

I want to tell you a story from the life of Daniel. Not the Daniel from the Bible, I mean *this* Daniel. I want to tell you about the job I had while I was at seminary training to become a pastor. Well, really, about how I got the job. Mm, that's not right either. Really it's more about how I chose to work at the job in the first place.

In order to qualify to become a pastor, one of the things I had to do was go to seminary, which for those who don't know is mostly just grad-school for people going into the ministry or theological studies. It's not like a stone monastery where you put on sackcloth and take a vow of silence. It's just grad-school with extra Jesus. I have the Master's Degree and the crippling student debt to prove it.

I spent my first semester there without a job. That was by choice. It was a whole new world for me, studying religion and Scripture academically, and I had a lot of buckling-down to do. Plus I was living in Boston for the first time, and I had to spend some time learning to navigate that as just a small-town boy living in a lonely world.

But I did eventually have to find work. My savings and my summer job and my student loans would only take me so far. And I had a lot of options; living right by a stop on the Green Line meant I could get to work all over the city. And I managed to find a number of places that were hiring for things I could *do*, which in this economy is miracle enough, I know. Whether or not I'd actually *get* the job was anybody's guess, but at least people were hiring.

Early on in my search, somebody suggested to me that I should apply at the seminary dining hall. It was a convenient ninety-second commute from my dorm, and one semester into classes I had already met everybody who worked there.

And I liked the dining hall. It had a comfortable atmosphere and was a great place for students to put our heads together about the classes we were wrestling with and the work of ministry we were doing as a part of coursework or internship. And of course to solve all the world's problems and wax philosophical over a plate of french-fries. The staff was nice, and they made pretty good food for *very* reasonable prices, and as a student that lived on campus I was by then extremely grateful for the variety and all the work they put into it.

But I didn't really think I wanted to *work* there. I'm not an extrovert; I just play one on TV. And most of the work you *do* at a dining hall like that involves interacting with customers—a *lot* of customers, non-stop. Whether it's working the line, or the cash register, or even the dish window, people are always talking to you. It's a

necessary part of doing the job. And not only was I as a well-established introvert not super excited about the prospect of having the same conversations over and over with people every waking moment I wasn't in class learning about homiletics and exegesis and substitutionary atonement, but *also* I didn't really want to be serving food to all these people that I *knew*. I mean these were my classmates, friends, and the primary population of people I saw throughout the course of my life nine months out of a year. Working at *their* dining hall would... change things, it'd be... I don't know, *weird* somehow.

Well, I was still deciding what to do and where to start sending applications when I was waiting in the line to the cash register for lunch and I overheard a conversation. The head of the dining hall—the head chef-slash-manager—was actually at the register, ringing people out, and she was talking to someone a few spots ahead of me in line.

And I heard her mention that they were short-staffed, which was why she was at the cash register instead of in the kitchen or her office getting her work done. Which really is one of those God-moments, right? Like, God poking you in the side and saying, “Hello-o? Anybody ho-ome?”

So I had about two more customers ahead of me to make a decision. Do I choose the simpler, more comfortable, more attractive part-time options out there in the city, or do I choose the place that had served *me* so well, and join *them* in serving my peers and friends?

In our Scripture reading today, we see Joshua asking the ancient Israelites to make a choice too. Joshua had been the assistant of Moses. Two Sundays ago we read the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, parting the Red Sea to escape the pursuing army, and beginning their trek into the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. According to what was written in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years, and shortly before they found the Promised Land—the land of Canaan—Moses passed away. He passed leadership of the Israelites onto Joshua, who finally led them to their new home.

Now, there were already people living in Canaan. Some were people with distant blood relation to the Israelites, and some were just completely other. The Israelites made peace treaties with some, and fought others to make a place in the land in which God had told them they could be safe and free.

And after a time, they found that place where they could be safe and free. They had made peace with the neighbors who were peaceful, and had driven away the evildoers and aggressors. Or, rather, God had done most of the work. According to Joshua, all of the things that went *right* for the Israelites—all the little coincidences, the perfectly executed plans, the miracles, and the panic and self-destruction in the enemy ranks—all of that was handed to them on a silver platter by God.

God had protected their ancestors as they came together to become the Israelites, God kept their people whole as they slaved away under Pharaoh, God freed their parents from bondage in Egypt and delivered them to the Promised Land, and God brought them safely home.

