

Todd R. Allen
Interim Pastor
Ordinary Time

February 12, 2017
5th Sunday,

“In Honor...or Dis-Honor”
“The Story”: Chapter 18

Scripture: Daniel Chapter 3 (selected verses)
Matthew 5: 13-16

Daniel Chapter 3 (selected verses)

Reader One:

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, ^[a] and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.² He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up.

⁴ The king’s herald loudly proclaimed, “Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: ⁵ As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.”

⁷ Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Reader Two:

⁸ At this time some astrologers^[b] came forward and denounced the Jews.⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “May the king live forever! ¹⁰ Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹ and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. ¹² But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.”

Reader One:

¹³ Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, ¹⁴ and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ¹⁵ Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?”

Reader Two:

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us^[c] from Your Majesty’s hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹ So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace.

Reader One:

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers “Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?”

They replied, “Certainly, Your Majesty.”

²⁵ He said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”

²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!”

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, ²⁷ and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

Reader Two:

²⁸ Then Nebuchadnezzar said, “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.”

³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Matthew 5:13-16

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

They say that attendance will be light. It is said that the Sunday when the Annual Meeting of the Congregation follows a worship service—as it does today--will be light because the meeting to follow will be boring, or of little significance....

Well, what do we think?

Today IS the day—and I am glad to see so MANY of you here! But, maybe--just maybe—you are wondering—in the back of your mind—if they are right—and that you might want to slip out, in a few moments time...

Well, I hope you will stay, and -what is more—I hope you will savor what this story from the Book of Daniel can teach us about God—and what it can teach us about ourselves. What do we learn about God in this story? Who does God want us to be—as His faithful people?

Let us pray:

Surely, it has to be in the top ten—this story from Daniel, Chapter Three—the story of, yes, here I go with the pronunciations: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Who of us has not heard—and marveled—over this story? It’s a story that has captured the imaginations of all who hear it. Your bulletin cover features perhaps the earliest surviving depiction of this event, a fresco found in the Roman catacombs, dating from the third century A.D.—but it is safe to say that this story of three men being cast into a fiery furnace—and emerging from it untouched—had been told--and re-told—for

many centuries before this time (and perhaps with all the drama and gusto the Biegel family gave to it, a few minutes ago. Bravo!)

Why do we repeat such stories?

Why are some exploits forever remembered—while others are lost to time?

In answer, I'd say that when a story teaches a lesson—and a lesson that is vital, and that speaks to us—it gets remembered and repeated. In the case of our three young men, Biblical scholars suggest that their story was written down nearly 200 years before the birth of Jesus—or about 500 years after the event itself--and these same scholars suggest this time frame—the second century before Christ--can point us to the answer of why this story was written down....

And so, what was happening? Or--to put the question another way--why did this story matter so much in the second century, B.C?

These stories from Daniel were written down—preserved--during a time of a great unease within Israel. Earlier in the century, the Jews had won their freedom from the Greek empire, but their future remained tenuous. While Israel remained free she was still surrounded by powerful enemies, any of whom could invade, pillage, and occupy her at will. The Greeks, once more. The Egyptians. Even an upstart republic located in Italy, based in Rome, and starting to make a name for itself...

Here was the big picture, if you like, and when it came to the average Jew, perhaps you and I can easily imagine that he—or she—was torn over what to do. When the future, friends, is uncertain—indeed, when the future looks to be filled with risk and danger—don't we weigh options? I think we do. We may wonder, for instance, if it makes sense to keep on doing what we have been doing, day in and day out. We may wonder if it makes more sense to change what we do—even change what we believe—if the going gets tough. Here were the options, let me suggest, also being weighed during this time in Israel's history—and let me add that these options touched not just upon political life—but upon religious life, as well.

How so?

Well, if Israel were to fall to an outside power—which seemed certain—there would be the political/economic ramifications of it all: The Jews could keep their businesses and they'd have to pay tribute to a foreign ruler, as they'd done in the past, but it was all but sure that they'd have to worship that same foreign ruler as a god. And here—here!—is the link to the stories we find in Daniel. All of the stories here involve loyalty—whether it is to Yahweh—or to some other, and often human, god.

To whom do we owe our loyalty?

What does this loyalty look like?

How is it lived out, day by day?

It was in answer to these questions, that these stories from Daniel had such currency, back in the second century before Jesus....here, I think, is the answer to the question posed earlier

OK, I am being the history professor this morning! But I surely pale in this regard next to my step-dad, Jay Ruoff, now age 91 and as sharp as ever.

