

Sermon for June 23 Triune Mercy Center

Faith's Freedom: A study of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the book of Daniel

Sometime in my late teens, a book came into my life that changed my personal spiritual connection to God forever. Somehow, I didn't quite know how at that time, that book set me free to be a more honestly faithful person. Indeed, the book was called *Honest to God*. The author was a revered Anglican bishop. It was not his authority that moved me so much as the truth—the honesty-- I received in his words about how to read God's Word.

You see, he said that we did not have to read the Bible solely as history. Instead he presented the idea that God's Word is filled with God's willingness to touch us where we are--by as many different ways and by as many different paths as it takes to fill out our understanding of God's nature and ways.

We know that God's scribes entered into the recording of the holy text with a great deal of factual history, but that they also used other kinds of writing to tell God's story: parables, songs, poems , dreams and visions, to name a few.

We can treasure them all as points of view on the truth of God. According to Bishop Robinson, we have been given the freedom to read the Scripture both literally and poetically. In this, we can be both honest and faithful.

I say all that because today's Scripture lesson is considered by most Biblical scholars to be a folktale or legend with a sprinkling of historical context. And this folktale is full of amazing truths about faithful living.

In case you haven't gotten the theme of today's sermon yet, the theme I hope you will remember is "faith's freedom." Recall that this follows faith's courage and faith's persistence for justice in our "faces of faith" lessons so far.

Our "faces of faith" today are the Jewish prophet Daniel's friends: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—the three men in the fiery furnace!

So now I will ask you to travel with me into this intriguing and relevant Biblical folktale or legend, which was probably passed down and embellished orally, like a campfire story! So, pull up a log and listen to a Word from God contained in the third chapter of the book of Daniel.

But because this is a very long chapter that is based on the previous two chapters, I want to give you a bit of context and then I'm only going to read excerpts.

To set the stage, we are in Old Testament times, around the sixth century before Jesus came. The Jerusalem Jews have been captured by the Babylonians and taken back to Babylon where they are living in exile. It seems that over time they were able to live among the Babylonians in peace as long as they followed the rules of that culture but that can get dicey.

As you might expect, though, some of them hoped to preserve the traditions of their revered Israelite ancestors, people like Abraham and Moses who brought the Israelite people into a covenant relationship with their one God.

There was a small group of handsome and well-educated young men who were particularly living a more traditional Jewish life, which set them apart from their community but who were also quite well-versed in the Babylonian culture.

These bright and shining Jewish fellows, included the prophet and dream interpreter Daniel and his comrades Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. As ideal models of education and culture, they were recruited to be courtiers in the palace of the powerful king Nebuchadnezzar who reigned over Babylon at that time.

The part of this folktale that can be verified as historically factual is the name and reputation of the king-- Nebuchadnezzar. Apparently he was powerful beyond powerful and rich beyond rich, and egotistical beyond egotistical. Somehow, he was still worried about his status—as powerful and narcissistic people tend to do. Before we enter this particular chapter of the story, let us pray.

Prayer

Touch us today, O God, with the freedom that faith offers each of us. May the words of my mouth be faithful to your Word, through Christ ,our Lord, Amen

Daniel 3 (excerpts)

3 King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue...; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. ² Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent for...all the officials of the provinces, to assemble and come to the dedication of the statue... When they were standing before the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, ⁴ the herald proclaimed aloud, 'You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, ⁵ 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. ⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire.' ⁷ Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of ...the entire musical ensemble, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshipped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸ Accordingly, at this time certain Chaldeans came forward and denounced the Jews. ⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'O king, live forever! ¹⁰ You, O king, have made a decree, that everyone... shall fall down and worship the golden statue, ¹¹ and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. ¹² 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.'

¹³ Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought in... ¹⁴ 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? ¹⁵...

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. ¹⁷ 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.^[b] ¹⁸ 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.’

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace to be heated up seven times more than was customary, ²⁰ 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. ²¹ So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics,^[c] their trousers,^[d] their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. ²² 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. ²³ But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counsellors, ‘Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?’ They answered the king, ‘True, O king.’ ²⁵ 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.’^[e] ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counsellors 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^[f] were not harmed, and not even the smell of fire came from them. ²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar said, 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him... ²⁹ 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.'

Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

It's a great story, is it not? Children's books and songs have taken it up. You may have seen or sung them. The three Jewish guys smiling and singing in the midst of fire with an angel by their side! And today we will hear a grown-up song about that fourth man in the fire.

But why did the Jews of Babylon feel it so important to tell this story over and over, handing it down until we have it for our consideration today? What are the lessons planted in the furnace for us?

Often the first lesson we think of and teach is that these guys were models of faithful obedience to God and God only, and in this case, that meant civil disobedience to the powerful king, his court and his gods. These three men confronted lethal danger to stand up for the one true God in a culture of apathy or open opposition.

I wonder if I would? Would you? Do we? Let's look more closely at what the story-tellers and the scribe chose to include in this powerful and important story of faith.

First we have the king and his golden statue. What can we learn from him? It wasn't a statue of himself as a god, but it was surely a statement of who should be worshiped and considered more powerful than all the people and their gods. This is narcissism—self-admiration-- at its very worst! Bow to me, he says, and all will be well! Don't bow to me, and you should be very, very afraid.

Perhaps this can speak to those who today would aspire to that kind of power and acclaim, wielded by fear. Perhaps it describes also those who carelessly or willingly bow to the falseness of that kind of claim. Fear seems to be running the show both then and now. But not for those three men.

I'm sure they were afraid. After all, a fiery death is a fearful thing! It's hard to say exactly when their faith in God kicked in to set them free from their fear so that they would go where their faith was leading them. You may notice that they recognized that the outcome was not assured and they went forward anyway. Somehow their faith found the moment to set them free. They trusted in the goodness of God no matter what might happen.

Our fears can keep us in bondage. In fear, we find ourselves bowing down to false gods like power, money, drugs, media or even our own egos to protect us-- or at least to distract us. Fear, while a useful instinct, can become a false god.

If we bow to fear, we are limited. We stop ourselves from stepping up to right action. Faith in God may be and can be the liberation we seek, but so often, it is fear that holds us back.

I confess that I am not as brave as were the three faces of faith today. But I want to be. A recent episode of the television series *Monk*, which is being rerun, showed Monk with his therapist, almost weeping, saying, “I am so tired of being afraid.” Me too. How about you?

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego brought more than mere obedience to their faithful decision. They brought a kind of trust in God that was unlike any other. They were free, through their trust in God, to do whatever was faithful because they knew that God is always faithful. If only we could remember that God’s covenant of faithfulness is in our genes! We can trust it.

I will just add that it seemed important to me that none of the men went into the fire alone. They went in with their trusted friends in faith. When we decide to face the fires in our own lives or in our world, it helps to know that there are others who will go there with us. We do not have to face the fires alone.

And then there is the so-called “fourth man in the fire” with a godly face. To me that is a reminder that God goes with us wherever we need to go—even into the fires of our lives, especially into the fires of our lives. We are not alone, even if all would desert us. Knowing that is, I think, the essence

of true faith—the kind of faith that sets us free to go where we need to go.

Although our lesson today focuses on the Hebrew Scripture, I can't help being reminded that we have a model of faith's most beautiful freedom in Jesus.

In his lifetime, people set their own personal fires in front of Jesus all the time, but Jesus was not afraid--period. He was not afraid of being fully himself. He was not afraid of other humans, no matter who they were or what they had done, what diseases of body or spirit they had. He was free to meet them in his and their humanity. He was free of the claims of possessions, and the compulsion to protect them. He was free of the rule of all other powers—kings, emperors, even Jewish leaders who sought religious power.

I don't know about you, but I need a strong dose of faith's freedom as I consider my own life and this world. I want to trust God with all my mind and all my actions, but I know that my trust, my faith, is still not strong enough to set me as free the men in Babylon's furnace or Jesus.

I want that though and that is the first step. Don't you want it too? Wouldn't it feel great to go about our lives without fear? With a sense of freedom because we believe God is. And God loves. And God will be with us as we step into the fire.

I long for faith's freedom for each of us today as we confront our fears and the powers of other gods. May God, our Creator, Jesus our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit, our sustainer speak louder than our fear. Amen