

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

Daniel 3:1-29
For Lent Round-robin 2023

Tonight's story – what a strange and wacky and WONDERFUL tale this is. The evil king Nebuchadnezzar just DOESN'T GET it. He's on a power trip to end ALL power trips. It's all about him. He likes to think of HIMSELF as the "KING of kings," so when he decides to build a statue, he wants to make it as much a SPECTACLE as HE is. He builds it on a plain, so it will be seen for MILES around. And of course, it's RIDICULOUSLY HUGE; its 60 cubits high and 6 cubits wide. That translates to about 100 FEET HIGH by 10 feet wide. Now did you catch that — it's 10 TIMES TALLER than it is WIDE. A ten STORY structure on a ten FOOT base. How did this thing even STAND UP? And of COURSE, it's made of GOLD — it was IMPOSSIBLY EXPENSIVE to build. The story doesn't TELL us what the statue LOOKED like, but WHATEVER it was, it SURELY fit the OUTLANDISH personality of the king who set it up.

I hope you caught the comedy in my reading of this story. The repetition of the LONG LISTS in this story is meant to MOCK Nebuchadnezzar, to MAKE FUN of his ABSURD EGO.

The statue is just the BACKDROP for this scene. Nebuchadnezzar is just BEGINNING to make a spectacle of himself. It isn't ENOUGH that the OFFICIALS of the provinces come to the dedication of this MONSTROSITY. Oh no, he's got to have the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, AND all the officials of the provinces. And it's not ENOUGH to have a HORN announce the beginning of the dedication. Oh no, he's got to have the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and ENTIRE musical ensemble. Now those instruments don't even WORK together; it would have sounded HORRENDOUS. The whole scene is UTTERLY RIDICULOUS. NEBUCHADNEZZAR and his GODS are ridiculous.

So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, faithful Jews who had risen to a level of LEADERSHIP in this GENTILE kingdom, are commanded to COMPROMISE their faith — AGAIN. (This wasn't the FIRST time Nebuchadnezzar tells them to stop worshipping their God, but they'd always found a way AROUND it.) But THIS time, it's SERIOUS. If they don't WORSHIP this IDOL, this FALSE god, they could lose their LIVES. Nebuchadnezzar is in a FURIOUS RAGE, (ahem) AGAIN, and if they don't fall down and worship his golden statue, he'll have them killed.

But once again, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stand firm. They REFUSE to compromise their faith, even if it means DEATH.

When we hear their brave words, we conjure up images of larger than life figures — HEROES who already know how the story will end, CHAMPIONS whose CONFIDENCE is absolutely UNSHAKABLE.

But did you hear the "if" in their response? Listen to it again: "IF our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, 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."

"IF God is able to deliver us"? What does that MEAN—"if"? You mean Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego weren't SURE that God would save them? Maybe that means (pause) they were AFRAID.

But IF they were SCARED, WHY did they DO it; why did they RISK their LIVES? King Nebuchadnezzar was the most powerful person on the planet at the time. He had the power to have a RIDICULOUS looking 100 foot GOLDEN statue built on a whim, and he had the power to MAKE ALL the leaders in his kingdom come and WORSHIP his statue. He had gone into Israel and destroyed Jerusalem, and destroyed their lives. With a word, he could HAVE Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego SLAUGHTERED in an instant.

He could have ENDED their lives, but he COULDN'T have TAKEN their lives. You see, their lives already BELONGED to GOD. In all of their trials, God had never left them. God had ALWAYS been PRESENT with them, and they knew that, WHETHER they lived or whether they died, they were in GOD'S HANDS. With all his power, and all his riches, that was ONE thing that Nebuchadnezzar could NEVER take from them. It is God, and God ALONE, that creates and sustains and delivers us. It's GOD ALONE that can take a life in the pit of despair, and give it meaning and hope. As POWERFUL as Nebuchadnezzar was, he couldn't COMPARE to the GOD of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They couldn't be SURE if God would SAVE them from the fiery furnace, but they WERE sure that they could NEVER BOW down to any OTHER GOD.

Were they afraid? Probably. But was their faith and obedience to God WORTH RISKING their lives? Absolutely.

In the end, God DID save them. Even though the fiery furnace was SO HOT, SEVEN TIMES as hot as normal, so INTENSE that the guards HOLDING Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were KILLED AS they through them in, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego weren't harmed in the slightest. Nebuchadnezzar started to realize what was REALLY happening, when he looked into the furnace and saw 4 OF THE 3 men he'd thrown INTO the fire, (pause) just walking around COMPLETELY UNHARMED. "Why are there 4 of them?", he thought. "And why does he have the APPEARANCE of a GOD? Hmm...(gasp) oh. OOHH!" Even Nebuchadnezzar could see a REAL God at work.

I had a reason for CHOOSING THIS text to preach on for our round-robin series this year. The LAST time I preached on this story was during my Senior year at seminary, in a chapel service. I preached on it, AS my classmates and I were preparing for our graduation, and to be sent out into the world to become pastors, right AFTER we got the news that the Reverend Fred Phelps and his Westboro Baptist Church would be THERE to PROTEST our graduation.

I said "Reverend" there GRITTING my TEETH, because he CERTAINLY wasn't WORTHY of that TITLE. The church he founded had ONE agenda – it proclaimed HATE for the gay and lesbian community. They were KNOWN for protesting at funerals and other events with vile and disgusting signs and shouts.

And they were coming to try to RUIN our graduation. The day came, and the police did a good job of keeping them AWAY from the ceremony, but my class and I were not going to LET their HATE STAND. We gathered in the parking lot before the ceremony, where THEY could SEE us, and we PRAYED for them. Slowly, our HURT BECAME more of a SADNESS for Mr. Phelps and his family. How TOXIC the hate they spewed must have been to their LIVES.

When he DIED back in 2014, a great many RELIGIOUS people said that they were GLAD he was dead. Surprisingly, the MOST gracious word I heard came from a GAY man named George Takei, a man who had been PERSONALLY ATTACKED by Phelps. Takei said this, "Today, Mr. Phelps may have learned that God, in fact, HATES NO one. Vicious and hate-filled as he was, may his soul find the kind of peace through DEATH that was so PLAINLY ELUSIVE during his LIFE."

You see, hate RAGES and BLASTS its fiery furnace, but LOVE WINS.

NOW, as I look BACK over the last 23 years of ministry, as I think of all the EVIL I have SEEN in this world, as I consider EVERYTHING that the congregations I have served have ENDURED in that time, I am MORE convinced NOW than EVER that we are IN GOD'S HANDS. We ALWAYS HAVE been, and we ALWAYS WILL be in GOD'S HANDS.

Being a disciple of Christ is HARD. We are constantly being BOMBARDED by forces that DEMAND that we COMPROMISE our faith. Being a COMMUNITY in Christ is hard, even a little SCARY. But our faith in a God of LOVE, if it means ANYTHING at ALL, MUST mean that we stand UP for what's RIGHT.

IS our FAITH and OBEDIENCE to God WORTH it? Is PROCLAIMING the GOOD NEWS of the love Jesus Christ WORTH the TROUBLE? Is JESUS worth it? Absolutely. Because 3 of us may get thrown into the fire, but there are 4 of us STANDING here. Amen.