Jay is a former Marine, retired State Department official, and an avid Civil war historian; in fact, he has written—and published—four books on the conflict. Every time I see Jay, I sit down to hear his newest take on this event, or that. Most recently, he spoke about Abraham Lincoln’s presidency....

To say that Lincoln became President during a time of uncertainty would be an understatement: Within days of his taking office, states in the southern part of our country began to secede, and, very soon, of course, this country was at war with itself. Defeat—followed defeat—for the Federal armies, however, and some began to doubt whether it was worth it. Why continue the fight? Why not let the Southern states just have their cotton—and their slaves?

On December 1, 1862, President Lincoln sent a message to Congress. It was a message—as his aide wrote at the time—in which “his whole soul was absorbed”: It was his proposal to free all slaves living in the southern states, to make them—“forever free.” Up until this time this had not been the aim of the war--the goal had been to restore the Union—to bring the southern states back to recognizing Federal authority. But, now, here is what Abraham Lincoln wrote:

“My fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history. We, of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation.

We say we are for the Union. The world will not forget that we say this. We know how to save the Union. The world knows we do know how to save it. We -- even we here -- hold the power, and bear the responsibility. In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free -- honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth.

The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just -- a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless.”

Don’t these words just catch you up? They do, for me, and here’s why: They point me back to something foundational—even essential—about who I am...

Why continue the fight?

Why suffer the bloodshed still?

For Lincoln it was about more than being faithful to the inalienable rights spoken of in our Constitution: It is about being faithful to the Author of our freedom—to Almighty God. Here—here!—was the reason—plain and simple—for why America existed—for why it was—in his words—the last best hope on earth.... Here, I believe, is the basis for what Lincoln wrote—and Lincoln also knew his Bible well. Throughout his writings—and his speeches—he drew freely from it....

Did he draw from Daniel?

I cannot say that I've heard a direct quote, but surely the parallels were obvious to him: *When times get tough—when the future seems uncertain, even menacing—our loyalty will be tested.*

Point One for today—I am an incurable Presbyterian....and a vital one—a point that links us back to the setting of second century Israel, as well as the stories from Daniel. These stories—all of them—revolve around loyalty to God, and a loyalty that is then tested. And so, there *will be—to return yet further to the stories, just now—the temptation to avoid the furnace—to skip the lion's den. There will be the temptation to bow down to something we know, deep down is wrong—to appease it—to make compromises with it....*

But Lincoln—for one—was not ready to compromise: “*We cannot escape history*”, he said. It was his way of reminding the Congress that the democratic basis of our Constitution could not be ignored: “*As I would not be a slave—so I would not be a master*” Lincoln would write, “*This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this—to the extent of the difference—is no democracy.*”

Our Loyalty—to our families—to those we love—and, just as importantly, to our God—will be tested. This is a fact of life—and a fact of faith, too. Point One...

And now, Point Two—and drawn again from the Book of Daniel: In the midst of the temptation, we are not alone....

Perhaps it is only right for us to ask ourselves, “what are the temptations we face? Or—to put it in the context of Daniel—what are the other gods we are asked to worship?”

I posed this question this past week, to your Session—and let me pose it now, to us all:
What are the other gods we are asked to worship?

Money

Power

Sex

Violence

Let me add these:

Comfort

Cynicism

Despair

I think these are some of the most powerful gods walking around just now, impacting our culture. They provide us with the temptation to sit back, and to do nothing—to believe that nothing will ever change—that you and I will not make a difference—and so, why undergo the trial—why bear the flames—why try to change anything.....

I return to Lincoln once more—and to that letter mentioned earlier—listen to what he said:

“The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise -- with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”

Life is full of temptations—there is the temptation, for instance, to give into despair, to cynicism—to believe that nothing can be changed, or—at best—to believe what worked before is still good enough for the present challenge.

And, you know, friends, if the change required in such storms was left totally to us, we would be unable to affect anything new. Consider the image presented to us, here, in Chapter Three. Let us picture Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego at this moment—here they are, in the midst of a great trial—surely they are all but soon to be destroyed by what is to come, and you know, for all intents and purposes they have no hope. What human being can withstand such flames—superheated for the event--and flames, we are told, that have already engulfed and destroyed those tending the fires? Surely no one. Surely, this is how King Nebuchadnezzar—and those around him—see things:

And then they see something else—someone. A figure—presence—in that same place, this place of great testing, even life-taking flames—more to point—they see that the three young men are not consumed—but preserved! He sees that additional presence—power—shown in your bulletin cover today. Have a look back at it. Here, as mentioned, is one of the earliest depictions of this story from Daniel, and the artist has made sure the flames are well re-presented, but then—what is this image above the three men?

