

Crown of Glory (Daniel 6:1-9)

"You're going to do it, aren't you?" I asked.

He looked at me. "Did you ever think I wouldn't?"

I raised an eyebrow at this man to whom I'd been married for nearly sixty-five years. He was as straight and slim as he'd been when I first met him. He was also as bullheaded, answering questions with questions because he knew it irritated me beyond reason.

"You know, being married to you has certainly been an interesting experience." I waved away a servant and filled his wine glass myself.

"That's a very polite way of saying it, my dear."

"Maybe some of your diplomacy has influenced me in spite of my best efforts to prevent it."

He studied me. "Has our life in the service of the Babylonians and now the Medes been that offensive to you, Miriam?"

"You have always made me proud, Daniel, and you know it. And living again in the imperial palace has been luxury in the extreme. I hadn't realized how much I missed it until we returned from the provinces. And I shall certainly miss it again as of tomorrow."

"The children have a very nice home, and they will be glad to have you with them. You know that."

"I do not wish to live with my children," I snapped. "I wish to live with my husband."

He put his hand over mine. "How nice to know that after all these years I still hold your heart."

"Do not treat me lightly here, Daniel." I withdrew my hand and brushed impatiently at the tears that wet my face. One of the things I despised about aging was the too-ready surfacing of emotions.

Daniel offered me a piece of bread. He always thought of food as a panacea. "You don't fool me, you know. You just want to continue living in the palace. I'm sure there's an old Babylonian around somewhere who will be happy to add you to his harem."

"You are a nasty old man."

He smiled broadly, but I refused to be cheered.

"You realize that you have put me in a terrible position, don't you?" I was making pleats of the linen skirt of my garment, a habit I hated. I forced my hands to be still.

"*You're* in a terrible position?"

"Yes, me. Why not me?" Now it wasn't my fingers pleating but my foot tapping. "Do you know the biggest frustration of my life? Trying to understand how you can interpret all those dreams and oversee all those people and never once understand me!"

"Never once?" he asked.

"Never once," I answered untruthfully.

"I certainly understood when your brother introduced us." He grinned roguishly. "I have always recognized a flirt. I just never responded until I met you."

"Old man, looking at the past. It's today I'm worried about."

He reached across the table at which we sat and brushed gently at the tears caught in my lashes. "Miriam, my love, I do realize you are trapped in a situation that gives you no release."

Fresh tears sprang to my eyes at his gentleness. I grasped his hand, my knuckles white. "I cannot tell you to turn your back on the Most High God. Your whole life - and mine - has been lived in commitment to Him. But is my only other choice to say, 'Stay true and die?'"

"Miriam, it will be all right."

I ignored him and his foolish statement. "Ah, Most High God," I said to the ceiling, "is this the way to crown a life lived for your glory?"

"Yes," Daniel said without hesitation.

"What?"

"Yes, it is a way to crown a life lived for His glory."

I looked at my husband and marveled once again at his strength and my great good fortune to have lived with him and loved him for these many years. "It is only because I am afraid. For both you and me."

"I understand." He smiled, his eyes tender.

"I know." My voice was a whisper. "I know."

He pushed his chair back and came to help me rise. He extended his arm. "Walk with me, my love."

"It's your integrity, you know." I looked at his strong face with its corona of wonderful white hair. "In a land of corruption, you are a man of principle."

"I do not do this merely for principle."

I took his arm and we walked toward the southern window.

"You could always be more discreet, more private, if you will. Certainly the Most High God would hear prayers offered in a storeroom or a closet."

He smiled but said nothing.

Sometimes," I said, "it's difficult to tell the difference between stubbornness and dedication."

"You think I'm only stubborn?"

"No." I patted his arm. "I know you are committed to Yahweh. And I would not want it different, though I wish fervently that the consequences were different."

"You think they will kill me?"

"I know they will kill you, and you know it too."

We stopped before the door to the upper room facing south toward Jerusalem. Often when Daniel knelt in the window facing our city, I wondered how much he remembered of it. I remembered very little, more noise and chaos and pain than buildings and homes and people, emotions rather than substance. I did not even remember the forced march to Babylon or the humiliation of the people of the Most High God being forced to walk in captivity down Procession Way past the detestable god Marduke.

