

I'm Sorry, I Don't Dance
Daniel 3:14-20, Matthew 5:11
First Presbyterian Church
November 25, 2018 - Reign of Christ

Daniel 3:14-20

¹⁴Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? ¹⁵Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?" ¹⁶Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸But 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."

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 and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire.

Matthew 5:11

¹¹"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon

In the 1994 movie, Clear and Present Danger, Harrison Ford plays CIA agent Jack Ryan. Ryan is assigned by the President to go up against a bunch of Columbian drug lords. He accepts this assignment with every intent of doing it by the book... but his partner, Ritter, has a better idea: and he sets up a covert military operation behind Ryan's back. By the time Ryan finds out about it, a lot of bombs have exploded, and a lot of American agents and soldiers have died... and after almost getting killed himself, he winds up in the Oval Office with a nasty looking cut over his right eye, confronting the President about his own part in the scandal. Of course, the President denies it at first, but when Ryan announces his plan to take what he knows to the Senate Oversight Committee, the President's face goes slack. Then he begins to grin and says: "You're not going to do that, Jack." "I'm not?" Jack says. "No, you've got yourself a chip in the big game now. You're going to tuck that away. You're going to save that for a time when your own life is on the line. Then you're going to pull it out and I'm going to cash it in for you. The country can't afford another deception that goes all the way to the top," the President says. "You'll take the blame, and you will be punished, but it won't amount to much.

A slap on the wrist. You know, Jack, the old Potomac two-step.” To which Ryan says, “I’m sorry, Mr. President. I don’t dance.”

What a great line, right? “I’m sorry, Mr. President. I don’t dance.” And the reason it’s great is that we know he really means it... the viewer knows that Jack Ryan takes absolutely no pleasure in saying it. In fact, from the time he discovered what was going on, Ryan has looked miserable... a look he carries right up to the end when he raises his right hand and swears to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth to the Senate. If he had enjoyed it... if he had relished in causing a scandal or bringing the President down, he would be nothing more than the object of his own devotion. Instead, Tom Clancy’s Agent Ryan is a servant of truth... which was far more important to him than his own comfort, safety, or reputation.

As with all movies, what happened after the credits rolled was anybody’s guess. It was entirely possible that Ryan was discredited and disgraced by a Senate committee kowtowing to the President. But that wouldn’t have mattered to Jack. His purpose was not to become a hero. His purpose was to serve the truth.¹

I think of that scene every time I hear this story in the book of Daniel. In his day, King Nebuchadnezzar was the world’s only superpower... and he set out to establish a “new world order” with him standing at the center. He is ready to impose his purpose by every coercive means necessary... and this might have worked nicely except for this odd community of believers whose first commandment precludes them from having any other ultimate loyalty. “Thou shalt have no other God” the commandment says.² Here is their story. There were three Jewish princes named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Actually, their given names were Mishael, Hananiah, and Azariah – but as “King of the world,” Nebuchadnezzar had renamed them using Persian terms. These three were young men without defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight.³ In fact Nebuchadnezzar had “special-ordered” them from Jerusalem along with a bunch of other young nobles whom he meant to train for his court. He brought them to live in the royal palace, taught them the Persian language and literature, and fed them from the royal table... well, at least he tried to. You see, Daniel and his buddies wouldn’t eat the king’s food... it wasn’t kosher. And though they were princes from a land that no longer existed still they remained loyal to their ways. They asked for plain vegetables and water and oddly they gained weight... and when the king examined them after three years of training he found them so bright and competent that he made Daniel governor of Babylon and put Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in charge with him. This brings us to our reading for today. The kosher food incident should have warned Nebuchadnezzar that his princes had other loyalties... but that became very apparent some time later when the king erected an enormous golden statue in Babylon... nine feet wide and ninety feet high.

¹ This introduction and much of the sermon is adapted from “I’m Sorry, I Don’t Dance,” a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor published in *Bread of Angels* (Cowley, 1997), p. 17-18

² Walter Brueggemann in *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Power, Pain, and Weakness* (Fortress, 1996), p. 123.

³ Daniel 1:4

He invited VIPs from all across Persia to attend the dedication ceremony ... he hired a huge band... and when the day came his herald told all the honored guests what to do. When the band began to play, they were to fall down before the “statue god” and worship it. Anyone who didn’t do that would be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. When the moment arrived... the furnace was stoked... the band began to play... and everyone who heard it fell on their faces. Everyone except the three Jewish princes standing in the back... the same three that the king had placed in honored positions. They stood there like three tall trees while everyone else lay face down in the dirt. They meant the king no disrespect... it was not their purpose to humiliate him. But, “Thou shalt have no other God” meant thou shalt have NO other God... and they simply could not bow down to the statue any more than they could eat the king’s non-kosher food. They served a higher authority... they worshiped another king... and however grateful they might have been for all the king had done for them, they did not belong to him. They belonged to God... and they would worship no other.

Well, no self-respecting “King of the World” could tolerate such behavior and the enraged king ordered them to the front of the crowd and explained the procedure once again. When the band played, they were to fall down before the god and worship it. They could do that or burn to death in the oven. Their decision. According to Daniel, they answered in unison: “We’re sorry Mr. President. We don’t dance.”

