

Faith Under Fire
Sermon on Daniel 3
Pastor Julie McCain, Dec. 3, 2017

Please pray with me. Speak, O Lord, in words that we can hear. Open our hearts to your word, and plant the light of your grace deep in our hearts. Amen.

I used to be quite afraid of heights, and because of that, I'll always remember the first time I did a high ropes course, like the one you see on the screen. **[HIGH ROPES COURSE]** Who knows how high up in the trees it actually was, but to me it felt like we were hundreds of feet off the ground! It took quite a lot of coaxing even to get me to climb the rungs to the start of the course—the only reason I finally agreed was because our pastor went right behind me and told me not to worry, because if I fell, he'd fall right along with me and cushion my fall. And let me tell you, there are few things more comforting than the assurance that if you're going down, at least you're taking your pastor with you! Right?! LAUGH!

So, up I went! But standing at the top of that platform nearly paralyzed me. The first thing you had to do was appropriately called the leap of faith, where you had to jump what appeared to be a giant chasm. Sure, I had a harness on, but how did I know I could trust that thing?! I was so afraid that everyone else went all the way through the entire course before I finally worked up the courage to jump. Even then, there were quite a few false starts, as I reconsidered whether I really wanted to leap to my death.

Trust is a hard thing to learn, even when our lives aren't on the line. And yet when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego lives are on the line, still they trust in God.

That might be because this isn't the first time their faith had been tested. You see the reason they were living under King Nebuccadnezzar is because Babylon had conquered them & forcibly moved them.

- As a part of that inculturation process, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, all had their names forcibly changed as well. **[HELLO, MY NAME IS]** Their names had meant: "God is gracious," "Who is like God?" and "God keeps him."¹
- But after they're changed? Well, Abednego means servant of Nego, who is a Babylonian God. The other names have similar meanings.

Imagine then, how it would grate against Abednego's ears to hear himself called by his new name.

- Servant of Nego, come here! Servant of Nego, will you be around for dinner tonight?
- You can see how it would wear a person down.

Maybe Abednego developed some sort of a response:

"Hi, Servant of Nego, how are you today?" And under his breath, perhaps he would whisper: I am the servant of the one true God. I worship only him.

¹Juliana Claassens, "Commentary on Daniel 3," workingpreacher.org.

→For them being faithful took concerted effort; it meant swimming upstream, going against the grain.

By the grace of God, every day, they had to wake up and recommit themselves to faithfully following God. How much easier it would have been to just give in—bow down and worship the statue already!

In our lives, too, it takes considerable intentionality in order to follow God. We are pulled in so many directions and so often, our idols **[IDOL]** are not 90 feet tall, but rather, are built of little choices, here and there. Choices that seem harmless enough.

- Just last week I realized that I spent so much time on facebook in the morning that three days in a row I didn't have time for my morning devotions. Facebook was getting in the way. So I started not looking at facebook until 9.
- I also really like shopping, and I do most of my shopping online. But that too can be a black hole. How often I sit down for what I tell myself will just be a few minutes, and before long I have spent several hours clicking through deals. And that's all well and good if that's what I'm using to relax, but my red flag is that sometimes shopping starts to make me feel like I need more of everything. It quickly plant seeds of dissatisfaction in me.

And that, that is my cue that I am starting to make an idol, and so what I did is I set aside my online shopping for a few days and picked up a book.

Now these things aren't bad in and of themselves; in fact, they can be quite good. They only become problematic when they get in the way of our relationship with God or plant those seeds of dissatisfaction. So I encourage you to do a little investigating in your life, and if you find an idol of your own making, pray about it, and see how God might help you dismantle it.

Turning back to the story, King Nebuchadnezzar brings Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego in to answer for not bowing down to his statue. And did you notice that all the way through the reading, their names are together? Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego! It has a nice ring to it. I'm guessing it might just be indicative of the way they lived their lives of faith—always together, always supporting each other.

And here I think Nebuchadnezzar misses a significant opportunity:

When he calls for them, he does so together. **[HANDS TOGETHER]** But if he really wanted to break them, he should have separated them.

And as you saw in the children's sermon, a cord of three is not quickly broken. That quote comes from Ecclesiastes 4:12; in the new living translation, it says it this way:

"A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken."

That is what it means to be the Body of Christ together. It means that not only is the Holy Spirit with us wherever we go, but also residing between us, binding us together.

- Can't you just imagine that as they were being brought to Neb, that at least one of them was shaking? That one of them was asking if they could just bow down with

their bodies but keep worshipping their real God in their hearts? They absolutely needed each other in order to stand strong in their faith.

And so too do we. Being a part of the body of Christ means that we are never alone! For when our faith falters, there is always someone beside us, someone to borrow a little faith from for a while.

So as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego go to face Nebuchadnezzar, perhaps arm in arm, the king asks why they won't bow down to his statue.

And what strikes me about what they say is that they do not know if God is going to deliver them.

→ Or rather, they don't know if God is going to deliver them in the way that they'd like.

They are realists, and I appreciate that.

Like us, they don't know what form God's deliverance will take.

But as I pondered their story and wondered what kind of a faith you've gotta have to walk right into those flames, **[FLAMES]** I couldn't help but be reminded of Isaiah 43:

When you pass through the waters, or the rivers, or even the flames I will be with you.

For I am the Lord YOUR God, the holy one of Israel.

And with them God is, and in a way they couldn't even have imagined.

- Showing up in physical form, right there in the fire with them. But that's often the way it goes. God shows up in bigger and wilder ways than we could've imagined; each time, it gives us a little more courage for the next time we've gotta walk through the fire.

The trouble is that our lives are filled with uncertainty:

- Shadrach Meshack, and Abednego walk into that fire not knowing if they'll ever walk back out,
- And I jumped off that platform quite unsure if I'd make it to the other side
- And I'm sure you could make your own list of uncertain things in our life.

But in the midst of all that, one thing will always remain certain:

The Lord our God, the Holy one of Israel is WITH US.

And *that* means that we've got nothing to fear. Amen.