

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, August 28, 2022**  
**10am**

Text: Daniel 3 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

When I was small a child, I had a set of Bible story cassette tapes. (Yes, for those of you who may feel a little incredulous, I am old enough to remember cassette tapes and dial up internet and phones with cords, too. My first album was Britney Spears' 1999 debut "...Baby One More Time" on cassette. I remember lots of car rides rocking out on my Walkman in the backseat.)

My sister and I shared a room at that time. My parents would tuck us into bed at night, and my mom would pop one of the brightly colored cassettes into the tape player before turning off the light. We would fall asleep listening to a Bible story. And the story I remember the most is this story from Daniel 3 – the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

In retrospect, it's kind of a scary bedtime story. The narrator painted a vivid picture of the fiery furnace. But the story always ended in triumph. I loved to hear about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walking around inside the furnace with the angel, singing hymns to God. It is such an inspiring picture of courage. It is also a profound representation of the presence of God in tribulation.

We have heard three biblical stories of civil disobedience this summer. The first was of the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, who slyly undermined Pharaoh's genocide of the Hebrew baby boys. The second was of Queen Vashti, who refused to put her body on display for the Persian court. And the third is this story from the Book of Daniel. If you haven't caught on already, challenging unjust authority is a Scriptural tradition. This tradition has been passed down through generations of faithful believers, both Jewish and Christian. It is in our spiritual DNA.

In seminary I was required to take three semesters of church history. And in the very first class of my very first week, the professor quoted the following adage: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." The Christian author Tertullian wrote that in the late second century. The earliest Christians were sporadically persecuted by the Roman Empire because they refused to worship the emperor. The empire feared that Christianity would subvert the government. Periodically it would round up groups of Christians, imprison them, and even put them to death. Christians who were executed by Rome saw their deaths as sharing in Jesus' suffering on the cross; they believed that their spiritual reward in heaven would be greater than any suffering their bodies endured on earth. Tertullian argued that for every Christian the empire killed, countless more were inspired to convert to the faith. And so, despite the persecution, the early Church grew rapidly in faith and numbers, and spread to every corner of the Roman Empire.

The persecution of the early Church, and successive persecutions of Christians in different times and places across our two-thousand-year history – these inspire me to carefully consider this line from the Lord’s Prayer: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” A more modern translation goes: “Save us from *the time of trial*, and deliver us from evil.” The time of temptation, the time of trial – these are the times when our commitment to following the way of Jesus is pitted against the powers and principalities of this world. We pray those words together every Sunday, but do we pause to consider their meaning? When I think about the early Christian martyrs who were burned, drowned, mauled by wild beasts, even crucified like Jesus – I think of them praying the same Lord’s Prayer that I pray, and suddenly the words become a sobering reminder that when we follow Jesus, our very lives may be demanded of us.

If that reality makes you uneasy, that is okay. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not go to the king’s furnace with unwavering confidence that God would rescue them from a fiery death. When Nebuchadnezzar demanded to know why they would not worship the gold statue he had built, 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”* (vv. 17-18).

*If*. It's such a little word, and yet it can make a big difference in how we live our lives in the light of faith. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not 100% certain of God's deliverance; there was room for doubt in their profession of faith. And yet, they still chose to stand their ground before Nebuchadnezzar and openly defy him. They did this as young men who had power and privilege within the Babylonian government. They knew fully well that Nebuchadnezzar was a tyrant, accustomed to having his way in all things. He made gold the god of his empire and then built a monolith to its glory. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego possessed a memory of greater value than the empire's gold. They remembered what God had first commanded of God's people: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:2-3).

There are two important things to note about that commandment. First, God is not an impersonal god of wood or stone or gold. God is a *personal* god of *relationship*, a god that has claimed each one of us as His own, a god that is in the midst of His people, leading and providing and comforting.

Second, God acknowledges the presence of other gods. God recognizes that there is always a temptation before human beings to worship something other than the God we call LORD – the God revealed to us in Holy Scripture, revealed to us in the body and blood of Jesus Christ, revealed to us in the faith of our forebears.

I am certain that each one of us has a story about a time that we or someone we know prayed for deliverance from suffering and tribulation and, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that deliverance miraculously came. But for every story of deliverance, we probably have more stories about a time that we or someone we know prayed for that same deliverance and it did *not* come. It is clear where the miracle is in the former, but what about the latter? Where is God when the cancer comes back, the bills can't be paid, the relationship isn't mending, the depression won't lift? Where is God when the fires of life burn and leave their mark? Where is the miracle then?

When my faith is struggling against adversity, when tribulation is upon me, the Spirit is teaching me to reframe the question. Perhaps the question is not "*Where is the miracle?*", but "*What is the miracle?*". What is the miracle in the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? It is indeed a miracle that they emerge from the furnace unburned, without even the scent of the fire lingering on their clothes. But before that miracle there came another: The miracle of their courageous stand before Nebuchadnezzar.

It takes a lot of courage to look power directly in the face and not waver on your convictions. It takes even more courage when you know that power can take away your life. While I like to think I could do what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did, I know myself; I know that the fear of death would be overwhelming. I would probably throw my God under the bus. Denial is human – Peter demonstrated at Jesus' trial – and I give thanks that God's forgiveness is wide enough to cover all the sins that flow from the weakness of our character. But to have the courage that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had – to have the courage that the early Christian martyrs had – to face death for the sake of my faith? Well, friends, that too takes a miracle.

The true trial in this story is not the fiery furnace. It's not any physical or material tribulation that our bodies can and will face in this life. The true trial is the spiritual temptation to deny the sovereignty of God in every aspect of creation. When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," we are praying for the courage of our convictions. We are praying that when we face the trial of our faith, when we face the temptation to deny Jesus, God will give us the courage to stand firm and resist.

That courage is not based on a certainty of our bodily deliverance. Faith is not certainty. Faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is a choice to believe in a reality beyond what we experience with our bodies on this mortal plane. Faith is a choice to believe that God is sovereign, even when it appears the powers and principalities of this world are winning. Faith is the choice to believe that God is sovereign whether we get the miracle we want or not.

We can trust God because God has promised to be with us, in the trials of this life and the glory of the next. God has not only promised us this, God has demonstrated it. God took on human flesh in Jesus, suffered, died, and rose from the dead to prove God's sovereignty over death, so that when we are threatened with death, we do not need to be afraid. Jesus said, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). If God does not miraculously deliver you from the flames, you bet that God will be in the flames with you. This is what it means to worship our God – not a god of wood or stone or gold, but the LORD. Our hope for deliverance is in the resurrection of the dead and the life eternal. And in the meantime, may God give us the courage and the strength to resist the temptation to believe otherwise.

Amen.