

3 King Nebuchadnezzar made a gold statue. It was ninety feet high and nine feet wide. He set it up in the Dura Valley in the province of Babylon. 2 King Nebuchadnezzar then ordered the chief administrators, ministers, governors, counselors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials to assemble and come for the dedication of the statue that he had set up. 3 So the chief administrators, ministers, governors, counselors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. They stood in front of the statue the king had set up. 4 The herald proclaimed loudly: "Peoples, nations, and languages! This is what you must do: 5 When you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument, you must bow down and worship the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. 6 Anyone who will not bow down and worship will be immediately thrown into a furnace of flaming fire." 7 So because of this order as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument, all the peoples, nations, and languages bowed down and worshipped the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

8 At that moment some Chaldeans came forward, seizing a chance to attack the Jews. 9 They said to King Nebuchadnezzar: "Long live the king! 10 Your Majesty, you gave a command that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument should bow down and worship the gold statue. 11 Anyone who wouldn't bow and worship would be thrown into a furnace of flaming fire. 12 Now there are some Jews, ones you appointed to administer the province of Babylon—specifically, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—who have ignored your command. They don't serve your gods, and they don't worship the gold statue you've set up."

13 In a violent rage Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were brought before the king.

14 Nebuchadnezzar said to them: "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: Is it true that you don't serve my gods or worship the gold statue I've set up? 15 If you are now ready to do so, bow down and worship the gold statue I've made when you hear the sound of horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument. But if you won't worship it, you will be thrown straight into the furnace of flaming fire. Then what god will rescue you from my power?"

16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar: "We don't need to answer your question. 17 If our God—the one we serve—is able to rescue us from the furnace of flaming fire and from your power, Your Majesty, then let him rescue us. 18 But if he doesn't, know this for certain, Your Majesty: we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you've set up."

19 Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and his face twisted beyond recognition because of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In response he commanded that the furnace be heated to seven times its normal heat. 20 He told some of the strongest men in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the furnace of flaming fire. 21 So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound, still dressed in all their clothes, and thrown into the furnace of flaming fire. (22 Now the king's command had been rash, and the furnace was heated to such an extreme that the fire's flame killed the very men who carried

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Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to it.) 23 So these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell, bound, into the furnace of flaming fire.

24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in shock and said to his associates, "Didn't we throw three men, bound, into the fire?"

They answered the king, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

25 He replied, "Look! I see four men, unbound, walking around inside the fire, and they aren't hurt! And the fourth one looks like one of the gods." 26 Nebuchadnezzar went near the opening of the furnace of flaming fire and said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fire. 27 The chief administrators, ministers, governors, and the king's associates crowded around to look at them. The fire hadn't done anything to them: their hair wasn't singed; their garments looked the same as before; they didn't even smell like fire!

28 Nebuchadnezzar declared: "May the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be praised! He sent his messenger to rescue his servants who trusted him. They ignored the king's order, sacrificing their bodies, because they wouldn't serve or worship any god but their God. 29 I now issue a decree to every people, nation, and language: whoever speaks disrespectfully about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's God will be torn limb from limb and their house made a trash heap, because there is no other god who can rescue like this."

30 Then the king made Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego prosperous in the province of Babylon. (Common English Bible)

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When I arrived here in 2017, I introduced the Narrative Lectionary. We've talked about this occasionally, but most of you are probably still rather vague about what this is and what it means. The narrative lectionary provides a four year plan for scripture readings in worship. It keeps us in the Hebrew Scriptures until Christmas, in a different Gospel each year through Easter, and in the Book of Acts and New Testament letters until Pentecost. The tool St. A's (and I) used before the Narrative Lectionary was the Revised Common Lectionary, which offers four readings per week and operates on a three year cycle. The Revised Common Lectionary gives the preacher more choices, but also gives short shrift to the Gospel of John.

I also introduced a process of metaphor seeking creative worship planning that we have mostly used for Advent and Lent, and I think, without fail, when our creative worship planning teams have sat down with the Advent passages offered by the Narrative Lectionary they have been quite perplexed at first. A raging king and a fiery furnace? For Advent? A valley of dry bones brought to life? For Advent? Yup. Most of the readings we receive in

*Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery*

Advent were written in the midst of exile or to exiles. That is where we are in the narrative by the time we get to December. And exile is not a bright and cheery circumstance. But Advent isn't Christmas, despite what the shelves in our stores, the lights in our neighborhoods, and the music on our radios might be telling us. Advent is a time of Holy Preparation, of waiting in the dark for the light, of longing, of hope. And if the Book of Daniel feels a bit jarring, perhaps it is the perfect place for us to begin this season.

When this season's creative worship planning team convened, they zeroed in on the way God shows up in the midst of harrowing circumstances to help God's people through. They wanted all of us to focus less on preparing ourselves, and more on the fact that we are prepared, by the gifts of God, and indeed by the gift of God's own self to us. Even if the world we're living in is dark and scary, we've got all we need; our go bag is packed!

