

Friends in Faith: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

Second Sunday after Easter ~ April 25, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Daniel 3:19-28

¹⁹Then 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, ²⁰and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. ²¹So 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. ²²Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. ²³But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire.

²⁴Then 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." ²⁵He 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." ²⁶Nebuchadnezzar 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. ²⁷And 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.

²⁸Nebuchadnezzar 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."

Today, in the second sermon of our Friendship and Faithfulness series, we look at the story of three friends who stood together in defiance of the Babylonian king . . . and were saved by God.

Peer pressure. Conformity. Going along to get along. . . All the Babylonian king wanted from these three friends was that they kneel and worship a golden statue. Couldn't they at least go through the motions? Surely, all their fellow Jews would know they didn't really mean it.

Deliverance

God had allowed the unthinkable. The Babylonian army had made a wreckage of Jerusalem and shipped thousands of Israelites to Babylonia for a life in exile. Among those living in Babylonia, more than a thousand miles from home, were Daniel and three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

The four young Israelites were the cream of the crop from Jerusalem. They were young, educated, and fully competent to serve Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Babylonian empire. Thus, they were summoned to the palace where they could learn the language and culture of the Babylonians. But there was a problem. Daniel and his friends weren't Babylonians! They were

The Book of Daniel

The book of Daniel is set during the time of the Jewish exile in Babylon, more than 500 years before Jesus. Daniel is in two very distinct sections. The first section, chapters 1-6, tells the story of Daniel and his friends. Living in exile, they are pressured to assimilate into the Babylonian culture and religion. All of the short stories that make up this section tell how God delivered his people from harm because they stayed true. These stories came together in their final form about 200 years before Jesus, when the Jews faced similar pressure from a Syrian despot. The stories have a common moral: stay true to Israel's God and you will be saved.

The second half of Daniel, chapters 7-12, tells a similar story about faithfulness and deliverance, but this time in apocalyptic language and imagery that is very similar to what we find in Revelation. The writing may seem very strange and bizarre to us, but it was quite popular during the period 200 years before and after Jesus.

Israelites and worshippers of Yahweh, the one true God. Staying faithful to their covenant with the LORD God, they refused even to eat the “unclean” food of the Babylonians. Nonetheless, these problems were overcome. God gave Daniel the power to interpret the king’s dreams. At one point, Nebuchadnezzar was so overwhelmed by Daniel’s visions that he fell on the ground to worship Daniel! All four of the friends even earned promotions from the king. *But . . .* the pressure on Daniel and his friends to conform to the religion of the Babylonians would prove unrelenting.

Nebuchadnezzar quickly forgot about Daniel’s God and erected a sixty-foot golden statue which he ordered everyone to worship. Just to make sure that no one would refuse, the king ordered that a big furnace be fired up, ready to consume any ‘lunatic fringe’ that might disobey. Despite the furnace, word got back to Nebuchadnezzar that not everyone was going along. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remained defiant. When the king learned of their stubbornness, he flew into a rage. Though ordered to worship the statue, the three friends simply refused. Though uncertain of the outcome, they trusted God. To punish the insubordinate Jewish exiles, the king had the friends tossed into a fiery furnace so hot that it burned up the soldiers who did the tossing. It isn’t very difficult for us to imagine the depth of Nebuchadnezzar’s astonishment when he looked into the furnace and saw four men, not three, walking around the furnace, unbound and unhurt. So he ordered the three to come out of the furnace. They didn’t even smell of smoke. As he had done before, Nebuchadnezzar submitted himself to the power of the Lord God, even outlawing any blasphemy against God throughout the empire.

In the world, but not *of* the world

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were administrators in the Babylonian government. Clearly they were “in” the world, making their way through the dog-eat-dog world of imperial matters. But still, they were not “of” the world. They didn’t surrender one bit to the Babylonian demands. They did not adopt the ways of the world around them, at least those that would have undermined their covenant with God. Where did they get the strength to stand strong?

