

Faces of our Faith: ***Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego***

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Daniel 3

We end the *Faces of Our Faith* series this morning and we have covered some ground! 10 books of the bible, 19 characters, six preachers, and six personal stories of the people who inspired our own faith journeys. It's been quite a summer.

We end our series with three fellas who were prominently featured in my Southern Baptist upbringing. I am talking about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, as the song from my childhood goes..."three faithful boys...who wanted to know how to grow...in the love of the Lord." If anyone ever wonders if our kids are listening, let me assure you that I was taught that song 30 years ago and until the last few weeks had not thought about it since then, but it revealed itself readily. I knew they were thrown into a fiery furnace, but to be perfectly honest, I never learned too much about the Book of Daniel beyond the furnace, the lion's den and some scary apocalyptic words that come later on.

All of the stories in Daniel are set during the Babylonian Exile. A quick refresher is that as the kingdom of Israel broke into two, the northern kingdom was first conquered in 722 BCE by the Assyrians and eventually the Southern Kingdom fell in 586 to the Babylonians. The Babylonians came in and deported the people back to Babylon, or modern day Iraq. The people were ripped from their homes and jobs and the Temple and sent in three waves to Babylon. And the conquering emperor was none other than King Nebuchadnezzar. He was a larger than life figure in the empire as you can imagine. He held the ultimate authority and wielded it with cruelty, oppressive policies, and military strength.

But what's super interesting is that the book of Daniel was written down centuries later—around 165 BCE, another time when the Jewish people were being persecuted again, by another oppressive regime.

They were back home now, but they faced empire after empire who ruled over them. And when the book of Daniel was written down, Babylon was a memory—an important one, but the empire of the Seleucids loomed over them during the writing. With that empire, they couldn't read Torah, couldn't keep the Sabbath, the Temple was desecrated with a slaughtered pig by the ruler of the day, and their every breath was threatened.

This setting was when writer set quill to parchment to write down the book of Daniel. We must consider both the time of writing—why would they write it down right then, and the time that it tells about. Clever writers might write a story set in the past to comment on the current conditions of the day without ever mentioning the current oppressive regime, but everyone who knew—knew what they were talking about.

Daniel as a book of resistance, revealing, humor and hyperbole—and most of all, a book about the steadfastness of God. As one commentator said this week, Daniel is resistance literature.

He continued, “Daniel can seem a little out there but look again and consider that Daniel recognizes that humor is weapon. Humor is one of the most important tools that we have that brings life out of seemingly desperate situations. There’s a deeply satirical dimension to the stories in Daniel. The high and mighty are described as so puffed up and pompous that you can hardly believe it.

Imagine it in the same kind of way you think about modern-day political cartoons, but in Daniel we have words instead of a picture. Consider a political cartoon—the artist finds an official and exaggerates their traits—bigger ears, the way they stand, ridiculous hair. But this portrayal, whether in word or picture is important--as soon as you roll your eyes at that political cartoon, you’ve let the humor in, and you’ve admitted that that person depicted does not have power over you. You might feel threatened by the person portrayed, but as soon as you can roll your eyes, you’re not held captive by them any longer. Did you hear how many times the book of Daniel wrote out the long lists of government officials and musical instruments? It’s there to make us roll our eyes at the spectacle of the king.

Daniel uses humor as an essential tool for survival. If you don’t know whether to laugh or cry, Daniel seems to suggest, try laughing because it comes a gateway to resistance. When you’re under the power of the empire and oppressed, one of the greatest tools is laughter. A person in power and self-inflated, pompous ego, one of the things they hate the most is to be laughed at. Another commentator said this week, “Dictators always shut down the comedy clubs first.”¹

With that understanding of Daniel and King Neb, let’s jump in. King Neb was someone with military might and had destroyed Jerusalem, but here he is portrayed as silly. He gets so angry at a moment’s notice!

