

## **“In the world but not of the world...”**

A Remembrance Sunday Sermon by  
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4 November 2022

Scripture: Daniel 3: 1-30

*Summary: As Christians we are called to be in the world but not of the world. That's easier said than done. Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego found themselves in Exile, trying to live faithfully and honour God in a culture of shifting values and idols demanding worship. These three young, godly men offer us an opportunity to reflect on what it means to find hope in God, even during the most difficult and challenging circumstances.*

It's a joy to be with you here today at Oakridge Presbyterian Church on this Remembrance Sunday. Our preaching text today helps us explore the complicated question of faithful witness and action in a fallen world, one where those who follow God are brought into conflict with the powers and principalities of this world.

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Now, in order to make sense of this story from Daniel we need to set it in a broader sweep of God's salvation history. We have the people of Israel entering the promised land after Moses' death on Mount Nebo. Joshua's leadership eventually yields to the Judges and then the people get jealous that everyone else seems to have a King but them. God half-heartedly grants them Saul as King who is a disaster, followed by the brave but flawed David and finally the Kingdom flourishes under Solomon. From 1020 BC to 922 BC, life is good under David and Solomon, but after Father and Son shuffle off this mortal coil the Kingdom falls apart, literally breaks into two – Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The people fall away from God – and God as covenant maker and covenant keeper calls the people back to faithfulness again and again through the prophets. The people do not listen. Finally, in 722 BC God gives Israel into the hands of the Assyrians and in 586 BC the southern Kingdom of Judah including Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians.

Now the Babylonians had a clever way of conquering a foreign land. They would skim off the top of society the best and brightest of the military, religious leaders, business and government folks and take them back to Babylon (roughly modern-day Iraq). This action served two purposes. First, by removing the leadership the chance of rebellion was diminished. Second, once back in Babylon these folks would be enticed into jobs within the Babylonian Empire...nice condo, free camel rides, and so forth. Many of the five to ten thousand Israelites who were taken to Babylon did indeed assimilate into the Babylonian empire receiving good jobs, good pay, and a nice invitation to King Nebuchadnezzar's Christmas party.

Included in this group are Daniel and his three buddies, Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego...or as real estate agents refer to them “My shack, your shack and a bungalow.” They all graduate from Nebuchadnezzar’s equivalent of the Western’s Ivey School of Business MBA program and get jobs in the administration of the Empire. Life is great until one day Nebuchadnezzar decides to build a national worship site – a statue (height was six times greater than its width) ... something a little like Nelson’s column in London or the Brock monument in Niagara. Nebuchadnezzar orders all his people to bow down and worship the idol. Hmm, for as integrated as Daniel and his three friends have become in the local culture, they certainly have not forgotten both who and whose they are. The God of Israel would not permit them to worship idols...they remember growing up and hearing their elders tell the stories of Aaron and the golden calf in the desert. So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego all refuse to bow down. They are taken before the King and ordered to bow down and worship. The three buddies refuse and in a remarkable act of speaking truth to power, declare that if God saves them that’s fine...but catch this...this is unusual...*even if God does not rescue them, they will remain faithful to God unto death.*

Imagine how these three young men felt standing before the most powerful man in the known world and saying no to his demands, knowing that their very lives were at stake. The King flies into a rage (one thinks this was a common experience) and orders them thrown into the fiery furnace.

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I remember hearing this story as a child and my eyes were as big as saucers. Wow! I thought in that little Sunday School classroom – how brave Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego were in facing the King. At first, this appears to be a straightforward story of danger and how God rescues us. Over the years I’ve thought of the Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego story in the Bible – when facing various trials and tribulations. I recall at my Ordination interviews being asked a rather odd question, “When has your life been in danger and how did God save you?” Isn’t that strange? I was hoping for something more cheerful like if you were a vegetable what would you be? Or if you could have dinner with any of the Reformers, who would it be and what meal would you have – John Knox...Haggis.

I told them the story of my time serving as a missionary in Africa and having an accident in South Sudan. We were in a political no man’s land – in control of rebel forces working with the Sudanese Council of Churches – our vehicle hit a fence and was surrounded by angry villagers. They were reaching into the truck and trying to pull us out. I remember praying with the mission team and just when things were about to go from bad to worse two village elders appeared, the angry crowd simmered and parted, and we negotiated our way out of the situation. It was like being rescued from the fiery furnace.

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But the more I prayed over this story and reflected on what God was saying to me the less I thought it was simply a story about God's rescue in a time of danger and more about a story of faithfulness in the presence of national idolatry. The reason Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego get into such trouble is because of their refusal to bow down to a nationally sanctioned idol. They will not give their praise and worship to *anything or anyone other than the living God* – Yahweh, who we, as Christians, know through Jesus Christ.

Presbyterian students at Vancouver School of Theology where I teach as Professor of Mission Studies learn the ancient Creeds of the church as well as the subordinate standards of our tradition. After exploring the Westminster Confession, we move onto the little-known Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation. The 1955 Declaration wrestled with the role of the believer in the state – something that led to Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego being tossed into the fiery furnace. Over twenty years after the First World War, after a decade of Fascism in Europe and in the midst of another global war, Canadian Presbyterians looked at our only subordinate standard, the Westminster Confession and found it sufficiently vague enough on the question of our role regarding the state as to ask for clarification. I suppose the Westminster Confession is fuzzy on this since it was the need for the Scottish army in the English civil war that even brought our Church of Scotland ancestors to the table in the 1640s in London. The process for Canadian Presbyterians started in 1942 with overtures from the Presbytery of Paris wanting to get a sense of whether to participate in public services of worship called for by the state that did not mention Jesus Christ – a little bit like the Swiss Air memorial or the 9/11 memorial on Parliament Hill.

