

“Avoiding the Traps”

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Good morning. I'm pleased to be standing up here this morning, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to talk with you.

When Mary asked me if I'd be interested in giving a sermon, I was intrigued with the challenge. I like challenges.

A good sermon is a tall order, though. And I felt a little overwhelmed in finding a direction. Now I see that today is also a big day...a groundbreaking after worship; choirs are singing; the kids are adorable. Attendance this morning looks robust. Here's hoping for the best, right?

First, a bit of background. I grew up a Catholic, and so I learned a lot about practicing good works...about the fruits of the spirit. We learned in Catholic school about helping others, and about being kind and generous. In fact, I remember talking more about good behavior than I do about learning the Bible. Which is to say, I know how important the fruits of the spirit are, but I know less about the biblical roots of that fruit tree.

So...in considering today's reading, I went to the one place where I do know a little bit: politics. I considered Biblical stories that had some political intrigue, as well as interesting political and institutional structures. There's a lot to pick from! Now, I know also that this puts me in potentially dangerous territory. Politics from the pulpit is not exactly a fan favorite. But, to be honest, I don't want to talk about politics in the "who's ahead and who's behind" sense of the word. People ask me all the time about my thoughts on this or that political development. But to be honest, I'm just not a very good political strategist. I'd make a better play-by-play analyst for the Red Sox.

No, this morning I'm interested more in something larger...the body politic—the health of our civil society and the way that our time here together can inform good citizenship.

I know the story of Daniel and the Lion's Den, and I've read the story to my children. It is actually referenced a fair bit in popular culture. It's mentioned in "Fiddler on the Roof," for example, and gets alluded to or mentioned explicitly in songs by Bob Marley, Bruce Springsteen, and the band Coldplay—not to mention the singer Raffi, who wrote a children's song about Daniel.

The story also puts front and center an all-too familiar narrative of exclusion. A trap is laid for Daniel the Jew to choose between his religious convictions and his life.

The conspirators against him say, ““We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God.” They distrust him because he is held in high favor by King Darius but also because he is devoted to God above all else. This is very similar to what happens in Chapter 3, when three of Daniel’s friends—who also refuse to compromise their religious devotion—survive being punished to death in a fiery furnace. In recent weeks we have been reminded yet again that we have not escaped even today the raw anger and hatred of those who do not accept others because of their religion.

When I revisited the 6th chapter of Daniel awhile back, I was impressed with its political components. Of course, we have a King, but we also have administrators—a bureaucracy!—appointed to oversee 120 subordinates, or satraps. We have an edict from the King, establishing an unchallengeable law. We also have the administration of justice, albeit in the form of hungry lions. And we have, shall we call it, a deep state conspiracy at play.

There is also some serious justice in here. Daniel emerges from the story unscathed, saved by God from the lions. But the conspirators against Daniel get thrown into the den of lions and are violently killed. In verse 24: “At the king’s command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions’ den, *along with their wives and children*. And

before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.”

In preparing my remarks, I was intrigued with the timing of today’s service. We are just 12 days removed from an important election (a huge referendum on the current and deeply polarizing administration), and we are about to enter some bumpy waters around the investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election. In fact, many of us were expecting some news on that front this past week.

It would not be unfair to say that we have a leader currently who thinks of himself as very powerful, surrounded by satraps and administrators clamoring for his attention and eager to bestow praise and affirmation; a partisan divide that demands complete loyalty; and we have—it seems—fewer and fewer Daniels who are devoted primarily to higher principles and values.

That is, as the reading says: “the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. *They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.*” We should hope that all our political leaders meet this standard. But, of course, they often do not.

One goal of mine this morning is to apply this story to our contemporary political leaders—to consider the many elected officials against the standard of being “*trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.*” In my research, I am often finding myself in the position of defending our political leaders. Politics is messy; solutions are hard; people disagree about the way forward. The output of all this is sure to fall short of any ideals we might have. In my own work, I’ve defended negative campaign ads, as well as various federal agencies that regulate money in elections. In general, in talking with students, I vigorously defend our political system and the process of making policy in a republic defined by separated and competing institutions.

And yet, despite being in general an optimist about politics, I would suggest that there are many “traps” in our political landscape today—traps that make it harder for our political leaders to stick to their principles and convictions. Our current political climate rewards excessive partisanship, highly values appearances on nauseating cable news, and prides scoring political points with allies above all else. The roots of this are deep and pre-date any single political leader. But a lot has gone off the rails in recent years. “Loyalty” is now priced above principle.

