

Thank you, Lord, for your word, and we pray you'd speak to us.

Encourage and challenge us, and make manifest in me the gifts required to do my part in communicating what I've prepared.

I know, Lord, Holy Spirit, you're the one who brings the revelation.

So would you do that now, in Jesus' name.

Amen.

What a great painting this is.

It's by Britten Riviere.

It is telling a great story, isn't it?

A wonderful story of Daniel in the lion's den.

We're in a series we've called Strong Eyes 120.

It's based on Moses, who died with strong eyes at the age of 120 years.

And we are turning 120 this year, and so we thought there was a nice connection 120 years on.

And as a church, we want to have strong eyes like Moses.

And so, as well as Moses, we've been looking at some other characters in the Old Testament who lived with strong eyes, eyes of faith, eyes that could see what God was up to, when others couldn't see what he was doing.

Daniel in the lion's den.

It occurred in history.

It's a real story.

Around 530 or 540, we don't know for sure, BC.

Daniel was actually an older man.

Who thinks of Daniel as a young man when he went into the lion's den?

He wasn't.

He was a young man when he was deported back in the 7th century.

But he's at least 70 years of age.

In 605 BC, so with BCC, you've got to go backwards, the lion's den happened in around 540 BC.

But 65 years before that, Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, took Daniel and some of his friends as the first group of Israelites that were deported on this long journey up towards Lebanon and then out towards modern-day Iraq, which was Babylon.

And then he came back in 586 BC, so 20 years later.

And Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

So we pick up the story again in around 540 BC.

Daniel is a man in those 60 years of high standing.

If you read the story, he's one of three governors who are running the country, and in fact, he's the top governor.

So under the king, King Nebuchadnezzar, he is the person with the most power.

He has demonstrated distinguished leadership.

Now, not everyone in the government, the administrators and satraps, not everyone likes Daniel, and so they set up a trap.

And we're going to read a lot of text today.

This, I would put it to you, that this may be the sermon that you have heard that has the most text you've ever heard in your life.

There you go.

It's a challenge.

Let's see if that's all that happens.

It won't be a bad sermon.

In fact, this sermon, I've preached a version of it at Hornsby about seven years ago, and it's had about 17,500 views, which is completely unusual.

So it must be good.

But actually, to rave a little bit on about it, isn't that strange that you have 17,000 views of a sermon that you'll know at the end how much scripture was in?

So people have a hunger for the word of God.

So, chapter 6 and verse 6.

These administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said, May King Darius live forever.

The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisors and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next 30 days, except to you, your majesty, shall be thrown into the lion's den.

Now, your majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.

So, King Darius put the decree in writing.

Now, this decree goes against Daniel's beliefs.

He's an Israelite, a follower of the one true living god, Yahweh, and the first commandment says, you're not allowed to worship another god.

So, he has a problem here.

The question is, does he have strong enough eyes to see what a compromise in bowing down to the king rather than Yahweh would do to him?

That's the question, isn't it?

That's always the question about compromise.

We had a staff meeting this week, and I asked our staff, what does strong eyes mean for you?

Strong eyes of faith.

And everyone had fantastic thoughts.

And one of the thoughts was Ben.

He said, strong eyes can see a long way.

I hadn't thought of that.

Strong eyes see a long way.

They can see what behaviour now will mean a long way off.

That's a great point to remember about strong eyes, isn't it?

When you don't have strong eyes, you make compromises, not realising what that will mean further down the track.

Amen?

So, Daniel has strong eyes.

Verse 10, when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened towards Jerusalem.

Three times a day, he got down on his knees and prayed near the window, giving thanks to his God just as he had done before.

Full view, public view, at the window, he prays to the one true living God.

Verse 11, then, these men went as a group to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree.

Did you not publish a decree that during the next 30 days, anyone who prays to any God or human being, except to you, your majesty, will be thrown into the lion's den?

The king answered, the decree stands in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.

Then they said to the king, Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, your majesty, or to the decree that you put in writing.

He still prays three times a day.

When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed.

He was determined to rescue Daniel because he liked Daniel, made every effort until sundown to save him.

Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, remember your majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians, the decree can't be changed.

So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lion's den.

The king said to Daniel, may your god whom you serve continually rescue you.