The 1955 statement took a keen interest in the 1934 Barmen declaration that was made by Karl Barth and those pastors in Germany who were concerned about the influence of the Nazi regime on the national church.

The 1934 Barmen Declaration states: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."

There was a clear sense post-war that as Reformed Christians we need to have a Christological understanding of Church and State.

This tension is a reminder that we as Christians are what Stanley Hauwers and Will Willimon called, "Resident Aliens." The 1989 book *Resident Alien* encouraged Christians to understand their citizenship in Heaven not a particular country on earth – a reminder that instead of trying to change culture we are to be more faithful to Jesus Christ wherever we find ourselves.

Will has said to me that the reaction to the book and its popularity over the years surprised him, but it must have hit a nerve. Indeed, across the West, and around the world we are trying to figure out how to be faithful in this world but not to worship idols instead of God – no matter what the cost.

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Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faced their time of trial with courage and faith and are thrown into the furnace. And then, the most astonishing thing happens, instead of being consumed by the fire, they are seen walking around, unharmed and unbound with a forth shadowy figure that has look and feel of a divine being. If you think these three Jewish boys were amazed, King Nebuchadnezzar is totally blown away. He orders them to be plucked out of the fire and when he sees that the three men are unharmed he is transformed and converted to belief in the God of Israel. The three guys demonstrated a firm faith in God, as well as God's sovereignty to act. Their belief was not dependent on a happy ending...whether they lived or died they testified to the power of God. They were not holding on in hopes of a miracle...they simply placed their trust in a time of danger in God's hands and God's grace.

In many ways it marks the difference between Hollywood heroes and Christian Saints. Sam Wells, Vicar of St. Martin's in the fields, London writes in his excellent book *Improvisation: The drama of Christian ethics*, "Of those sixty-four references to saints in the New Testament, every one is in the plural. Saints are never alone. They assume, demand, require community – a special kind of community, the communion of saints. Heroes have learned to depend on themselves; saints learn to depend on God and on the community of faith."

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There is a lesson here for us when we consider our own fiery furnace how we react during times of fear or danger. For throughout Church history people have looked to this story of faith to find strength, courage and hope during times of trial. From Revelation 18 where the Roman Empire is compared to Babylon to Martin Luther's famous "Babylonian captivity of the church" to the civil rights movement or the struggle with Apartheid to the Black Lives Matters and #MeToo, people of God have drawn strength from Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's ability to speak truth to power and trust in God no matter what. In all of the stories you can trace God's loving presence in the midst of crisis...including my experience in Sudan where two village elders, like a divine presence in the fiery furnace, walked into the fiery mob and restored calm and order allowing us on our way, shaken but alive.

I was given a book a while back from a member at Richmond Presbyterian Church when I preached there called *The Tartan Pimpernel*. I know, silly title. But it was awesome. It is the true story of Rev. Donald Caskie, a Church of Scotland minister, who in 1940 when the Germans invaded was serving at the Scottish Church in Paris. I knew there was an American Church in Paris, I'd visited there but I didn't know about

the Scottish Church. Rev. Caskie tells the harrowing tale of fleeing to the coast and then in a moment of revelation turns back. He heads south to what eventually becomes Vichy France, that nominally independent part of conquered France, although the authorities were clearly taking orders from the Nazis. Caskie made his way down to the south coast of France and opened a seafarer's mission to minister to those in need. He also contacted British Intelligence and ran a covert operation as a minister to sneak downed airmen and British soldiers still hiding, who missed their exit at Dunkirk, over the border through Spain to Gibraltar and home. This guy got thousands of people out all the while continuing to preach weekly, administer sacraments and offer pastoral care - amazing. And, as you'd suspect, eventually he was caught. He was first imprisoned in France. While in prison, his bible confiscated, he prayed and recalled Scripture verses that he'd memorized over the years. He carved in the wall the words from Isaiah 43, "Thus says the Lord, fear not I have redeemed you I have called you by name. You are mine."

Later Donald was transferred to a more depressing prison in Italy. One day a prisoner was thrown in the same cell. He introduced himself and said he was just brought from France. A member of the resistance with dangerous knowledge in his head, he had considered taking his own life in that French prison. "What made you change your mind?" Donald Caskie asked. "I looked up on the wall of my cell and someone had carved the words 'Thus says the Lord, fear not I have redeemed you I have called you by name. You are mine.' I took it as a sign..." God's saving presence in a time of trial.

I don't know what dangers or fears you are facing today. I don't know what the fiery furnace might look like in your life. I don't know if it's a workplace fear, a family fear, money danger, or a bad diagnosis but what I do know is that in the midst of your trouble God in Jesus Christ stands with you, the presence of the divine other and the divine comforter. Call on his name this day or any day in the future and you will never be alone. For as the great hymn of our faith moves us to say:

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home.  
Amen.