Let's consider the folk tale carried to us on the pages of Daniel. In this story three Jews in exile resist an unjust law that is demanding them to violate the first and most fundamental commandment of their faith— You shall have no other gods before me. The emperor built a giant golden statue— 90 feet by 9 feet— a super tall, skinny, golden statue— and ordered that all the diverse peoples within the Babylonian empire bow down to worship that statue whenever one of several different possible instruments were played, and the consequence for disobeying this law was steep— immediate death in a fiery furnace— being burned alive. Lovely.

I want to say at the outset that it matters not if this actually happened. Not all of the Bible is history, certainly not in the sense that we understand history in modernity— there's all different kinds of literature in the Bible, some of which are captivating stories, stories that convey truth whether or not they are literally true. Today's story has captured imaginations for thousands of years... it captured imaginations even before making it into the Book of Daniel. It is a story set in the time of the Babylonian exile, but it was recorded in the pages of Daniel hundreds of years later— Daniel was one of the last books of the Hebrew Scriptures to be written. And the fact that Daniel doesn't even appear in this story is some evidence that it is a story that was inserted into his narrative, but that it had an independent life outside of it. At the time the book was written Jewish people were being horrifically and viciously persecuted— they were subject to unjust laws that put their lives in grave danger should they honor their faith. Given these circumstances, we can understand

why dramatic folk tales that speak to standing firm in faith in the face of unjust, arrogant authority would be useful to tell. It may also be helpful to note that there is quite a bit of humor in the way this story is told. The author is poking fun at the Babylonian bureaucracy and the arrogance of the emperor. I heard one scholar say that it is rather like political cartoons or caricatures— where the flaws of politicians are exaggerated for a laugh. It's useful to laugh in the midst of struggle and oppression. There's great power in levity.

Did you notice how much repetition there is in the story? Memorable stories often use this tool. But the repetition that struck me was the recurrent use of names— the king or emperor's name— Nebuchadnezzar— and the names of the three Jews who resisted his command— Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. We hear these names over and over again... but as the story progresses we hear the king's name less and their names more. The names of three cogs in an ancient bureaucratic machine are remembered, lifted up, repeatedly. They stand alongside a world leader in memory.

But as the story of these three is told, these were not even their actual, given names. They were renamed in Babylon, stripped of their Hebrew birth names and given Babylonian names. Their Hebrew names testified to their faith in the God of Israel— Hananiah meaning "God is Gracious", Mishaël meaning "Who is like God?" and Azariah meaning "God keeps him." Their new names reference the Babylonian gods. Their very names witness to their oppression. In exile their identity, heritage, and religious commitment were deeply threatened. Being commanded to worship a golden statue was an extension of the daily experience, in which one regularly was asked to submit to a lesser authority than God.

But as the story is told, no matter the threats to their identity and even to their very lives, their faith was strong. They tell the emperor— even if God doesn't rescue us from the flame, nothing will make us bow in worship to anyone or anything else. And they allow themselves to be bound and thrown into a furnace made seven times hotter than the norm— so hot it swallows up the beefy strong soldiers who bind them and throw them in. And a messenger of God joins them in the flames, allows them to stand upright and walk out utterly unscathed— not even smelling of fire— humbling the arrogant emperor and witnessing to the power of the God of Israel.

Two scholars I listened to this week talked about how much of the story reads like an over the top cartoon, but with an "utterly arresting, mic-drop statement of faith planted

somewhere in the middle.” As they mused on it, they commented on the absurdity of all the lists and the tall tower and the extreme rage, and yet the life and death seriousness at the heart of the story. They suggested that’s rather what it feels like in the world right now. So much that is happening is utterly absurd and yet the consequences are deadly serious.

And in the midst of this deadly serious, absurd time, there is a need for a witness of faith. A need to pledge our allegiance to God and God alone and stand up for the most vulnerable around us. When we’re stepping into the fire, God gives us a map, guidance for how to get through— If the first and greatest commandment of Jewish faith is “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” the first and greatest commandment of Christian faith is closely related to this, you know it, say it with me if you’d like “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbors as yourself.” “Love God, Love People” to put it more succinctly. “Love” This is the highest command laid on us by our faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. And if anyone or anything is asking us to violate this command, to love something in place of God, or to fail to love a neighbor... we have to resist, no matter the threat, but we must resist in a way that honors the command to love— I think, therefore, that our resistance must be non-violent.

Our map lays out paths of love. And that map is guiding me to finally join those who gather outside the ICE facility for a Blue Christmas liturgy tomorrow evening. I know that it is safer to join the protests in the light, but I will stand with other people of faith in the dark, non-violently bearing witness to the God we worship and serve, and I hope you’ll join me. It’s not a fiery furnace, but it is a bit scary. Indeed, our world right now is very scary. But our bag is packed. We have all we need. We are prepared.

Credits: Both the WorkingPreacher.Org Narrative Lectionary Commentary ([http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3319](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3319)) and Podcast ([http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative\\_podcast.aspx?podcast\\_id=944](http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=944)) influenced the writing of this sermon. I also cite the BibleWorm Podcast (<https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-714-into-the-furnace-daniel-31-30/>) in this sermon.

The Blue Christmas Liturgy at ICE begins with a gathering at Elizabeth Caruthers Park at 6 pm and then a march to ICE at 6:15 pm. There is a qr code in your e-news and on flyers around the church that you can scan for details and to RSVP.