

## “Cool in the Furnace”

December 3, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Daniel 3: 1, 8-30

### Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,  
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,  
lead us to deeper understanding of you,  
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

A little known fact about your minister is that I have been in about 4 musicals in my life. The stage for each one has been at Berwick camp in Nova Scotia. Berwick is an important place for my soul and apparently a bit magical - because I have never been asked to be in a musical anywhere else.

When I was 13 years old, music directors at Berwick introduced the idea of doing a musical with the youth during the ten days of camp. The first musical we did was entitled “Cool in the Furnace” and it was the story of Shadrach - what kind of name is that, Meshack - who has a name like that and Abednego - oh, oh, oh, oh.

I had never heard of these guys or King Nebuchadnezzar before that musical. What a fun way to learn the story. It was great way to learn the story because I don't ever remember thinking that this actually happened. But just because it didn't happen, doesn't mean it is not true.

Biblical interpretation is tricky and one of the images that I often use to talk about it is to compare the Bible to a newspaper. Within a newspaper there are various types and forms of writing with varying purposes and so we bring different expectations to each. For example, we read the horoscopes with different eyes than we read the letters to the editor. One of the challenges of biblical interpretation is that the different types, forms and purposes of writing are not so obvious or well known in the layout of the Bible.

The story of Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego would be an editorial cartoon or in the comic section. One of the tools that a prophet has is satire and this story from Daniel is magnificent satire.

The story is set in the exile time at the end of 6<sup>th</sup> century BC when the Israelite people have been taken off into exile in Babylon. The story was actually written during another period of persecution in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It is a story about how do you resist a culture that is demanding that you abandon your faith traditions or ethical principles.

In the story, King Nebuchadnezzar has decreed that all citizens are to bow down and worship a statue of him that is 60 cubits high and 6 cubits wide. We may not have heard much about cubits since the story of Noah building the ark. A cubit is an ancient unit of measure equivalent to the distance from tip of middle finger to the elbow. So this statue is about 90 feet high and 9 feet

wide. (The ark was only 30 cubits high!) Can't you just see this statue in the editorial cartoon?

The demand in the story is to break the first commandment of not having any other gods before God - and so the Israelite folk are being asked to replace all the familiar practice of worship which is far away in Jerusalem by instead bowing down to this monstrosity of a statue to a narcissistic king.

But, they don't. Even when they know that they will be thrown into the fiery furnace they do not choose Nebuchadnezzar. The satire of the story even says that the furnace is turned up to 7 times normal heat - and yet these guys still are not deterred. The image of the musical is imprinted on my soul, as Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego sing, "heh, this furnace is cool, cool, cool, cool ..."

While satire, there is truth within this story and it does make you think about the level of faithful resistance that one would endure. How much do we compromise our ideals and principles for convenience, for comfort?

While the story is satire, there is a recognition of truth in it because we know that the danger is real. Dictators do kill. The threat is real. There would have been many in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century - as in every century who have been killed for resisting the power of oppressors and tyrants.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and as we prepare for God's coming anew we watch and wait through the lens of hope. The narrative lectionary offers different passages for these Advent weeks than we are used too. It takes some theological imagination to connect some of these stories with the expectations and themes of Advent. But, when it comes down to it, the story of the guys in the furnace is an proclamation of hope. Amidst persecution and fear, there is a sense of assurance that dictators and oppressors never have the final word. The satire cartoon portrayed in Daniel has a fourth person on the furnace to remind everyone that the god of Rack, Shack and Benny (as Veggie Tales calls them) are not alone.

It is not the God rescues people from the fire, but the story offers an image of resistance and faithfulness.

This is an important story to hear and to know. It is not outdated. It is estimated that there are 65.3 million displaced persons in the world. Within that there are at least 65.3 million stories of struggle and search for identity amidst foreign lands and strange circumstances.

Throughout time there have also been prisoners of conscience who have been imprisoned for not bowing down and compromising principles and convictions. Martin Luther King in his famous letter from the Birmingham jail, speaks of how civil disobedience is sometimes necessary in the face of unjust or misapplied laws. He says, "Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was seen sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego to

obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar because a higher moral law was involved.”

On Wednesday of this past week 12 clergy were arrested in the Senate Hall building in Washington for unlawful conduct. What were they doing? They were reading out some of the 2000 plus verses of Scripture that speak of care for the poor, as the Senate was discussing a tax reform bill.

On Saturday morning, we will have the opportunity to participate in an act of hope, as we gather here for the Amnesty International write for rights event. There are various cases of current prisoners of conscience who refuse to bow down or whose fire of seeking justice and truth is too threatening to those in power.

**Hanan Badr el-Din**, a medical analysis specialist is being held in Cairo's Qanatar Prison. Her crime is searching for her husband who was wounded and taken to a hospital after attending a protest in July 2013. She searched for him, became a human rights defender working for disappeared people. The government claims that disappearances do not exist in Egypt. This involvement resulted in her being arrested on false charges for which she faces five years in prison.

**Clovis Razafimalala**, is an environmentalist in Madagascar. In trying to defend the vanishing rainforest, he has come into conflict with a corrupt network of smugglers who will stop at nothing to silence Clovis and other environmental rights defenders. Authorities have invented charges against him and could use them at any time to jail him.

**Mahadine**, in Chad, posted videos on Facebook that are critical of government policies, accusing the government of corruption and misusing public money. Within days he was snatched from the street in the middle of the day - probably by intelligence officers. He says he was beaten electrocuted and chained up for weeks. He has contracted tuberculosis while in prison. Charged with threatening national security, he now faces life in prison.

These are three - among others - whose names could be Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego. They are not imprisoned for religious reasons, but they are adhering to an innate sense of what is right, what is just, what is true. Writing letters doesn't guarantee a change in their circumstances, but each letter written is a sign of hope that they are not forgotten.

As we ponder the gift and light of hope, we are reminded that this story from Daniel offers a word of life - a holy word of life. It is a reminder of faithfulness in the midst of trouble, hope in the midst of difficult realities, wisdom in the midst of distorted versions and understandings of fake news and distorted values.

It is not likely that any of us are going to face the realities that others face in too many places in our world, but that does not dismiss the challenge that is offered to live faithfully where we are to have no other gods before God. The gods we are tempted to bow down to not have such exaggerated statues, but nevertheless, we are reminded to focus on what it means to worship and to follow a Way, a Spirit, and an Energy that has been revealed in a manger, on a cross and in an

empty tomb.

The gift of hope, the light of hope enables us to live in the present knowing that we not alone, knowing that the life sustaining bread will be offered, knowing that however difficult life may be, we are not alone. Amen.