In the midst of this are men and women who toil along. They may be partisans, liberal or conservative, but they adhere to a belief in the rule of law, in the importance of

compromise, and in the dictum that you win some and you lose some. What matters most to these good folks is that we adhere to the rules and norms that make a free society prosper.

Consider the position of Martha McSally, a Republican from Arizona, who conceded last week that she lost a close election, despite the push from those in her party to fight on, and to use claims of fraud and malfeasance as tactics—even in the absence of evidence of such. She looked at the vote tallies and determined that all had proceeded fair and square. A lot was at stake in her election...it meant a GOP loss, one that would threaten the narrative that the midterms were not a wholesale defeat for the party. Her approach infuriated party leaders.

Frank Bruni in the NY Times wrote recently about the 2000 election, and he made a similar point:

Sure, the review of ballots that Gore's campaign demanded in 2000...was a rancorous affair lousy with recriminations.

But after the Supreme Court halted it, Gore didn't reject that ruling as partisan, rant about rigged systems, rail about conspiracies or run around telling Americans that he was their rightful leader, foiled by dark forces. He felt that the stability of the country hinged on the

calmness of his withdrawal. So he told Americans to move on.

Then he did likewise, a decision that seems positively exotic in retrospect.

The issue is not just about conceding close elections, of course. Mike Gallagher is a Republican congressman from Wisconsin, and he recently wrote (in *The Atlantic*, “How to Salvage Congress”) about the context of making policy in Washington.

When I ran in 2016, I assumed the problem with Congress was the people. I thought most members were either hopelessly unqualified or ruthlessly ambitious. Or probably both. And to be sure, Congress has always had its dunces and its Machiavellis. However, most of the representatives I have gotten to know on both sides of the aisle are smart, patriotic, and hardworking.

I have come to believe that the problem is not the people. The problem is a defective process

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The reality is that Congress cannot get anything done because it is not equipped to get anything done. It is no longer a tool suited

to its original purpose of making laws and providing oversight. It has instead become a theater used by both parties to stoke the outrage of their base.

Gallagher actually makes a lot of claims in his article, not all of which I agree about, but his larger point is the one I'm referencing today. We do not have a political system that is well-balanced and well-functioning. And the political environment does not encourage good behavior.

Now, I am not arguing against partisanship in our politics. I am a partisan, and I believe that my party is generally right more often than the other party. I am not persuaded by the argument that a centrist position on important political issues is always ideal. What I am suggesting is something more about the *process of politics*. That the interactions of partisans should be smoothed over by certain rules of engagement, and many are fruits of the spirit: kindness, self-control, patience. I would hope that our political leaders would not fall for the trap that these are signs of weakness.

We do know that political democracies survive as much because of good institutions and well-established due process rights. But we also know that democracies need norms...that is, informal rules that structure the way we engage each other. These include respecting the free press and assuming that political opponents are

well intentioned. They include the knowledge that a free society requires that we respect each other. That we win and lose with grace, and that we honor the sacrifice of those who put everything on the line to make our system survive.

A lot of such norms are fraying. Our current political environment is its own “den of lions.”

I also see Daniel’s role as relevant to us as well—to us as citizens. For we, too, are beset by traps. The facts we encounter are often filtered through social media or deeply partisan sources. We can often be rammed into a sort of complacency, throwing our hands up in despair and promising to just “tune it all out.”

And polarization in the electorate is a different breed than polarization among elites. Lots of evidence suggests that on policy matters, Americans are generally pretty moderate; that we agree more than we disagree. What seems to have affected us more is what we call “negative partisanship,” the idea that we strongly dislike members of the other party. We don’t want to socialize with members of the other party; we are told to be suspicious of their motives and of their loyalty to American democracy. This is serious stuff.

Our great challenge is remain engaged, and to be thoughtful and considerate citizens. There is nothing in this to suggest that we set aside our passions in our

civic engagement. I would argue only that we pair our political and policy positions with evidence; with respect for those who oppose us; and with a commitment to the ideals of fair play.

And I would argue that in isolation, the “fruits of the spirit” are wonderful. But together, they “add up” to something more than the sum of their parts. They are a blueprint for constructive citizenship.

The story of Daniel in this chapter is sort of perplexing. How did Daniel react to the wives and children of his opponents being slaughtered? We do not know, but I think we can assume that he didn’t object. There is a lesson there too. We might not idolize certain figures as beyond reproach. We all make mistakes, and we all miss the mark sometimes.

At the core of all of this is a set of really simple ideas. Daniel sees the trap and ignores it. He trusted in God, and he stayed the course. May we all learn from this and see the lesson applied in our civic life.