King Neb has created a gigantic statue and called together all of the government officials—I’ll only read the list once, but he calls together the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counsellors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, for the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

When they were standing before the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, the herald proclaimed aloud, ‘You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire.’ Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, all the

¹ Working Preacher Narrative Lectionary Podcast.

peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshipped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

That was it. When you hear the royal orchestra begin to play, bow down and worship this statue. Everyone. All the time. Daniel is begging us to eye-roll.

Why does this ruler need everyone to bow down and worship this statue at a moment's notice? Because he wanted to say he could make them do it—for power and control. There were three who refused to bow down and worship because they were faithful to the God of Israel and they refused to worship another god before their God.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, three who had places of importance in the Empire refused to worship the golden statue. Neb was FURIOUS and tweeted, I mean summoned those three to come to him immediately, where he repeated all that they were to bow down at the sound of that long list of musical instruments and if not, they'd be thrown into the fire.

They calmly replied to their boss/oppressor, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up."

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not claim to understand the way God worked and whether they would be saved or not, but one thing they did know was that God was faithful, and even if God didn't save them, they would never worship that golden statue. The three choose to believe in God who is always faithful, even while they are in a place where they must practice civil disobedience. Holy resistance!

Guess what? Nebbie didn't like that too much. He ordered that the fire be turned up seven times higher than normal. His guards led the three into the fire and the guards all died instantly because of the heat. But when Neb and his group looked again, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were walking around in the fire with all their clothes on, alongside a fourth figure, who the onlookers assumed to be an angel.

Neb couldn't believe it! He called them out and eventually issued a decree that no one should blaspheme against the God of Israel and then gave Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego promotions.

Ummmm...thanks King Neb? I doubt they showed up to the first day of their new jobs with a "World's Best Boss" mug for him, but he seemed to think he had just done the best thing in the world, with zero awareness for how his actions, as a dictator impacted all of the people under his control.

The whole story sounds exaggerated and impossible and that's the point.

This story is not written down for the purpose of a good laugh at satire and then to walk away from the realities of the dictators. The people knew what they were facing. They knew the emperor's extreme fiery tactics. But beyond the reality of the dictator, the

people writing down the story did it because it was a proclamation of who they knew God to be—always faithful, even in the midst of the horrifying reality in which they were living.

I didn't know until this week that the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is a favorite one of those who are often leading the way in social resistance. In his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, referenced the trio. Of course, he was writing to white moderate clergymen, pointing out why there was no more time to wait, even though they kept asking him to wait for Civil Rights. King believed in civil disobedience, in resistance of the unjust.

In that letter he wrote, "Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidently sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Neb on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions."²

As if it was providential this week, I stumbled across a post that Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis posted on Instagram. Lewis is a pastor at Middle Collegiate Church in New York City and preached at the Alliance gathering this year. In her post she wrote, "We often say that joy is a form of resistance—it IS. I also think that in its truest form joy is a form of SURVIVAL. We cannot resist if we are not alive. There are no simple answers of "how to be" in this time when we are slammed with atrocities every single day while managing our own day to day lives. It's TOUGH. Whoever you are, wherever you are, and whatever is on your plate, I hope you find space in for JOY in your day today. I hope JOY finds you unexpectedly. I hope that you find a reason to laugh, to smile, to dance, to hug, to love, to rejoice in the gift of life even in the middle of these hot mess times."³

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are three faces of our faith who resisted evil because they knew of the goodness of God. In some ways, we could tell their story with thousands if not millions of names throughout time.

And that's the point. Whether their names were Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, or Perpetua and Felicity and Stephen, or Rosa, Martin, and Cesar, or William Barber, Jacqui Lewis, Mitri Raheb, they are all pointing toward the faithfulness of God who created them, redeemed them, and sustained them still, even in the midst of the heat from the powers of the day.

God's faithfulness is always true. We know the story.

We know the faces of our faith because they are our faces too. Thank God we can see the beautiful tapestry of God's creation calling to each of us to find joy and laughter, to resist evil with good, and to love freely until the whole world knows they are beloved. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail,"

³ Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, Instagram post, Wednesday, August 28, 2019.