And at this point, probably the angels, sometimes we talk about the music the angels play, they probably sang, no turning back, no turning back, the baptism song, because they put a stone over the seal, the entrance, and that night, the king with all of his heart, an empathetic brother that he was, did not eat any food or have any entertainment.

First light of dawn, verse 19, the king got up and hurried to the lion's den.

When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice.

It's an odd situation, isn't it?

You're not allowed to do it anymore, but I so want to do this with an English accent.

Daniel, servant of a living god.

Is that allowed, Ruth?

Can I have an English person sanction that terrible accent?

Has your god whom you serve continued to be able to rescue from the lions?

And then Daniel says back from within the den, may the king live forever.

My god sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions.

Can you believe it?

They haven't heard me because I was found innocent in his sight.

Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, your majesty.

The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den.

And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him because he had trusted in his god.

At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lion's den, along with their wives and children.

And King Darius wrote, to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth, may you prosper greatly.

I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom, people must fear and reverence the god of Daniel.

For he is the living god, and he endures forever.

His kingdom will not be destroyed.

His dominion will never end.

He rescues and he saves.

He performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on earth.

He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions.

So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

I think we've already had the most text in the sermon.

Wow, what a story.

What a great story.

To seal up the mouths of a bunch of hungry lions.

Last week we talked about faith-inspired obedience.

Faith-inspired obedience, F-I-O.

It happens on the backstage of our lives.

And we were talking about David as another man who had strong eyes.

And he talked about the fact that when no one was looking, looking after his father's sheep, he had taken on, bravely, a bear and a lion, and had defeated them and rescued the sheep.

But it all happened when no one was watching.

And so then we sort of were unpacking this idea of front stage, back stage.

Front stage is where everyone sees our polished life.

We can act a bit on the front stage, but the back stage behind those lines represent a curtain.

Behind the curtain, it's normally just God and maybe a few people who see our real life, who will allow to come behind the curtain.

Sometimes the back stage looks very different to the front stage.

Yes?

Sometimes, we have barrels of poison on our back stage, envy, bitterness, anger, lust, unbelief.

And then all of a sudden, there is this unexpected overflow of what is on the back stage, and it sort of spills out onto our front stage.

And we made the point that David performed with faith-acquired confidence on the front stage.

He was able to incredibly bravely say, I'll take on that Goliath, that giant, with confidence on the front stage, because on the back stage, he had exercised faith-inspired obedience.

No one else was watching.

It was just that God said it, and that settled it.

So, the theme for today's message is really, at some stage, to be a Daniel or to be a David who have strong eyes of faith, we need to say on our back stage, FIO, here I go, don't we?

On the back stage, I have to say, look, I can't just keep on making compromises.

God's word has instructed me about the best way to live.

His spirit has convicted me about the best way that these choices I'm facing, these habits I've formed, it takes some courage.

But once you do, I'm sure if I ask the question, hands would go up all over the room.

We learn that God is faithful and God knows best, amen.

And it's worth it.

And the smile that we see on the Lord's face is worth it, too, because he loves to take pleasure in his kids when we obey.

And we can find a joy in that obedience, even though it sometimes is hard.

It's often hard and sometimes it's scary.

And we can then learn to say on our front stage, F-A-C, and this is very corny, but remember there were 17,000 views.

F-A-C, you don't scare me.

I know that's corny.

But that's what David said, isn't it?

Goliath, you're scaring everyone else, all included, but you don't scare me.

Why?

Because on the backstage, I have learned.

They're not just words, they're God, my God's words.



And they matter.

In the book of Daniel, there are particularly out of all the books of the Bible, there are several passages that present God as august and sovereign.

Think about Daniel.

Remember, it talks about 490 years, a set period of time.

No matter, no one's going to change this.

Daniel interprets the prophecy, and he says, Messiah is basically going to come.

The saviour of the world is going to come in about 500 years, and he does.

Jesus comes and fixes the problem of sin.

So Daniel is a book that is so wonderfully about the sovereignty of God, yet there is this hint of conditionality.

So the sovereignty of God, I guess, is all about the unconditional love of God, the unconditional will of God that is being rolled out.

But there is this piece, and it's about the word because.

Because of Daniel's actions on the front stage, something happens.

622, Daniel says, My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lion.