Daniel's arm slid around my shoulders. "Will you sit with me as is your custom?"

"Of course. I am offended that you need ask. My only regret is that while I commit the same offense as you, you alone will suffer the consequences."

"A rebel to the end, Miriam." He kissed my cheek. "What spice you have added to my life."

"Well, someone had to answer all your questions."

I settled myself in the great chair near the south window. As I placed my feet upon the footstool that our daughter Leah had embroidered for me, I took up a piece of handwork I was doing, a scarlet and jade belt for Daniel. It always seemed that if my hands were busy, my mind was still. I could concentrate on talking to the Most High God.

But today my mind was not calmed. I looked at the scarlet thread upon my needle and the fine linen that lay in my lap, and I knew my husband would never have the opportunity to bind the finished belt about his waist. My hands began to shake.

I pressed them together to still their movement. Instead they communicated their distress to my heart, which began palpitating wildly, painfully. I knew overwhelming fear.

Daniel was going to die and leave me alone.

If I didn't die of fear first.

I stared at my husband who was calmly kneeling at the south window as he had done three times a day for as long as I could remember. When we

lived in the provinces, it was another window, but the same practice. His constancy in this and all other areas of his life had been my anchor, but I was about to be cut adrift, and it terrified me. I rose and went to Daniel, needing to be near him, to touch him.

He did not move from his attitude of prayer as I stood beside him, and his very immobility calmed me. The constricting bands across my chest loosened slightly. I stood with my eyes closed, leaning on the window jamb, breathing deeply.

Most High God, how shall I survive a future without him?

I did not understand why I was so terrified of the lion's pit or of tomorrow. Daniel was ninety and I eighty- three. We had had many more years than most, and we could not have many, if any, left, even without the lions. Closure comes to every life, as it had to our son Micah and his Rachel.

Ah, Most High God, speak peace to my heart.

I must have spoken aloud for Daniel quoted, "In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame. Rescue me and deliver me in your righteousness; turn your ear to me and save me. Be my rock of refuge to which I can always go. For you have been my hope, O Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth."

I looked down upon the beautiful grounds of the royal gardens, surely the most glorious in the world, and let the words of our great King David comfort my soul.

"Thank you, my dear," I said. "Always the right word. I shall miss that. You realize, of course, that the enemy is there among the vines, taking note of your treason."

He nodded. "I have seen them, but I will not honor them by acknowledging them."

It was evening when our daughter Leah and her husband Samuel stood with me as they took Daniel away.

"Come to our house, Mother," Leah urged again, but I would not.

"I shall remain in these apartments as long as I can, even if it is only for one more night. They mean order and continuity to me. They mean life." And they meant hope, though I did not say it. Leah had little imagination and therefore little hope. "You go home though. I'll be fine."

I saw Leah and Samuel exchange a glance and knew they thought I was being contrary. I dislike intensely their tendency to hover, to worry, to decide what I wanted to do without consulting me. To me they seemed the staid old people and Daniel and I the clever, creative, younger couple. Living with them would not be easy for any of us, for I am not good at fitting into expected patterns or keeping my opinions to myself.

The night was excellent for sleeping, but I could not close my eyes because of the pictures my imagination drew upon my eyelids. Instead I went to the upper room and sat in the south window, looking toward Jerusalem. I would have knelt, but I knew I'd never be able to rise. And I refused to humiliate myself by having to call a servant to come and rescue me.

If you had had the arthritis instead of me, Daniel, and you had not been able to kneel, would you have been taken from me?

But the Most High God who knew everything had given me the arthritis and Daniel the lithe and limber joints. Such a little thing to make such a great difference.

To my amazement my heart kept a steadier rhythm in the deep of night than it had during the afternoon. The comfort of Yahweh was a blanket about my shoulders, a soothing hand upon my brow. Though I could not sleep, I rested, dozing sporadically, rousing as each new stiffness forced me to change position.

So it was that I was awake and heard the commotion when King Darius set out for the pits at the first light of dawn.

I should have asked, I thought, for Daniel's bones to be returned to me.

"After I die," he always said, "I want my bones taken back to Israel just as Joseph's were."

