

First Sunday of Advent - The Fiery Furnace

December 3, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: John 18:36-37; Daniel 3: 1-30

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit — Amen

We're on our way to Bethlehem. Come, Lord Jesus. It's the first day of a new church year. It's the first day of Advent, the season set by the four Sundays before Christmas. We're on our way to Bethlehem, where we remember the birth of Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus. We're on our way to Bethlehem to remember that the baby born there grew to be a man who lived, died, rose and will come again to bring to completion the Kingdom of God. Come, Lord Jesus. We're on our way to Bethlehem but our Advent readings will take us through some wild territories to get there.

Our travel guides will be Daniel and the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah. Traveling with us will be our Hebrew ancestors, living in exile far from their beloved and destroyed nation and Temple. It seems a peculiar combination for a tour group – ancient, exiled Israelites and modern followers of Jesus. But most tour groups are an odd assortment of people from many places, with many viewpoints and life experiences. What holds any tour group together is a common interest. In this instance, we all are interested in the one, almighty God who created us and loves us completely. We're all interested in living the full, faithful life God wants for each of us and we all seem to have a devil of a time doing it. (No pun intended) At the end of our Advent tour, our Hebrew brothers and sisters will go on to Jerusalem and we will head toward Bethlehem. We will all carry memories of the strange places we visited: Nebuchadnezzar's punishing fiery furnace, a valley of dried bones and God's invitation to a world that doesn't yet exist. We're on our way. Buckle up. It may seem like a strange, rough path to follow to receive the Light of God. But God's ways are not our ways. Bethlehem, here we come.

First stop, a story from the book of Daniel. Though set in the time of Israel's exile in Babylon, we actually think it was written much later for the Israelites living under the

colonizing rule of the Greeks. One reason to think this is that the Babylonians did not force their religion on others. But that was not true about later conquerors. Perhaps, like in the book of Revelation, the writer of Daniel found it easier or safer to use a familiar setting and villain from centuries past to tell a story meaningful for his current times. Instead of saying Greek Seleucids, you write Babylon. Instead of naming the current king, you use Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar. His contemporaries would get it. The exact setting or names are not as important as the meaning and message.

The original audience of the third chapter of Daniel were living “under a religiously oppressive regime, a situation that fits the time of the Greek overlord Antiochus,”¹ referred by some as Antiochus the Madman.” He took Hellenization to a new extreme. To further his control, he demanded all conquered people to conform to his Greek ways, including religious practices. It was a time of cultural totalitarianism in which the Jews were under great pressure to give up their culture, identity and faith or face punishment, violence, even death. Put yourself in their position. To preserve your life, property or family, how far do you compromise your faith? Your decision would largely depend on what you believed about the character and activity of God, especially during such faith-challenging times. Keep your eye on God in this story.

The king sets up a huge golden statue and demands all subjects to bow and worship it or be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. It is the oppressive exercise of coercive and violent control over an entire population. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have to make their choice — just like the Jews living under Antiochus. They could accept the religion of the king as superior to their own. They could go through the motions of bowing to the statue while still maintaining their own belief. Or they could [participate in] a rebellion against this oppressive religious practice. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego choose none of these”²

“Instead, they decide to become living witnesses to what they believe in,”³ offering their lives as an act of faith *“If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the*

furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up." It's a remarkable expression of unconditional and absolute faith regardless of what happens to them. It's a devotion to God that is not based on what God can do for them but who God is. If I have to choose between this violent, self-serving earthly king and the God who has stood by my ancestors and been with me in good and bad, I choose my God. "They surrender their future to God, not Nebuchadnezzar. In the process, they do not tie God's hands. Death does not limit or end God's capacity to create a future."⁴ It is a form of peaceful resistance often associated today with people like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bishop Oscar Romero.

When Romania was still under Soviet communist control, Dr. Joseph Tson, a vocal Romanian pastor, was often arrested and subjected to tortuous questioning for his religious convictions and preaching. At one such interrogation, he said:

"I have to tell you first that I am ready to die. I have put my affairs in order. Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying, because when you kill me people all over Romania will read my books, [listen to my sermons on tape] and believe on the God I preach...even more than they do now."⁵

Tson was exiled from his country. When Romania became independent, he returned to find the Christian church very much alive. The fiery furnace of communism hadn't been able to destroy it.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are ready to surrender their lives as a witness to the God they trust no matter what happens to them. At that point, three Jewish men have undone the power of a tyrant. Stripped of his weapons of fear and violence, Nebuchadnezzar is powerless to control these three men. Their God is already proven more powerful than this earthly king. That king's kind of power will not last. Oppressive, corrupt, unjust empires fail and fall. God will not.

So what does this story say to that original audience? It's a story of hope. Cruelty, tyrants, injustice and war will not go on forever. God is stronger. It's a story that rally's the faithful to stand tall and fearless in their faith. In life or death, God will not abandon God's people. What does this story have to say to us on our way to Bethlehem? Maybe we are to wrestle with some questions: To what golden gods are we bowing or tempted to bow? When do we compromise our faith by action or silence to get approval? What might happen... what God be able to do if we let go of our fear to let all of our life be a living witness to our faith and love of God? Tough, heavy question for December Advent pondering. But remember whom we are walking toward on our way to Bethlehem — Jesus our Savior, who showed us once again that when you stand up for what God declares is right and good against the latest Nebuchadnezzars, you are not alone or forsaken in any fiery furnace. Not even death is an obstacle for God.

Let us together keep walking to Bethlehem. Keep your December and Advent devotionals open each day. Come, Lord Jesus. Walk passed the golden gods. Be brave. Be awake. Look for the others who bring you God's presence in a fiery furnace. Receive the light of Christ that will not burn or consume but make you shine like that guiding star of Bethlehem.

Linda M Alessandri 3/2/17

ENDNOTES

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1. Corrine Carvlho, "Commentary on Daniel 3:1, 8-30" December 1, 2013 as posted at www.workingpreacher.org
 2. Corrine Carvlho, "Commentary on Daniel 3:1, 8-30" December 1, 2013 as posted at www.workingpreacher.org
 3. Corrine Carvlho, "Commentary on Daniel 3:1, 8-30" December 1, 2013 as posted at www.workingpreacher.org
 4. Richard W. Nysse, "Commentary on Daniel 3: 1-30" October 11, 2011 as posted on www.workingpreacher.org
 5. Mark Adams, "The Fourth Man in the Furnace" June 13, 2004 as posted on www.redlansbaptist.org