When Nebuchadnezzar saw a fourth person in the furnace, we are reminded that God has been the friends’ companion through all this. It is God who saves them from the furnace. But there is more. The three men share not only the bonds of friendship, but the commitment of covenant. They are people of God, living in deep and trusting relationship with God and one another. Their commitment to faithfulness and to friendship provides them with the strength to withstand enormous pressures to conform, to just go along.

Our Youth Ministry is creating many small covenant groups for exactly this purpose – that the strength of faith and friendship might sustain our youth through their own dangerous social pressures.

The power of three

Whenever Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are mentioned in the book of Daniel, all three are mentioned together. There is not a single instance in which any one of these friends do or say anything apart from the other two. Today, we might refer to these friends as being “joined at the hip.”

Early in the last century, the sociologist Georg Simmel wrote extensively about the power of three. He noted that three close, mutually supporting friends or loved ones can create a bond capable of withstanding troubles that might crush a pair. In the touching movie, *About a Boy*, young Marcus knows that he and his troubled mom can’t make it on their own. As he puts it, “we need back-up . . . everybody needs back-up.”

The exiled Jews living in Babylonia had three choices. They could give up their Judaism entirely, fully embracing the religion of their Babylonian neighbors. They could accommodate themselves to the Babylonian culture and demands, perhaps not turning their backs on God entirely, but making whatever changes were needed to get along with their new “masters.” Or . . . they could stay defiant. They could choose the path of most resistance and simply refuse to diminish, in any way, their commitment to the LORD God, to God’s covenant with them, or to each other.

We can be sure that some exiles gave in entirely and that others took the path of accommodation. But some, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego found in their bonds of friendship and faith, the strength to withstand the threats and the pressures. Their trust in God endured.

Daily Bible Readings

(more stories about the defiance of Daniel and his friends)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Daniel 1 Daniel and his friends are ordered to eat palace (unclean) food	Day 2 Daniel 2 Daniel interprets a dream for Nebuchadnezzar
Day 3 Daniel 4 Daniel interprets another dream	Day 4 Daniel 5 The writing on the wall!
Day 5 Daniel 6 Daniel is tossed into the lion's den	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

Are You Part of a Sunday Morning Class?

Sunday School classes have always been a vital part of United Methodism. At St. Andrew we offer a wide variety of adult classes. There are nearly twenty different classes! Whether you are looking for a discussion-oriented class that focuses on the Bible or a class that emphasizes parenting or even a lecture-oriented class, there is something for you! Information on the classes is available at the information counter in the Narthex and also on-line at www.standrewumc.org.

Please visit one next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

My third (and last!) son just turned fourteen. I know something about peer pressure. It is easy to recognize the pressures that teenagers can come under. What is cool? What's not? Who's in? Who's out? All parents face a big challenge in helping their teenagers navigate through it all. But it would be a mistake to think that it is only our teenagers who must deal with peer pressure.

"Keeping up with the Joneses" is a cliché for a reason. All of us want to be accepted, to fit in. In and of itself, this is not a bad thing. The question is with whom do we want to fit in? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego made their choice. They were part of God's covenant community and there they would stay, even if it meant being tossed into a gigantic barbecue.

There are at least a couple of steps involved here. *First*, we have to do our best to learn what behaviors and actions will weaken our relationship with God and one another. Scripture is the primary means of our learning, but not the only means. We also learn from our experiences, from Christians both living and dead, and from our own reasoning. *Second*, once we have an idea of what it means to live as God would have us live, we have to find the strength to actually do it, to withstand the pressures to conform to a culture that may have little interest in being true to God.

How do our friends in faith, those living with us as God's covenant people, help us to resist the temptation to give ourselves over entirely to the ways of the world? You might relate some specific occasions when Christian friends have helped you avoid a big mistake. When have you helped others in this? We might think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as a small covenant group. What is a covenant group? How can small covenant groups help us to stay faithful to God?