

Sunday July 19, 2020
Lesson 7: Our Always-Faithful God
Scripture: Daniel 3: 19-30

Context:

We continue in the Book of Daniel to look at God's faithfulness as the people find themselves in exile. The characters in this narrative are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the companions of Daniel. Daniel is not mentioned and the story focuses on their interactions with King Nebuchadnezzar.

Not much is known about the personal lives of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They are Jews who are part of the Diaspora living in exile in the Babylonian court. The important part of their role is how they will play a part of the theme of Daniel as a book focusing on the ultimate supremacy of God.¹ Their story will have a greater purpose for how the surviving remnant tells the story of God's faithfulness to them in the midst of the exile.

This story reveals the utter ruthlessness existing in King Nebuchadnezzar's court. Earlier in chapter three, the king erects a huge golden statue and orders all to worship on pain of death by being thrown into a blazing furnace.² There are to be no exceptions and everyone is told they must participate. Leaders across the land are commissioned to come and bow before the statue, even leaving their places of command to do so.

Like their companion Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, are pious Jews and remember the laws of their God. As their ancestors were told at Mt. Sinai, there are to be no other gods for the Jewish people to worship. The three men do not come and make no plans to do so.

There is Anti-Semitism brewing in the court and there are those watching those who are Jewish officials. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are some of those officials and they soon become a scapegoat for the tension of those who want to be rid of the Jews. The report of their behavior is brought forward to the king and he is outraged. Because of their direct disobedience, Nebuchadnezzar wants the fiery furnace heated up to the highest levels and burn them.

As the servants carrying the men cast them in, they are killed because the fire is so hot. As the king watches them burn, he notices a fourth man in there who looks as a god. Later Christian scholars would contend this was Jesus while others have suggested it is a heavenly angel sent to protect them; there are not any details given to declare either way. Yet instead of continuing to let the fire burn, Nebuchadnezzar calls for them to come out of the furnace. As they do so, an inspection is made and there are no effects of the fire

¹ Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 527.

² *Ibid.*, 528.

done to them.

King Nebuchadnezzar is so impressed he makes it a crime to say anything negative about the men's God. Then Nebuchadnezzar makes them prosperous in Babylon. The story of the men ends with them in a secure place.

Application

Phrases about fire usually have a connotation of undergoing great ordeals. When we say things like "trial by fire" or "feet to the flame" we can probably imagine times where we or others have gone through something where limits are tested. The hope is that the person (or ourselves) will overcome whatever stands in the way.

I like to imagine these statements come from the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Often relegated to a beloved story to retell at Vacation Bible School, the story has theatrics, fun to imagine. You can see the rage on Nebuchadnezzar's face, the heat of the flames as the servants continue to throw coals, the huddled men in the furnace, and then the awe of the court as the men exit without even a hair singed.

As fun as the story may be for VBS reenactments, the story can also offer a lot of hope to those of us reading the story as adults. The theological premise of this story is God being faithful and the people of God enduring in faith despite the consequences. There's a richness to this text reminding us of the power of God and even the riskiness associated with being a follower of Jesus.

In the past several years, we have seen a focus on what is called cancel culture. In cancel culture, if a person or a group makes a statement or a stand, individuals will band together to "cancel" the person or the group by boycotting their products or their contributions to society. Sometimes the boycott can last days, and sometimes it can last months.

Some of those who are targets continue on in spite of the demands or criticisms. They still do their thing, and they still carry on as business as usual. It may cost them, and yet they will not compromise principles or simply cater to peoples' personal whims.

Much like the text today, Christians should stand against cancel culture because it isn't very Christ like. You can stand for something and believe in it and you should have the right to do so. You can hold a person or group accountable and still stay in a faithful relationship dealing with conflict and being open to hearing one another.

Following Christ means we take the risk to serve our God and worship only God even when other voices are screaming at us. At times it demands we throw down our other allegiances and walls we erect and seek to live genuinely with God and others. And at times unfortunately, this means we may be the victim of those who do not respect where we stand or what we believe.

I will never forget hearing about a meeting in which a person started making demands about the protection of the company for them to make bold statements and to do risky things which might alienate other people in the company and the community. Another individual told them they should do them if they felt so called; and remember martyrs. The idea of the "bloodless" martyr sounds nice and yet it's an oxymoron. A martyr might not die, but they sure do lose some blood in the process.

As a people of faith, we are also called to be a people of endurance. Just as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego went into a fiery furnace for punishment in not choosing not to break God's law, we too must be ready to endure. The fears of what is to come will be there and the wounds will have their fair share of blood and sweat mixed together. We may get burned, we may get canceled, and yet our reward is a God who is in those furnaces with us.

What are the furnaces of life in which you have found yourself? What does it mean to be a martyr to you? How can we hold faith when things are hard and difficult?

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