

***“Bible Heroes: Shadrach, Meshach, & Abednego”***

**Reverend Bill Gause**

**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**

**13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**July 2, 2017**

**First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 43:1-3a**

**43** But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. <sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. <sup>3</sup>For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

**Second Scripture Reading: Daniel 3:1-30**

**3** King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue whose height was sixty cubits and whose width was six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. <sup>2</sup>Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent for the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to assemble and come to the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. <sup>3</sup>So the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, assembled for the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. When they were standing before the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, <sup>4</sup>the herald proclaimed aloud, “You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, <sup>5</sup>that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. <sup>6</sup>Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire.” <sup>7</sup>Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

<sup>8</sup>Accordingly, at this time certain Chaldeans came forward and denounced the Jews. <sup>9</sup>They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, live forever! <sup>10</sup>You, O king, have made a decree, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, shall fall down and worship the golden statue, <sup>11</sup>and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. <sup>12</sup>There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These pay no heed to you, O King. They do not serve your gods and they do not worship the golden statue that you have set up.” <sup>13</sup>Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought in; so they brought those men before the king. <sup>14</sup>Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? <sup>15</sup>Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?” <sup>16</sup>Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>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.”

<sup>19</sup>Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace heated up seven times more than was customary, <sup>20</sup>and ordered some of

the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. <sup>21</sup>So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. <sup>22</sup>Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. <sup>23</sup>But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire. <sup>24</sup>Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, "Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?" They answered the king, "True, O king." <sup>25</sup>He replied, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god." <sup>26</sup>Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. <sup>27</sup>And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men; the hair of their heads was not singed, their tunics were not harmed, and not even the smell of fire came from them.

<sup>28</sup>Nebuchadnezzar said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. <sup>29</sup>Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way." <sup>30</sup>Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.



**Sermon: "Bible Heroes: Shadrach, Meshach, & Abednego"**

This week we celebrate the 241<sup>st</sup> birthday of the United States. When Tuesday rolls around, many of us will celebrate. We'll wear red, white, and blue. We'll grill out in the backyard or come to the Yankee Doodle Picnic here at the Church. We'll watch fireworks and more than likely hear Lee Greenwood sing *God Bless America* more than a few times, whether we choose to or not.

This country isn't perfect, no nation is. And some of our imperfections are a little harder to deal with than most. But we've accomplished great things like putting explorers on the moon and curing deadly diseases like polio and smallpox. We invented the internet, baseball, Rock and Roll, Disney World, and the bacon cheeseburger. God Bless America, indeed.

As Americans, we have a lot of which to be proud. But, we also have some skeletons in our closet...and a few of them right out on the front porch, too. And on Tuesday we will honor this nation with all its glorious beauty and painful flaws. Because we're Americans, dog-gone it! And that's what we do. No matter who is president. No matter what congress is doing or not doing. Because our love of and loyalty to our home is about more than what it is today. It's about what it has been and what it can be.

As the Independence Day holiday looms, I found myself reading this story from the *Book of Daniel* and wondering about loyalty and how far our loyalty goes.

If you're here in Church then your faith in God must be important to you. God is great. All that we have and all that we are come from God. We celebrate that because of Jesus Christ, in God we are given new life and our worst sins are forgiven. We have every reason to be loyal to God, and throughout history men and women have given their lives rather than betray God or deny their faith.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were three who did just that.

The setting for their story is the Babylonian exile. Now remember, when Israel was conquered by the Babylonian Empire, many of their people were carried away into exile. Part of this was slavery, certainly. It was common for a conquering nation to claim the residents of the conquered state as slaves. But a victorious King would also bring back the brightest and most talented people in a conquered nation to enrich his own kingdom. After World War II, both the Americans and the Soviets recruited German rocket scientists to come and build-up their respective space programs.

Likewise, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are three Israelites who have been identified as competent, knowledgeable, and wise. They have been taken from Judah and brought back to Babylon to serve King Nebuchadnezzar. They excel for their captors, much like Joseph did in Egypt before them, and they rise to a high rank within the Kingdom. Their names are changed to reflect their place within Babylon. Most people don't remember that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are not their given names.<sup>1</sup>

But while they are serving in Babylon, like Daniel, they remain loyal to the God of Israel. So, when the King commissions a statue and orders all the people to bow down and worship it twice a day, these three choose not to. The punishment for not obeying the King's command is a cruel death in a fiery furnace. Yet they still ignore the order.

Initially, this is not an issue. They do their work, the King is pleased, when the twice daily worship times arrive, they make no fuss, but they do not bow down either. Until at some point they are noticed. We don't know, but someone turns them in to the King. "These pay no heed to you," they say, "They do not serve your gods and they do not worship the golden statue that you have set up."