They were saved, of course, but not before they spent some time in the oven. For his part, the king was unnerved when he saw a fourth figure walking around with them in the oven – a figure he knew he didn’t put there – and who looked for all the world like a god. And seeing that mysterious fourth one Nebuchadnezzar had a change of heart... called the whole thing off... and promoted them on the spot. It was the best of endings... which Daniel has preserved for all time. And I believe it offers us two very important reminders on this Christ the King Sunday. First, there’s the reminder that along with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, we are people of that first commandment – To us God says: “Thou shalt have NO OTHER gods before me.” As Christians we are to be welcoming people... INclusive people... just last Sunday we talked about our call to show hospitality to strangers. But when it comes to who we worship... what we serve... who we trust with our lives... we are as EXclusive as it gets. We belong to God... we are bound to Christ. We live in somebody else’s kingdom... somebody else makes the rules... somebody else sets the standards. We live in somebody else’s kingdom... and every person must ultimately answer this question – to which kingdom do I belong? We are reminded we are people of the first commandment...

The second reminder we might call the “no matter what-ness” of our obedience to God. When Nebuchadnezzar gave Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego one last chance to change their minds, they did not presume to tell him what God would do... because frankly, they didn’t know. They simply told him what THEY would NOT do. “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter,” they said. “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.”⁴ It was that simple... and for me this is the high point of the story... this moment of sparkling clarity... when these three “faithfully stubborn” men declared WHAT... for the love of God... in obedience to their King... they would NOT do no matter what.

The challenge here... the challenge of being first commandment people... is knowing who and what to say no to. Though for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego the choice was clear... and the price of their resistance was equally clear in the form of that fiery furnace. In some ways it would be easier for us if we had a real enemy like Nebuchadnezzar to say no to. Stick me in front of a 9-by-90-foot golden statue and I may still bow down, but at least I’m clear about what I should have said NO to. Yet, most of us face powers that are much more subtle and nuanced... the foreign gods don’t always look so menacing... in fact, they don’t always look so foreign. We’ve been living in Babylon so long now that it takes special gifts of discernment to recognize them because to us they do not seem like gods... to us they just seem like the realities of modern life: money, success, reputation, power, busyness, body image, status, comfort, security. We are like fish swimming in the water of these foreign gods and we need special tools to recognize them, so we can resist them.

Well, one way you can discern the foreign gods is to pay attention to what is going on inside you... because this is where God’s Spirit abides. Jesus has not left us alone but gives us his Spirit to live in us and to remind us of all he teaches including the wisdom to know foreign gods from the true God. So, my friends, listen to the voice inside you – and when someone in a position of power asks you to do something you are not comfortable with... when someone asks you to cheat or lie and threatens consequences if you don’t... start looking around for a golden statue. The name of the god doesn’t matter since it is not really a god at all. Its only life comes from those who have set it up and made it more important than everything else. So, listen to the voice of the Spirit inside you...

But not only that... listen to the other voices God uses to speak to us – listen to the voice of Scripture heard through reading and Bible study and preaching. Read the Bible daily... be a part of a serious Bible study group... attend worship often to hear God’s word as it is read and proclaimed and sung. Remember, three times Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness and three times Jesus responded by quoting the words of Scripture... words he had heard and memorized and assimilated over many years. Friends, listen to Scripture to help you discern the foreign gods around you... because it is to the spiritually hungry they will offer rich food and drink from their own tables.

And then, make sure to stay in close touch to your sisters and brothers in faith... the preacher in Hebrews implores us do not neglect to gather together... do not neglect the fellowship... because the foreign gods are always looking for converts... and trust me, you and I make their

⁴ Daniel 3:16-18

job so much easier when we neglect our fellowship with each other... we are so much more prone to bow down when we are out there on our own. We'll never know the impact it had on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that there were three of them standing together... resisting together... and yet, I think we can imagine. I am much more likely to do the right thing when I am with people who are also doing the right thing. Call it positive peer pressure or the power of Christian community, but we are so much stronger to resist when we are in the company of others who have the same commitments.

So, on this Sunday when we celebrate Christ as our King, let's all remember the basic pattern. Someone tells you that old god of yours is all worn out... and that out there is one newer and bigger and better and nicer. With this new god there is no more guesswork... no more wondering where it is or what it looks like... because with this new one it is all very simple: when the band plays you are to worship the golden statue.... to thank him for all your good fortune... and to promise him your loyalty from now on. Do this, they say, and good things will keep coming your way. Refuse to bow, and you lose everything. That's the basic pattern – from before time and forevermore. Think about it... memorize it... look for the pattern... and you will begin to see it popping up all around you. Some of us may even get the chance to choose between the golden statue and the furnace. But all of us have the chance to choose which kingdom we belong to... which king we will bind ourselves to. And when we do... when we get that chance... let's remember that there are two gods in this story. One is nine-feet wide and ninety-feet high and located safely outside the furnace. The other is flesh and blood - like us – and is found inside the furnace – that mysterious fourth one who appears to those who obey... those who hold on... those who will not dance. And who walks WITH them through the midst of the fire.