

Rev. Seth D Bode + Sermon 289 + Reformation Sunday

"Lord God, You have appointed me as a bishop and pastor in Your Church, but You see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked Your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon Your Word. Use me as Your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all."

"Sir, we would see Jesus."

THREE MEN OF FAITH ARE THROWN IN THE FIERY FURNACE

Sermon Text – Daniel 3

¹⁶Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar, "We have no need to answer you about this matter. ¹⁷Since our God, whom we serve, does exist, he is able to save us from the blazing fiery furnace. So, he may save us from your hand, Your Majesty. ¹⁸But if he does not, you should know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods, and we will not worship the golden statue that you set up."

¹⁹Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and the expression on his face changed against Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego. He said to heat the furnace seven times hotter than it was usually heated. ²⁰He ordered some men, who were soldiers from his army, to bind Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego in order to throw them into the blazing fiery furnace. ²¹So these men were bound in their coats, their pants, their turbans, and their other clothing, and they were thrown into the middle of the blazing fiery furnace. ²²Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace was extremely hot, those men who carried Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego were killed by the intense heat of the fire. ²³But these three men, Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, who had been tied up, fell into the blazing fiery furnace.

²⁴Then King Nebuchadnezzar was startled and immediately stood up. He said to his advisors, "Didn't we throw three men, who had been tied up, into the middle of the fire?"

They answered the king, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

²⁵He said, "Look! I see four men, who are untied and walking around in the middle of the fire, unharmed. What is more, the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods."

²⁶Then Nebuchadnezzar approached the door of the blazing fiery furnace. He said, "Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out!" Then Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego came out from the middle of the furnace. ²⁷The satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the royal advisors gathered together and looked at these men. The fire had no power over their bodies. Not a hair on their head was singed, their robes were not damaged, and the smell of fire had not stuck to them.

²⁸Nebuchadnezzar said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, who sent his angel and saved his servants, who trusted in God and ignored the king's command. They gave up their bodies and did not pay homage or worship any god except their God.

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There once was a monk named Telemachus.

- He shouted, "In the name of Christ, stop!"
- He was not preserved in the here and now.
- Why talk about Telemachus, or the three men in the fiery furnace today?

Faith On Trial Brings Surprises And Blessings

1. Surprises

That men would stand on true God.

- As strangers in a foreign land.
- As beings with an inner sinner.

That God would save through fire.

- A fourth man walked in the furnace.
- The three did not even smell smoky.

2. Blessings

These three men were part of another kingdom.

- This kingdom is untouched by fire.
- This kingdom is by grace alone through faith alone.
- This kingdom belongs to the Ruler over all.

We take our stand.

- What if God does not preserve us here and now?
- God is with us.

There once was a monk named Telemachus. In the fourth century, in the middle of the Colosseum in Christian Rome, he was appalled that there were still gladiator fights. He walked out into the middle of the stadium and

- **He shouted, "In the name of Christ, stop!"**

The crowd balked in surprise, but then broke out in laughter. They ridiculed and jeered Telemachus, and so did the gladiators. "In the name of Christ, stop!" Telemachus repeated. One gladiator slapped him in the stomach with the broad side of his sword. Telemachus rolled in the dust, but got up and repeated, "In the name of Christ, stop!" The gladiator finally ran him through, and Telemachus again gathered himself and shouted his last words, "In the name of Christ, stop!" As some tell the story, the crowd finally hushed and swiftly exited the stadium. This effectively ended all Roman events in the Colosseum. It came at the cost of Telemachus' life.

- **He was not preserved in the here and now.**

It is a sad story, but it shows where people can end up when they take a stand for Jesus Christ and the gospel.