They have not hurt me.

Like this is the, you know, the piece de resistance sort of of the book of Daniel.

We all remember the time when the lion's mouths were shut.

Why did that happen?

There's a because.

Because I was found innocent in his sight.

Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, your majesty.

This is conditionality.

This is an interesting concept to think about.

God just loves Daniel.

He's his boy.

But Daniel is also a man that God is pleased with, amen?

God loves us, but he wants to be pleased with us.

Yes?

He loves it when we obey him.

When we serve him with all of our heart.

So I wonder if for a couple of moments, we could go backwards in this story of the life of Daniel and see, were there times on his backstage that he demonstrates FIO here I go?

Were there times, and if you know the story, you'll know, there are several significant times where Daniel is just the same as David, when no one else is looking, he chooses to obey.

It's around 605 BC, Chapter 1, Nebuchadnezzar has invaded Jerusalem, and he takes off a whole lot of plunder from the temple, and with it, a group of young men, and it tells us in Chapter 1, Verse 3.

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, king of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility.

Young men without physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well-informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace.

Among those who were chosen were some from Judah.

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

The chief official gave them new names to Daniel, the name Belt-Shazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach, and to Azariah Abednego.

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine.

And he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.

Right at the start, isn't it fascinating to see a young man?

He's probably a teenager.

And he can see what the spoils of luxurious living with the abilities that God has given him, where that could take him.

And right at the start, he says, I'm going to make a stand now on food laws.

I am not going to just embrace this host culture.

I'm not going to be immersed into it.

And he took a stand.

Did he have to take a stand?

No, he didn't, but I get the idea that he had a sense that God was watching.

It was his backstage, but he wasn't alone on that backstage.

In a way, he said, FIO, here I go.

Faith inspired obedience.

Can you think of a time when you did that?

I used to work with a bloke who was the salt of the earth.

If you had to pick someone to be in the trenches with you in a war, you would pick that man.

But as we got to know his story, he wasn't always like that.

For many years, he was a young man who from leaving school went from dream to dream, from

job to job.

He was in the circus.

He has a classic story.

From country to country, he's overseas traveling, taking, you know, basically letting the horizon drive his life on the road out there.

And he's overseas, and he felt like God spoke to him very clearly, and he gave him some clear instructions.

And these might seem quite clear.

The instructions were, go home, go back to Australia.

Make a commitment to be faithful to God, to me.

Make a commitment to be faithful to a church.

Find a woman, this was God's word for him.

Find a woman, love her, marry her, and be faithful to her, which is different to what you've been currently doing.

Go home and become a faithful and committed man of God.

Stop running from your responsibilities.

And he had the option to just leave that, because no one else heard this.

It was his backstage, but he said, FIO, here I go.

He came back home, and he joined a church, he met a girl, he married her.

He is a really faithful, godly man with three great sons doing just a good job.

He is doing his best with a heavily loaded trailer, back truck.

And I think of that man, and I think he is a great example of what we are talking about.

FIO, here I go.

What comes to mind for you?

I think of a rock jump I did once at Foster that was about as high as the roof, and this won't relate to many of you who are scared of heights and think, why would you use an example like that?

But when you do a rock jump that's about that high, you stand at the edge, and at some point, you have to go, FIO, here I go.

And when you go, what happens to your stomach?

It sort of goes up, and it's like there's a visceral experience after the jump.

And you think to yourself, and your voice goes up, I'm not sure I made a good decision in this.

And then there's a very deep guttural, ah, ah, bang.

But so often in life, it's like that.

There's a need for courage, isn't there?

And it's just on the backstage, and no one's watching.

There's not the sort of glory of a rock jump, and people cheering you on.

You know, that's why it's good to share some of these challenges we have on the backstage with others, so we do get cheered on by some people who are walking the journey with us.

So what is God speaking to you about in your life?

Is there an area of compromise as you begin 2023?

Because I want to encourage us to think that compromise, that challenge, that's the most important thing in your life at the moment, because obeying God, there's nothing more important.

We categorise other things.

We think, oh no, there are things far more important than that, Lord.

In fact, we have a prayer.

We've been petitioning God about, and we think, yes, Lord, that little thing you want me to do, we know that doesn't matter.

What really matters is my agenda.

