those who find that when they are placed in a position in which their strength is no match for the threat they are facing, God gives us the strength we need because God is right there with us – He will never leave us.

When we resolve to love God with all our strength we are reminded that at the end of our strength, at the limit of our muchness, when there is nothing left, God is ready to act—from Daniel in the lions’ den to Jesus in the tomb, to whatever threat you are facing today—whenever hope within you dies, whenever you are troubled, whenever you are discouraged, when the shadows come—resolve to love the Lord with all your strength, with all of your muchness – with all that you are – rest on his goodness - His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.