- **Why talk about Telemachus, or the three men in the fiery furnace today?**

This is the celebration of the Reformation, a day when we enjoy what God has done with the gospel in dark times. We don't want to fall into the trap of emphasizing that Martin Luther was this great personality, as if that was the most important thing. We don't want to fall into another trap of thinking it was Luther's "movement" that mattered most. Instead, we want to view the monk of the 4th century as well as the monk of the 16th century as episodes when the gospel stood for something, and when people of faith stood for the gospel. This is true wherever the gospel is preached and wherever the gospel sets sinners free.

Faith On Trial Brings Surprises And Blessings

1. Surprises

That men would stand on the true God... is its own surprise. In the days of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was toppled. The northern ten tribes had been carried off, never to be seen again, and the southern two tribes were exiled to Babylon, a den of sin and unbelief. Babylon under king Nebuchadnezzar had first carried off the brightest and best young people of every nation they conquered, including Israel. They forced them to train under Babylonian education, even robbing them of their names. Daniel was called Beltshazzar, after Nebuchadnezzar's god; and Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were called Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, after false Babylonian gods. They were ...

- **As strangers in a foreign land.**

In such a place for such a time, they were commanded to fall down to a god made out of gold, 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. Everyone was doing it. The music played, the people collapsed to the ground, and the god was worshiped. Only Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were left standing. What's worse, to this command to worship this idol was added a threat. Anyone who did not would be thrown into the fiery furnace, a very common way of destroying enemy prophets in Babylon. Jeremiah lists prophets whom the Babylonians burned to death. But this furnace was hotter than most, stoked to hundreds of degrees.

Can we imagine how scary this was? For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, it could not have been easy. They must have thought how easy it would be to bend the knee. They must have figured that it was just a game of survival, a way to show obedience to the king for a while. Maybe they would be able to get through this, *if they would just bow down*.

- **As beings with a sinful nature...**

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego might have reasoned God would understand. They weren't being asked to become heathen, after all. They weren't tied to a temple service by bowing down. They weren't really going to worship just by bowing, were they? We can understand all of these half-truths in our own sinful nature, too.

We know what it's like to have a chance to take a stand, but we skip the episode altogether. We know what it's like when we should tell someone they're sinning, but we say nothing. We know

what it's like to have a chance to witness the gospel we know and love, but instead act ashamed. Why go on trial if we don't have to say anything?

We know what it's like to realize our sinful nature is not just another ongoing project. It needs to be put to death, that is, mortified, in God's Law. For us New Testament believers, the sinful nature needs to be drowned in our baptism, so that a new man might arise.

That is what happens when faith is on trial – spiritual warfare. For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, faith-on-trial won out, and they stuck out like a sore thumb while everyone else responded in fear of a false god.

Here is where they got something you and I don't always get. Things don't go as we expect when faith is on trial. We act like people will simply resist, but would our sinful nature be surprised ...

That God would save through fire.

When they didn't fall down to this statue, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego received special attention. They had already been promoted in the province of Babylon, so the king allowed them one more chance. The music played, the people bowed down, and the world was intimidated ... except for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The king was enraged. He had the furnace heated to seven times, so that even those who threw the three men into the fire died. It was a failure of the king, an uncalculated risk to intimidate the three as the world watched.

Now Shadrach Meshach and Abednego had no reason to believe God would do this. They knew the king had lost credibility and authority as soon as he commanded them against God's will. But their response included, "even if God does not [save us]." They knew it was out of their hands. They knew it was God's business whether they would live or die. They had a faith that God doesn't really abandon his believers even when everything looks dreadful and deadly. They had the faith of Abraham, who reasoned God could raise from the dead. They had these promises:

- Psalm 56:11 – In God I trust, I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?
- Psalm 118:6-8 – The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? The Lord is with me; He is my Helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man.

They had the same faithful attitude as the apostles:

- Acts 5:28 – We must obey God rather than men.

The furnace probably had two openings, in the top to drop, and in the side to view. King Nebuchadnezzar was part of the audience. He asked, "Didn't we put three men in? But I see that the three are walking around in there, and that ...

