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SERMON TITLE: *Seeing God in the Dark*
SCRIPTURE: Daniel 13:17-23a
DATE: January 3, 2021
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Read also Daniel 9:1-9

Do you ever wonder if your prayers matter? Do you ever think to yourself, *only God's will happens, whatever that is*. Or perhaps you think, *I don't know what to pray*. Or, *the last time I prayed it didn't work*. Or, *who am I to make a difference?*

Today you heard a story of a man who prayed in a dark time. His nation lived under duress. He was privileged to have been given a job in the Babylonian government. The young men who were chosen were given three years of a college education to learn the language, literature, and customs of the Chaldeans. Then they were assigned to positions in the king's court. Still, he and other young Israelites, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, had been in trouble for exercising their faith in Israel's God rather than the pagan gods of Babylon.

Daniel served under four kings. Our story takes place during the rule of the third king, Darius the Mede, so Daniel had been there a long time. Perhaps he was in his 60s. Daniel taught the people who knew him, both Babylonians and Israelites, with not just his words but also his life. He taught them that **you can live out your faith even in dark times**. You can be just as active in faith while in bad times because the power of God is always active.

God gave him visions and the ability to interpret dreams which gave him influence with the kings. His faith influenced his friends' faith. He was blessed by God, even though living as a captive in the darkest time so far in the history of Israel.

One day Daniel read in Jeremiah that Israel was to be held in captivity for seventy years. Now Daniel, being the astute believer he was, had surely read the Book of Jeremiah before. But you know how it is. You can read it and it speaks at the time. But it's easy to move on and forget what you read. Even so, that's not the end of it! We read the Bible again each year because the Bible speaks into our daily lives.

The Bible gives that necessary direction because it is the living Word of God. It goes out; and it does not return void. Read it this year with that expectation. Read it curious for what God has for you. It is important to expect something from God.

Well, when Daniel read that his people would be captives for seventy years, he was depressed. He was appalled. He resisted that bad news and so he prayed. He was used to praying. He prayed when he got to Babylon; he prayed as he worked there; he prayed when the nation had an edict against prayer—three times a day before an open window facing Jerusalem. He wanted his

prayer life to be a witness. All who walked his street saw him. **He was a light, pointing to God.**

Today is Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany means to "shine light upon." You've had an epiphany—you know, when the light bulb comes on. In this case, God's light shines. The wise men followed the bright star to worship Jesus. Simeon prophesied over Jesus as a baby, that Jesus was God's Savior. (Matthew 2:2, 11-12; Luke 2:25-32)

Believers are lights revealing his message. Do you believe the world needs God's light? What needs do you see in our culture? What light is needed?

The darkness in the world means some danger is involved in being a light pointing to God. When Daniel prayed to God before his open window, all that praying got him thrown into a lion's den.

When his friends refused to pray to the Babylonian King, they got thrown into a fiery furnace. But Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said to the king,

"We have no need to present a defense to you. . . . If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us . . . out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods." (Daniel 3:16-18)

They were a light in the darkness and God did save them. Praise God! And Daniel kept praying for his nation, though he was only one man.

How might you pray for the U.S.A.? Daniel's story encourages us that it may help. Can shedding the light of Christ help this nation? Can it help your family?

It's quite likely to bring blessing to you, your family, and this nation if you pray.

In the Old Testament, there are blessings and curses. There will be blessings for honoring God and curses for resisting, ignoring, and disobeying God. Believers pray so that curses are broken. For example, Noah warned people by building the boat. Abraham argued for God to save people out of Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses stood in the gap praying God forgive the backsliding Israelites and save them from destruction. Job prayed for his rotten friends.

This is the believer's role. Some turn and are saved. This is your role in your family, with your friends, and on behalf of your nation. This just might work!

So when you pray for those you know, **including your nation**, and you don't know how, follow Daniel's example.

He put on mourning clothes and prayed like this:

"We have sinned and done wrong. We have rebelled against you and scorned your commands and regulations, refused to listen to your prophets who spoke to all of us. You are in the right; our faces are covered with shame. This is true of all of us (v. 5-7)."

It was as simple as that, really; a good, strong inclusive confession.

He wasn't telling God what to do. He was not offering solutions. He simply *stated the facts, ma'am*. He prayed because he remembered this: "(but) the Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him (v. 9)."

Daniel was only one man but his prayers helped us all to see God in the dark.

He continues:

"O our God, hear your servant's prayer! Listen as I plead. For your own sake, Lord, smile again on your desolate sanctuary. O my God, lean down and listen to me. Open your eyes and see our despair. See how your city -- the city that bears your name -- lies in ruins. We make this plea, not because we deserve help, but because of your mercy. O Lord, hear. O Lord, forgive. O Lord, listen and act! For your own sake, do not delay, O my God, for your people and your city bear your name" (Daniel 9:17-19).

Praying for a nation is like you praying personally. When things are dark in your life and you want to turn to God, the first step is to repent, which is saying, "I'm sorry. I don't deserve a second chance. But because of your mercy, God, forgive."

Daniel says:

I went on praying and confessing my sin and the sin of my people, pleading with the LORD my God for Jerusalem, his holy mountain. As I was praying, Gabriel, whom I had seen in the earlier vision, came swiftly to me at the time of the evening sacrifice. He explained to me, "Daniel, I have come here to give you insight and understanding. *The moment you began praying, a command was given*. And now I am here to tell you what it was, for you are very precious to God" (Daniel 9:20-23a).

Did you catch that? If you did, you won't worry whether you pray right or wrong, you will just pray. Nothing will keep you off your knees. Did you hear it? *The moment you began praying, a command was given. . . . for you are very precious to God.*"

You may not be a Daniel yet. You may not see God like he did. You may not see God clearly enough to stand up for God in times of danger. You may not think of your actions as making a difference. But you **can** make a difference in this: when you pray, you are very precious to God.

You can make a difference in your children's lives, even children who are grown. The greatest influence I see is parents of adult children impacting the faith of their children by their own vibrant faith—and vice versa. I have also seen a thirteen-year-old grandchild making a great difference in her grandmother's life by her faith. Praying can also deeply affect a nation.

Praying builds faith and faith makes a difference. Connection with God activates God's action because the connected person is precious to God.

Did it say that God will do exactly as you prayed? No, Daniel did not tell God how to do it; Daniel asked God to help the nation see and honor God.

Part of people "seeing God in the darkness" is for them to see **your** reliance on God. The world sees God in the dark when everyday people draw close to God.

There was a young peasant girl named Joan who lived in France. She could neither read nor write, but her mother taught her to pray. By the age of thirteen she began having religious visions. It was a very dark time as England occupied her nation. Yet she believed God wanted to rescue France so, following the visions God gave her, she appealed to King George VII. She boldly shared the messages of God with him. Her message was exactly what the king had asked of God when he prayed alone. God works in powerful ways.

She was a simple peasant girl who saw God because she prayed and let the light of God shine through her in a dark time. This girl led the French army to victory. I'm sure you heard of Joan of Arc.

God's light has not ceased. It shines through people who believe in God enough to turn to him. How will you begin 2021? The question is—will you be a Daniel, devoted to prayer, which opens the possibility that *God will answer YOU?* Will 2021 be different from 2020? It can be, if you see God well enough to pray, if you lean on God for answers, if you devote yourself to God, even in hard times. Isn't that the call of the believer?

AMEN