It is a dove—it is the representation of the Holy Spirit....

Friends, where does the power come from—the ability for us think anew and act anew? To withstand temptation—to survive the flames? It does not come from us—it comes from outside of us, really. This is the teaching given to us in Daniel—it is—it is the teaching now made visible to the King of Babylon: “Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?” the King asked. They replied, “Certainly, Your Majesty.” ²⁵ He said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”

Where does the power come from? What Nebuchadnezzar sees—and what our ancestors illustrate for us—is the saving power of Christ—and the enduring presence of the Holy Spirit. Here are two entities totally separate from us—even totally different from us, for we are not God, my friends—but here are two entities that bind themselves to us—two entities that can be counted on to be with us not matter what befalls us....

Yes, where does this power—this presence—come from? It comes from our relationship with God—with the move God makes to bind Himself forever to you, my friends....

But there is more: This presence is also to be seen in others—in those individuals, for instance, who inspire us—in the lives of those who put us in touch with something deep and real—even something that startles and transforms us—that changes our way of looking at the world—even living with it.

And, now, one of those individuals is King Nebuchadnezzar himself:

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.²⁹ Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.”

Oh, what a rousing conclusion to this story we are given here! Can you imagine the cheer going around the fireside when it was told, years ago? The smiles—even the prayers of thanksgiving—offered in the Synagogues—in the catacombs...

Yes, this story has power—it teaches valuable lessons. *The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego reminds us that our faith will be tested, yes—but it reminds*

us that we will not face the temptations alone. That there will someone with us at all times...the one who is God himself—The Holy Spirit, given through Our Risen Lord—and the one who has the power of God moving through their lives—the person whose life—whose actions, whose words—touch us in a way like no other.... Here—here!—is what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego become for the most powerful man in the world—and they change his life forever....

Who are these people for you?

Who have they been down the years?

For here is Point Three for today—and a fitting conclusion it surely is: Our loyalty to God will be tested- but our steadfastness—our faithfulness to God—will change hearts—and minds...

Yes, here is the final point for today, and I lift it up because we know the end of the story, here in Chapter Three—we see a changed king—and a kingdom—more to the point—that is also changed because of what happens: We read that there is a royal decree made that the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is to be respected—even to be revered—because of what has just taken place in the furnace—because of what has been seen—and heard...

Our Annual Report (lift it up). In a few minutes time—and as we move into our Annual Meeting—I will ask you to receive the reports presented in it, and—as part of this same meeting—you will also hear from the Elders who has written the reports you find in it, your peers who oversee these areas of our life, together...

This Report is a witness—it is what we offer not just within these walls, but also make freely available outside of them, as a witness to who we are—and what we stand for. This report will be posted on our website, beginning tomorrow

What do we find in it? What do we find in it, more to the point, that testifies to what makes us loyal to God?

Here are some examples:

Worship

CE/Children's Ministry

The Presbyterian Women

Here are just a few examples of the witness, we make, to Jesus Christ—how we stand apart from other non-profit organizations—here, simply put is what we stand for—and what we stand against....

Friends, we meet in the midst of temptations to hide our light under a basket—our day and age is not so far removed from the second century before Jesus. We also meet as we remain in a time of transition, moving from a past place of hurt and loss

of members. There can be a temptation—during this same time—to hold back, to wait, to avoid taking risks--after all, you are preparing for the arrival of your next, installed pastor.

Be bold—and confident—continue to wrestle with your future—and continue to witness. Because you are not alone: You have one other, and you surely have the presence of the Almighty God with you. How else have you come to this point, but that the Spirit has been with you, especially in the tough times of the past? You've come through, by God's grace. You have been refined by the trials, but not destroyed by them. You have emerged as a people with a faith that is deeper and richer. You are kin to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego!

Earlier, I lifted up the fact that, for many people, the idea of staying for an Annual Meeting holds little appeal—that, to them, such a meeting will matter for little—that it only promises boredom...

Nothing could be further from the truth: *Because you—my friends, of Trinity—hold the power—and bear the responsibility. Each of you has one voter—and, at this meeting, you have the power to use that vote to affect the police and ministries of Trinity Presbyterian Church.*

May this meeting be a time for us all to rise to the occasion—to make the future of Trinity that will be one of honor to our Lord.

Thanks be the One whose power sustains us, Who has brought us safely to this point in time—and all praise, honor, glory, to the One who will remain with us, and Who will work through us to change lives—and to change the world!

Amen—and Amen!