But what matters is his agenda, amen?

And his agenda is set typically on the backstage in those times that we spend with him.

There was a because for Daniel 50 years earlier.

Chapter two, Daniel has another opportunity.

Nebuchadnezzar has a dream, and it's a sort of a crazy dream.

It's the one like about these 500 years of prophetic future coming.

And he gets his sorcerers and astrologers in, and he says, I want you to tell me the dream, not just interpret it.

And so they're pretty scared all these dream interpreters.

And if they get it wrong, they're going to be chopped into pieces.

So there's no pressure on this group of people.

Of course, there's a lot of pressure.

And Daniel is someone who knows how to interpret dreams.

So is he going to step up?

Is he going to put himself on the line courageously?

Well, Daniel 2.16, Daniel went to the king and asked for time so that he might interpret the dream for him.

Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.

Isn't that a wonderful little picture of community?

Getting the community of the saints to pray with you as you exercise your gift.

During the night, the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision.

Then Daniel praised the God of heaven.

He has a prophetic gift.

He can interpret dreams.

He can foretell.

But this is the key.

Throughout his life, he doesn't sit on his gift.

When he could.

But in the backstage, he musters the courage to step out and put that gift on show on the front stage.

I wonder if you have a spiritual gift that is hiding on the backstage.

Anyone had a spiritual gift that you've exercised for many years, and then you got hurt?

All hands in the room go up.

At least many would.

Because it's easy to use that spiritual gift, and you get hurt by people in the church, or sometimes by God.

It doesn't work out the way that you think it will.

We want to encourage people.

We believe, as a church, that God has really good stuff in store for us.

And in fact, even though we try to have strong eyes that see far into the future, there are things God wants to do through us, NorthernLife, that we don't know yet.

And they will, I think, emerge from new people that come to our church.

Not everything will be like that.

But some of you who are new, you'll have a dream, and we will explore that dream, and we will follow that dream, and that will be part of what we do as a church, because that's how it works.

It's exciting.

So, can I encourage you?

Not everyone can do stuff on this stage, say.

It's 5% of what we do, I reckon, as a church.

So much of what we do as a church is outside this hour, or tonight's hour.

But we need people to have the confidence to step up, to grab that spiritual gift that's been hiding on the backstage and say, FIO, here I go.

I'm going to use this.

I'm going to take it out onto the front stage.

And very quickly, chapter 4, there's another dream of the king.

And Daniel, once again, on the backstage, he knows the interpretation.

So he says, FIO, here I go.

Faith inspired obedience.

He tells the king, if you remember, that God is displeased with him, and that the king will go mad, be driven into the wilderness.

I mean, who wants to deliver this interpretation?



King, you're going to go mad, driven into the wilderness, you're going to eat grass, grow hair like feathers until you learn that God is sovereign.

But Daniel doesn't hide from the interpretation.

And then chapter five, Bill Schazar has a weird experience.

He's the nephew or grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, not the son.

But he has a weird experience.

A finger turns up in a dream and he's writing on the wall of the palace.

And chapter 5, 17, I've heard that you, to Daniel, are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems.

If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you'll be clothed in purple, that very expensive cloth, and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you'll be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

The king thinks he knows what drives Daniel.

He hasn't worked it out yet.

Daniel couldn't really care less.

He, with faith, acquired confidence again, because as we've seen, he's learned this on the backstage.

He, Daniel said to the king, you may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else.

Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king.

And he says, God has numbered the days of your reign, brought it to an end.

You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

That very night, Belt-Shazar, king of the Babylonians, was slain.

And Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of 62.

So all that to say, there's some pretty adequate proof there, isn't there?

Daniel didn't turn up as a 75-year-old man and bravely defy the rule on a whim.

He's had 60 years of making decisions on the backstage of his life.

That faith that he demonstrated is a weathered, wintered, tempered, faith-acquired confidence.

Amen?

And if you haven't worked it out yet, that's the type of faith we need.

Full stop.

It needs to be weathered.

And if it's not weathered and wintered, it will be over time.

You can guarantee that because that's the type of faith that holds on to the grace of God, no matter what.

It's built on backstage obedience.

So can I encourage us, never think that obedience on the backstage is trivial or insignificant?

Because the decisions we make today will determine the habits that shape our future.