I rested my head against the back of the chair and listened to the melodies of the birds singing in the gardens and the scuffle of small animals scurrying through the bushes. A pair of Egyptian cats sat on a wall, their narrow, haughty, selfish faces turned toward the sun. A day like any other day. A day like no other day.

Suddenly the gardens came alive with shouts and cheering. Darius had returned, and I was both surprised and offended at the joy of his party.

Only one night had passed, and already fickle men were rejoicing over the death of the king's chief administrator.

"My lady!" A servant rushed into the room. "You must come."

I struggled to my feet. As clumsy and ungainly as I was following the night in the chair, I still knew the need to hurry. Kings did not suffer waiting easily. I was half way down the hall when the captain of the guard burst through the front door.

"My lady," he said as I detoured into the entrance hall. He bowed and swept his hand toward the doorway. "It is my lord."

And there stood Daniel.

My heart began to race, and my pain fell away. I felt as graceful as a girl as I ran to my husband. His arms swept me close, and I felt secure within their circle.

Most High God, You have returned him to me from death!

I drew back. "Are you injured?"

Daniel shook his head. "I am fine." He ran his hand over my hair.

"What have you done this night to look so disheveled? And is there any food available?"

I chose to ignore his comments about my appearance. An evening in the company of lions cannot help but undercut one's usual tactful tendencies. "If you're thinking about food, you must be fine." I searched his face. "Tell me what happened."

"I was thrown into the pit."

"Thrown?" I was indignant.

"Miriam, if the lions are to eat you immediately, does it matter whether you are thrown or placed there gently? And if the Most High God is going to rescue you, can He not rescue you from a fall as well as from the lions?"

I smiled broadly. "You are definitely well. You have asked two questions in the same breath."

"Do you wish to hear the rest of my story, or shall you continue to mock me?"

I rejoiced to hear the irascibility in his voice.

We reached our rooms, and found a table set with breads and eggs and cheeses. Daniel continued his story between bites.

"I must confess that when the stone was placed over the mouth of the den, the total darkness was like a living thing pressing upon me. I was so consumed by it that I didn't realize for a while that the lions had done me no harm. Instead they befriended me, sitting one on my left and one on my right, providing warmth through the night. They and I slept, not awakening until the stone was taken away this morning, and Darius called to me."

"There were only two lions?" I felt somewhat disappointed.

"Would it help if I said they were huge and had great fangs?"

"I guess. Were they? Did they?"

"Yes. At least my two bodyguards. And the other ten or so weren't too undersized either." He looked at me over the rim of his goblet, his eyes laughing. "Satisfied?"

I smiled back. "Very."

Daniel rose and came to stand behind me. He began to gently massage my neck and back.

I sighed with pleasure at the touch I never expected to feel again. "I heard the king's rejoicing as you returned, so I know what he feels about your survival. But what of your enemies who plotted against you in the first place?"

Daniel was quiet for a moment before he answered. "They will have no time to do anything to protect themselves. Darius has ordered that they, their wives, and their children all be thrown into the lion's pit."

I turned to look at him. "And you are distressed for them."

"You are not?"

"No, I am not. Yahweh has protected you and destroyed your enemies. Rejoice! That is what King David would have done."

"What I rejoice about, Miriam, is the response of Darius, not to me but to the Most High God." He pulled his chair close to mine and sat down. His eyes were young and eager. "He has issued a decree that the people within the kingdom must fear and reverence the God of Israel. He called Yahweh 'the living God' who rescues and saves."

I was breathless that a foreign king would make such sweeping statements.

Daniel began to quote the words of Darius. "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."

I was full of wonder. "Oh, Daniel, this is the crown of your life! Not death by lions. Not even being rescued from death by lions. Your crown is being used by the Most High God to bring Darius and who knows how many others to an understanding of who he is!"

Daniel nodded. Of course, he had arrived at that conclusion long before I, but then he'd had longer to think about it than I.

"Comb your hair, my dear," he said. "I have a great desire to go sit by the river."

"I shall gladly comb my hair if you will change your robes," I said. "The lions may not have been eating last night, but they were definitely shedding. You look and smell quite feline."