- **A fourth man walked in the furnace.**

"And he looks like a son of the gods!" What a surprise! And this surprise was only brought about because of faith that stood firm when it was on trial. We cannot know if this was THE Son of God or A son of the gods. But these men did have God's promises:

- Isaiah 43:2-3 – When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
- Psalm 91:11 – He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.
- Hebrews 1:14 – Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

No matter what, God protected our three faithful men from the fire. Would you be surprised if you knew this was God's angel, or perhaps even better, the pre-incarnate Christ, standing with you? Would you even believe it if you were one of the three? Could you imagine your limbs didn't incinerate, your lungs didn't choke, your robe didn't flake with ash, and that ...

- **The three did not even smell smoky.**

A fire chaplain I know tells me that gold melts at over 1900 degrees Fahrenheit. This fire was seven times hotter. This was a surprise of God you would have to call a miracle. It must have seemed that

these three men were in a different world altogether. But that's where we see **2. Blessings**, isn't it? Isn't that the fact, that ...

These three men were part of another kingdom. [...?] and

- **This kingdom is untouched by fire.**

Don't be surprised by this. All sinners are truly in a much hotter fire. Because of our shame for the true King of kings, and because in our sins we were dead set on serving the god of surviving this world, the devil had front-row seats to our execution. But while we were still sinners, Jesus Christ died for the ungodly. The true King of kings and God on High has snatched us out of the flames. He has suffered a penalty much hotter and much heavier, the penalty for our sins. The darkness and abandonment we deserved, He has felt.. And He has come through the fire unscathed and unsinged, untouched because of His resurrection from the dead. He was truly perfect for us and stood on trial for us. So He has made those who believe part of His kingdom.

- **This kingdom is by grace alone through faith alone.**

How wonderful that is to those who do not work, but trust God, who justifies the wicked! How wonderful to know that though we were often unlike Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, we were not abandoned to the flames of hell. There was no lesser place imagined for those who simply trust, like purgatory. Instead to those who trust God on their dying bed, Jesus says, "Today you will be with me in paradise." To those who trust God, He offers His kingdom. This kingdom belongs to us, because ...

- **This kingdom belongs to the Ruler over all.**

He has established this kingdom the hearts of all who believe in Him. There the battle rages to fight sin and immorality, whether in thought, word, or deed.

So ... **We take our stand.**

We will have a chance to battle the rest of our lives. We will have a chance to battle the devil, who says to sleep a little longer, God will understand. We will have a chance to fight distraction, which says you can check out – this little bit of the sermon isn't important for you. We will have a chance to say, "In the name of Christ, stop!" when we feel our own covetousness, when we wish to steal, to sleep in the wrong bedroom, to hate, to lie, and to deny our own God of free and faithful love. And when our survival instincts kick in, when our faith is on trial and we begin to feel like believing in Jesus might cost our life, how will we answer the question:

- **What if God does not preserve us here and now?**

We can say with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that even if God does not save us, we know He is able to save. And we will not serve the wrong god this day. As for us and for our household, we will serve the Lord.

Once a faithful friend told me about a Christian pastor being held in prison on the other side of the world. My faithful friend asked me the question if God really expects that man to die, for his family to lose him, just for a moment of taking a stand in faith. If I were facing death for my faith, my friend admitted to me, I don't think I would be able to do it. We talked about how being realistic is a good thing. Would you be able to do what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did? Would you be able to do what Martin Luther did and stand firm? Would you be a Telemachus?

I can't answer that for you. But if you're faced with that question, now you know how to prepare. Now you know your sinful nature will embattle you. It will get you wobbling. It will tell you to falter and fail. If you stand firm in faith, God will surprise you and give you blessings. They may not be miracles. The God who can save you with this world's survival may choose to bring you to heaven instead. And you can know that your God is with you.

- **God is with us.**

This is how St. Paul said it at the end of his life:

- 2 Tim. 1:12 – I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day.

So we can say with Telemachus, with Luther, with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and in the name of Christ, Amen. Yes, it shall be so. Amen.