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No Matter What

Daniel 3:14-18, Matthew 5:10-11

Morning Star First Baptist Church

March 1, 2020

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.”

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.

Prayer

Gracious God,
we do not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from your mouth.
Make us hungry for this heavenly food,
that it may nourish us today
in the ways of eternal life;
through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.

Theme: No matter what!

Sermon

In the 1994 movie, Clear and Present Danger, Harrison Ford plays CIA agent Jack Ryan. If you have Amazon Prime, you may have seen the latest Jack Ryan series starring John Krasinski. But “back in the day,” it was Harrison Ford who played Jack Ryan. In “Clear and Present Danger,” the President taps Ryan to go up against a bunch of ruthless Columbian drug lords. Now, Ryan’s a straight-up guy – “patriotic” in the best sense of the word, and he approaches this assignment like he does every assignment: “by the book.” But it turns out that his partner, a guy named Ritter, has a better idea: and he sets up a covert military operation behind Ryan’s back.

\Well, by the time Ryan finds out, a lot of bombs have exploded, and a lot of American agents and soldiers have died... and after almost getting killed himself, he ends up in the Oval Office with a nasty 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 threatens 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... you'll 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? Can't you just hear Harrison Ford saying that? "I'm sorry, Mr. President. I don't dance." Of course, the only reason the line worked was that Ryan took absolutely no pleasure in saying it. In fact, he looked miserable throughout the whole movie until the very end when raised his right hand and swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth to the Senate committee. If he had been enjoying himself... if he had wanted to bring the president and his administration down, it would have ruined everything... and he would be nothing more than the object of his own devotion. Instead, Tom Clancy's Agent Ryan was, as I said, a straight up guy... a servant of truth... truth which was far more important to him than his own comfort or reputation or safety.

As with all movies, what happened after the credits rolled was anybody's guess. Ryan's testimony could have led the Senate to clean up a deeply corrupt administration... or he just as easily might have been offered up as the sacrificial lamb by lawmakers who were kowtowing to the President. Either way, I don't think it would've mattered to Jack... because he wasn't trying to be a hero... he wasn't trying to secure his place in history... he was simply trying to do the right thing... to serve the truth at any cost.¹

I tell you all this because I think it will get you in the mood for Daniel. You see, Daniel tells a similar story in his book and as I tell his story I think you will agree that this ancient book is not so ancient. In his day, King Nebuchadnezzar was the only superpower left. He imagined himself at the center of a "new world order" which he was ready to impose by any means necessary. And this might have worked out nicely except for an odd community of God-fearing people who believed that their God had given them ten commandments. Ten commandments – with the first, and most important one saying: "Thou shalt have no other God before me."²

Here is one of their stories. There were three Jewish princes - you may have heard of them – their names were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

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.

Actually, their given names were Mishael, Hananiah, and Azariah. You see, just like slave-owners in this country took African ancestral names and assigned “slave names” ... this “King of the world,” Nebuchadnezzar ... took those Hebrew names away and gave them Persian names – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Now, apparently these were three good-looking guys... and not only that, they were smart. In fact, they were SO good-looking and SO smart that 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 how to speak and like a Persian... and he fed them rich food from the royal table... or, at least he tried to. You see, Daniel and his buddies wouldn’t eat what the king served up... it wasn’t kosher. So, they asked for and received only plain vegetables and water... and oddly enough, they gained weight. And when the king examined them after their first three years of training, he found them to be the brightest and best of the young princes of Israel and appointed them to his court - Daniel as governor of Babylon and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as his lieutenant governors.

Well, this brings us to our reading for today. The whole kosher food thing should have tipped Nebuchadnezzar off that these princes were different... that they had higher loyalties. Yet, that didn’t become clear until later when the king put up an enormous golden statue in Babylon... nine feet wide and ninety feet high... that’s the equivalent of a nine-story building... which was a very impressive statue when all the other buildings were two stories or less! The king hired a huge band to play at the dedication ceremony... he invited VIPs from across Persia to come see this monument to himself. And when the day came, his herald told all the honored guests just how things were going to go down. When they heard the band strike up, the herald announced, everyone was to fall down before the god and worship it. Anyone who failed to do that would be thrown at once into a furnace of blazing fire.

Now, if you’ve ever been in a pottery studio, then you know what the furnace looked like. It was like a big brick kiln with an opening at the top and another at ground level – big enough for three or four people to walk around inside when it was cold... and big enough to cook the same number when it was hot.

So, when the big moment arrived... the furnace was stoked, and the band began to play... and everyone who heard it fell to the ground in homage to the great god. Everyone, that is, but the three Jewish princes standing in the back... the same three that the king had given training and food and great jobs. They stood there - like three tall trees - while everyone else lay face down in the dirt. I suspect that though they meant him no disrespect, He felt disrespected. Their purpose was not to get the king or make him look bad... but because of that pesky old first commandment, they simply could not bow down to the statue any more than they could eat the king’s food. They served a higher authority... they worshiped another king... and that king said, “Thou shalt have no other...”