And it's hard to tell whether the King is enraged because they do not worship as he does, or because they disobey his order. My hunch is it's the latter. By not worshipping, they challenge the King's authority. But either way, he is angry. He has said categorically, that "Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire."

Now let's think about that for a second. We're not just talking about execution for a capital offense. We're talking about a torturous, cruel fate intended as much to threaten by terror as to punish. Who would risk such a thing? Better to just bow down even if you don't really worship, right?

And there's precedent for that. In *2<sup>nd</sup> Kings*, where Naaman, the commander of the Armies of Syria visited the great prophet Elisha who cured him of his leprosy.<sup>2</sup> And in response, Naaman pledged himself to worship and serve only the God of Israel. But he will be working for a master who worships the gods of Syria. So, before he departs, he says this to Elisha:

"...Please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord. But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel 1:1-7, NRSV

<sup>2</sup> 2 Kings 5:1-19, NRSV

I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count.”

Essentially, he knows that he will still have to accompany his master to worship a god other than Yahweh. When this happens, he wants Elisha to know that he will not actually be worshipping those Syrian gods.

Elisha responds, “Go in peace.”

So, we know that we can draw a distinction between the physical act of bowing down and an act of worship. It is entirely possible that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego could have just bowed down at the appointed time and not worshipped this statue. It would have helped them avoid persecution and allowed them to continue living to do the good work and will of God.

But the second commandment says that you shall not make any graven images and you shall not bow down to them in worship.<sup>3</sup> It is very clear, that what Nebuchadnezzar is doing is demanding Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego violate both parts of that statute. It would have been easier for them to pretend. But as is typical of these “heroes and sheroes” of the Bible, the easy way is not *their* way. They are loyal to a fault.

So, when the King calls them on the royal carpet and demands that they bow down to this statue, they reply thus:

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. 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.”

In other words, if God will save us, God will save us. But, regardless; even if God chooses not to, we will not worship your statue.

Now that is more than a statement of faith. That is a statement of loyalty. And it’s a statement of faith and loyalty that admits real doubt. Old Testament Scholar Sib Towner tells us that:

*“The dominating motivation in the hearts of [these three] is their utter loyalty to the first and second commandments, their utter refusal to participate in idolatry. Now, they are not so sure that God can save them from such a hopeless situation, but they know what [God] demands in any case. They are clear on what they must do, and it is that clarity and not their impending deaths that makes them immortal figures.”<sup>4</sup>*

Like many of the great stories of the Bible, this one makes a good children’s story. It’s pretty straightforward: trust God, and God will save. But the deeper story here is about loyalty in the face of hopelessness. It is much darker than the traditional children’s tale because it acknowledges the possibility that God may *not* act to save. It acknowledges what Sib Towner calls “divine inactivity.” What if God chooses not to save us? In a world that has seen world wars, natural disasters, and the genocidal cruelty of tyrants and dictators, the possibility of divine inaction is all too real.

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 20:4-5, NRSV

<sup>4</sup> Towner, W. Sibley. *Daniel*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1984. 52. Print. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.

In the face of that, how do we react? How do we relate to a God who doesn't answer our prayers in the way we would like? What do we do when the desperate pleas of frightened, hurting people apparently go unanswered?

We worship and serve God anyway.

You see, at its heart, this story is about doing what is right regardless of the expected outcome. We do what's right because it is right, not because of what we hope to get out of the deal. We worship God not because of what we hope to gain, but because of what we have already been given.

Reverend William Sloan Coffin is one of my heroes of the faith. In 1983, his 24-year-old son died in a tragic car accident. I can't imagine how horrible that must be or what crisis of faith must follow from something like that. Here is a man who has given his life to serve God as a pastor, and yet even he was not protected from the devastating loss of a child. Yet ten days later, Reverend Coffin stood in the pulpit of his church and preached one of the greatest sermons ever given. In it he speaks to God's love and compassion in the face of grief and he rejects the notion that "God's will" is the source of our tragedies.<sup>5</sup>

I marvel at it, not because it is a masterpiece of theological oration (it is), but because even in his grief, he remained loyal to God. I often wonder if I could've done the same. But, the reason he could is because his faith was built on what God had already done, not on expectations of what God would do next.

God is God and beside God there is no other. God made us and everything that is. God provides all that we need and teaches us how to live together as a family of God's children. God expects us to live up to the standards God has set for us and yet when we fail, God is merciful and compassionate. God's love comes without strings or preconditions and it never fails. We are loyal to and give our lives for God because in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has already done that for us.

Even if God never did anything else for us, all of that would be enough to earn our loyalty. That is why we worship and serve God, not because of what we stand to gain, but because of what we have already received.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Coffin, William Sloane. "Alex's Death." *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 3-6. Print.