

But Wait! There's Someone Else in the Fire

A sermon by John Strommen on Daniel 3:1, 8-30 Dec. 3, 2017

The story in Daniel today is about the attempt to use raw power and wealth to control, intimidate and diminish three men who were merely trying to hang on to their identities and their souls. But really, what chance did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have? Sure seemed like King Nebuchadnezzar would have the last word. After all, he had a 90 foot statue of himself made of gold. Who could argue with this guy? Shadrach and company had a snowballs chance in you know where.

But wait! There's someone else in the fire.

This story is about much more than the bravery and character of Shadrach and his buddies. This story tells us about the faithfulness and character of God, who shows up on our behalf in the most godforsaken places. Any places like that in your life?

This story also foretells the story of one Jesus of Nazareth.

So how did these three guys get into such trouble? Last week we talked about how the Jews were exiles in Babylon for 70 years, how God promised them that God still had plans for them; how they were therefore to trust God and not try and fight the Babylonians, but get on with life and seek the welfare of whatever city they were in.

I give you Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, three Jewish men who were smart, educated, and talented individuals who were given positions of leadership in King Nebuchadnezzar's administration – along with another contemporary of theirs named Daniel, who ended up facing not fire, but what – it eludes me at that moment?

So, these three men had loyally performed their duties, just as Jeremiah had instructed them: they sought the welfare of the city while remaining faithful Jews. And yet the attempts to intimidate these immigrants had begun long before. You see, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were not their real names in the first place, but are Persian names. In the first chapter of Daniel, we learn that their birth names were of course Jewish names, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. This change in names is quite significant as names not only signified one's identity and heritage, but in the case of these particular names, also one's religious beliefs. So, all three of the original names of these Jewish men contain references to the God of Israel. Hananiah means "God is gracious," Mishael means "Who is like God?" and Azariah means "God keeps him." Oh yes, He does, as Azariah would soon find out! These references to the God of Israel have now been substituted with references to the Babylonian gods, such as Nebo -- Abednego means "servant of Nego," not to be confused with "Negan" from a certain, popular TV show.

Well, Abednego wasn't a servant of Nego or any Babylonian god, nor were any of these three men. And this was not lost on some of the loyalists to the king, who correctly observed that S, M and A did not bow down and worship the statue of the king whenever the trumpets were sounded.

Now, the 90 ft. statue of gold indicates that Nebuchadnezzar presided over an exceedingly wealthy kingdom, essentially a cult of gold, of wealth, and the power it brings. Yet for S and company, none of these things were praiseworthy. More importantly, neither was the king praiseworthy. And when the king was informed of this fact, S, M and A were brought before the king to defend themselves. They were told that they would suffer the same fate as anyone who did not worship this statue, namely, they would be thrown into a furnace. The king then asked a rhetorical question: "and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?" the correct answer is of course, "no one."

Their response? "Well, I guess we're going into the fire, then, because we will not worship the golden statue. If our God is able to deliver us from this, fine. But if not, so be it. Either way, we've made the right decision."

The king in his rage stokes the fire so hot it kills the guards (thanks for your service, boys!), who have to throw our heroes into the fire. So now Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are in the furnace.

But wait! There's someone else in the fire, someone who has the appearance of a god. Furthermore, Shadrach and his buddies appear to be unharmed, their hair not even singed. Indeed, as we find out later, they were not harmed, and henceforth, King Goldfinger treated them with just a little more respect after that.

The message to the Jews in exile was that no matter how bad it gets, God has not forgotten you, but stands with you in the fire, because God has plans for you.

What are the broader meanings of this story? One meaning is social and economic. God stands with those who are bullied by wealth, power and bigotry. And God promises to prevail over all kingdoms and all attempts to intimidate and control others. Who around us in this world is intimidated and threatened by raw power? Can you think of any examples in our country right now? How do we treat the immigrants who come to our land? Do we honor and respect their beliefs, traditions and identity or do we turn the heat up and try to coerce them to be something else?

Or, as we've been learning recently, far too many men in positions of power have used that power for sexual purposes, and in the process have created a furnace of anger, shame, and desperation for women who were abused.

But wait! There's someone else in the fire with them.

One can't help but think of climate change. In Minneapolis since 1970, we've just learned, the average annual temperature has risen 6 degrees, and really, how many times do we need to hear about a glacier the size of Rhode Island that has broken away from Greenland or Antarctica and is now melting in the ocean? What does this have to do with S, M and A? Literally, the heat is being turned up because very powerful interests are being protected, and you know who the most vulnerable are: here's a hint, it's not the people who own skyscrapers, but the poor, who are the most affected by increasing droughts, violent storms, rising seas. Don't get me wrong, everybody is in jeopardy, but the poor are the first to be thrown in the furnace!

But wait! There's someone else in the fire with them!

And that someone is God, who often shows up through people like you and me, because we are called, you see. Is there someone around you who is being squeezed by the powers-that-be who needs your presence?

And speaking of you and me, another meaning of this story is personal and existential. Whether you call it a fiery furnace, or a lonely wilderness or just a hard, hard place to be, all of us are there sometimes. It comes with being broken and living in a broken world. We learn today that not only did Shadrach, M and A benefit from this God. This story tells us about the heart of God for people, for people like you and me.

That means you and me can both say, when things look unbearably bleak, "Wait a minute, there's somebody else in this fire with me." And not just a God who is impervious to the flames. A God who was fully subject to the flames, even died in the flames of a combustible humanity.

The fourth man in the fire is a lovely preview of Christ and the cross. By becoming a human and submitting himself to something even more awful than incineration, God is saying that he stands with us in the midst of the worst that human existence has to offer. He stands with us and bears it with us and for us, so that in the end we are unscathed, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

One might say, "wait a minute, just because you're a Christian, or a Jew, we know from history that God let's many die, sometimes in horrible ways. Look at the Holocaust for Jews, or countless Christian martyrs over the years." Yes, in a material sense, in a "this-world" sense, it may appear to be defeat, abandonment by God. But this is only temporary. In the broader scheme of things, we are all like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. God stands with us and preserves our lives for all time. As Romans reminds us, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." This makes a difference for our lives right now.

So we have a reminder that God is to be found most powerfully in our lives where there is fire, pain, hardship. And in the spirit of Advent, where there is waiting. Waiting for restoration, wondering if healing and wholeness will ever come. For the Jews, it was 70 years during the Babylonian Captivity. This is what the "theology of the cross" is all about. God is right there where our pain and suffering is the most poignant, to bear our sin and brokenness so that we don't have to. To redeem our suffering, even as we wait in hopeful expectation. Only a God who fully owns the brokenness of this fallen world of ours can truly help us. That God has done and does, each and every day.

There's someone else in the fire indeed, and it is God. Amen.