Well, of course, no self-respecting “King of the World” could tolerate such behavior... so Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to the front of the crowd and explained the procedure one last time. When the band played, they were to fall down before the god and worship it. They could do that as instructed... or they could roast to death in the oven... it was their choice. And according to Daniel, they answered in one voice: “We’re sorry Mr. President. We don’t dance.”

They were saved, of course... but not before they spent some time in the oven. To make his point before all the people, the “King of the world” had them tied up and thrown into the oven. He watched to see their bodies go up in flames... it takes several hours for a human body to burn... but that’s not what happened. No, what happened is he looked in the oven to see these three, tied-up resisters ... but what he saw was four UNTIED and UNBURNED men walking around in the flames. Needless to say, the king was unnerved when he saw a fourth figure in the oven... a figure he knew he didn’t put there – and who looked for all the world to him like a god. And seeing this mysterious, god-like fourth one, Nebuchadnezzar had a change of heart... called the whole thing off... and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the furnace no worse for the wear. It was the best of endings... and we can be thankful that Daniel preserved for us to read today.

Well, I’m just glad to be with you this morning to remind you of two very important things. First... that WE, too, are people of that first commandment! That along with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, God says to us: “Thou shalt have NO OTHER GODS before me.” And that when it comes to who we worship... to what we serve... there is only one answer: We belong to God... we are bound to Christ. And each and every day, you and I have to answer this question – to which kingdom do I belong... to which king do I bow down? We are people of the first commandment...

But then, there’s a second reminder that follows this and takes it even deeper. Because when we listen to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the point is not just to obey God... but to obey God no matter what. They obeyed – no matter what it cost them... no matter if anyone ever knew they were right... no matter if they died. When Nebuchadnezzar gave them one last chance to change their minds, they didn’t 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... then 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.”³ It was that simple... when these three “faithful and stubborn” men declared WHAT - for the love of their God – they would NOT do... no matter what. It is that simple... but let me be completely honest with you, it’s not that easy. Because the challenge for us... the challenge of being first commandment people... is KNOWING who and what to say “NO” to... it’s knowing who all the “little g” gods are that are trying to entice us away from the one, true capital “G” God. For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego the choice was clear... stay standing up... or bow down with everybody else. I don’t know about you, but sometimes I think it might be easier if we had an enemy like Nebuchadnezzar to say no to... something or somebody that is SO OBVIOUSLY bad or wrong that there was no question what we should do. I mean, stick me in front of a 9-by-90-foot golden statue? I may still bow down, but at least I’m clear about what I’m doing... I’m clear about what I should have said NO to. Yet, I would submit to you this morning that most of the powers we face are not that obviously bad... and that the foreign gods who want our allegiance are much more subtle and nuanced in their approach. You know... that god who says, “Hey, you gotta take care of YOU first...” That god who says, “A little of this over here won’t matter... and a little of that over there never hurt anybody. It’s not THAT bad... nobody’s gonna know.”

³ Daniel 3:16-18

That god who says, “You know, I’m better than you... I’m more successful than you... I’m more Christian than you...” That god who says, “You will never amount to anything because you’re not smart enough or rich enough or pretty enough. You see, my friends, it’s like these foreign gods have come into a room that is brilliantly lit up... they’ve come into this room full of bright, beautiful light... and they’ve gone over to the wall and found the switch and slowly dimmed the lights... slowly but surely, they’ve taken the light down. And we’ve been living in this world so long now that our eyes have adjusted to the “dim-ness” of the light. And in that dim light, we have a really hard time identifying the foreign gods... because they don’t look and sound so foreign anymore. Ya’ll with me?

Well, what this means is that we need to develop eyes to see these foreign gods... we need to develop ears to hear their siren calls to bow down to them. It’s like we need those night-vision goggles that police officers and soldiers use to be able to see in the dark. It’s like we all need those hearing aids that my wife and daughters keep telling me I need. As followers of Jesus, we need to develop special tools to see them and hear them so that 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 ability to know the difference between 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. And, 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... listen to Scripture through Bible study and preaching. Read the Bible daily... be a part of a serious Bible study group... make sure you’re in 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 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 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 how important it was that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were standing together... resisting together... strong together... and yet, I think we can imagine. I am much more likely to do the right thing when I am with other people who are 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, as always Morning Star, you've been more than patient this morning with this white, former-Baptist-but-now-Presbyterian-preacher... and I am very grateful. So, let's wrap this up by together remembering the basic pattern of how the foreign gods operate. First, they find you far from home... these foreign gods, they find you far from home and hungering for something you think you want and seem to not have. They teach you their language and how THEY think. They make you feel important and good about yourself and offer you nice things from their own tables. And then, one day they invite you to a dedication ceremony where they introduce you to your new god. They tell you that "old god" of yours is all worn out... and never there when you need him... but look at this new god who bigger and better... and all you have to do is when you hear the band play bow down and worship. That's the basic pattern – think about it... memorize it... look for it... and you'll 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 serve. 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 is located safely outside the furnace. The other is flesh and blood – just like us – and is found inside the furnace – that mysterious fourth one who appears to those who obey... who holds on to those who hold on... who gives strength to those who will not dance... and who walks WITH us through the midst of the fire.