And the bounty they were enjoying in that moment of victory didn't have anything to do with them, either. As Joshua so eloquently related the words of God: "I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant."

Which is something *we* can say as *well*. We worship today in Historic York, first settled by Europeans in 1624. The Wikipedia page for York doesn't mention anything about the history of any Native Americans who may have lived around here before the Europeans, but we all know it's likely they did. And while they may not have *remained* peaceful—and really, can you blame them?—I wouldn't necessarily call them "evildoers" just because they lived here before the English showed up and took over and started fighting the French.

*Many* men and women toiled over the centuries to build up this town, this church, and a place to live in peace and prosperity. *We* didn't build it. The oldest living person among us is a hundred or so. None of us lived here in 1624, unless there's something you haven't told me. None of us lived here when this was Abenaki land, and none of us built this church, none of us built the Nubble Lighthouse, none of us farmed the food that got York's early settlers through those first terrible winters. Truly, whether we were born here, or we moved here, or we're just passing through, there was a day we found ourselves on this land on which we had not labored, in a town that we had not built. We eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that we did not plant.

And dial that back even farther out. America, Western Civilization, human civilization, the planet Earth, the Sol system, the Orion-Cygnus Arm of the Milky Way Galaxy in the Virgo Supercluster of an observable Universe that is according to

scientists fourteen *billion* years old... none of us built that. None of us settled that. We are here but for the grace of God.

God ushered our ancestors into being, and somehow managed to keep them from destroying themselves. As people of faith, we believe that God's hand has been at work throughout the whole of human history in both small and large ways, and despite our best efforts to mess it all up (which we seem to do *really* well), we are somehow still here. We got to be *born*. Some of us are even prospering, though *certainly* not enough of us.

Near the end of his life, Joshua passed on a message from God to the Israelites who would go on living and striving without him. "Thus says the Lord, God of Israel," Joshua begins in Chapter 24, and he goes on to do something kind of like what I just did. Through Joshua, God details what God has done to protect the Israelites, to keep them safe, and to lead them to victory and prosperity.

And then Joshua offers them a choice. "Choose this day whom you will *serve*," Joshua says. Will you serve the Lord who has done all these things for you, or will you serve the gods your ancestors served in the ancient days, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are now living?

Joshua gives his people the freedom of that choice. He doesn't strong-arm them, he doesn't make it a demand or an ultimatum. He simply presents them with the choice, and says, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

What do we choose to do, now that we know what God has done? That's the question the Israelites had to answer.

Do they go the simple, uncomplicated route of falling back on their ancestors' gods, or the gods of the people on whose land they now live? Or do they serve the God who has so long served *them*?

Long story short, I *took* that job at the seminary dining hall, and I wouldn't change that choice for a *second*. I served that which had served me, and through it I served my fellow students; my fellow human beings. And through it I was blessed in countless ways with new friends, new skills, opportunity, networking, and all the extrovert practice I *desperately* needed.

And the Israelites? They made their choice with conviction and determination. "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of

the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed... The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.”

Now that wasn't an easy promise for them to keep. Generation after generation, the Israelites struggled to serve God. Sometimes they did well, sometimes they strayed, and God was always there to take them to task, just like a certain head chef I can think of.

Today... we have so many gods to choose between. And I'm not talking about the gods of different religions, I'm talking about the gods we have made for ourselves, the gods we have elevated to near capital-G status. Gods of this land *and* gods of our ancestors. The god that is money. The god that is power. The god that is nationalism, the god that is escape and addiction, the god that is selfishness. We worship politicians and ideologies, we serve emotions like anger and craving and sloth and jealousy and envy. We serve the god of fear and we worship at the altar of easy fixes.

And we have been given a choice. Just like Joshua gave the Israelites. A choice they got to make for themselves, and a choice that it would take their entire lives to truly make and live into. We have been given a choice—to serve the gods of this world, or the God who has served us... who created us, who came to us as a savior named Jesus, who died for our sake, who kept our ancestors safe, and who has brought us to vineyards we did not plant.

And so I pose the question to you, the question Joshua asked and one that I want you to take home with you and chew over and for the rest of your life try to figure out *how* you are going to do it...

What do we choose to serve, now that we know what God has done?

As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

Amen.