That's just the way it works.

And our habits shape our character.

Character is the sum of our habits.

And the habits you have tomorrow, you defined yesterday, didn't we?

And they're based on, do I change by the grace of God, when God challenges me about aspects of my life?

Do I take that hurt, that area of my life, that's, it's just not taking me to good places?

Do I accept that the Lord is saying to me, give me that, give me that, surrender it to me, I will take care of it?

There's dysfunction and deep anxiety that we can hand over.

Is that easy?

Not normally, but it's possible.

It's possible to pull down idols because sometimes on our backstage, there are all these little idols that we're actually worshiping, that God sees.

It's the story of the people of Israel.

Up on the high places, when they didn't think anyone could see them, they would go on worship idols.

But we can be exactly the same on our backstage.

Faith inspired, obedience, FIO, here I go.

Faith acquired, confidence, FAC, to get to the point where you can say, you don't scare me.

Does anyone remember that sort of cute movie that came out years ago called We Bought a Zoo?

Anyone remember that classic line, Matt Damon's the father, and his son, teenage son, has an interest in a young woman, and he's a bit nervous about what to do, and the father has this bit of advice and says, mate, you just need what?

Anyone remember?

20 seconds of confidence.

20 seconds of courage.

20 seconds of courage.

And I think that's true in life, not to do knee-jerk reactions that are dumb, but when you've been

sitting on something and you've talked to good people about it, and God's convicted us and challenged us, you know, that needs to change.

Let's be encouraged by 20 seconds of courage.

FIO.

Here I go.

Okay, Lord, I'm in.

Do you think, this is just a question to have a think about, do you think when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane and he said, not my will but yours be done, do you think that was the first time he ever said that?

My hunch is that it's not.

I think he was saying that all his life.

Or it wasn't any struggle at all to not sin.

But he lived a perfect 33 years on the backstage, perfect 33 years on the front stage.

Hallelujah.

Because if you are sitting there going, you don't know what's on my backstage.

There's a whole, yeah, join the club.

It's called being human.

We need a saviour.

We need someone to deal with all the junk on our backstage and our front stage and give us strength for tomorrow.

Hallelujah.

Amen.

That's the grace, the grace of God through Christ that is available to us because he took that

perfect life and he offered it as the perfect sacrifice that his blood would be shed, poured out like the sacrificial lamb the Bible talked about.

And he did it for us.

It's enough.

His blood is enough today, this morning, tomorrow, and in a year's time, and in 20 years' time, and 50 years behind us, his blood will cover our sin.

And when he has done that, we need to wake up again tomorrow with a resolute, with a wintered faith that says, I still believe I need the gospel, and I'm gonna do my best to do what you did, Lord Jesus.

Not by will, my will, but yours be done.

I want to be an obedient servant of the living God.

That I could step out with faith-acquired confidence on the front stage.

And in that confidence, in the midst of persevering suffering, my character will be shown.

And that testimony will be a witness for the gospel.

That's what we need.

Our gospel witness is eroded when we do not obey on the backstage.

So who needs courage to step into your faith-inspired obedience?

I wonder if we could all stand, please.

The band are going to come up and sing, lead us in singing some songs.

But could we bow our heads?

And just think for a moment about our backstage.

Can I encourage you that it's your backstage?

It's not worse than the person next to you, it's just your backstage.

And you've had stuff that's happened to you, and you were shaped in your family of origin, and it created some dependencies and habits and hurts and anxieties, and they're very real.

But I want to ask you, has your best friend, your most wonderful, perfect coach, the Holy Spirit, been pointing some stuff out, that he wants to either change, redeem, get rid of, turn the scar into a trophy?

Lord God, would you give us courage to be people of character at NorthernLife?

Would you give us strong eyes to see what complacency will mean for the long haul, the long journey, the testimony of your church?

Thank you that your power is available to us.

The same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead is in us, and if you're not filled with the Holy Spirit, I commend you and challenge you to come forward at the end of this service, and we can talk about how that could be the case, how you can find forgiveness of sin and a cleansing of that backstage.

We would thank you that your grace is enough for yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Lord, I'd love to have some testimonies of FIO Here I Go, in the weeks and months to follow.

You know, God is able.

God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.

In Jesus' name, Amen.