

“All in God’s Time”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Daniel 3:1-30
December 3, 2017 - First Sunday of Advent

It was December 1st, Thursday of the first week of Advent. She left work and boarded the Cleveland Avenues bus around 6 o’clock. She paid her fare, moved toward the middle, and sat down. She chose a spot in the first row of seats behind the “colored” section sign. The bus reached the third stop, in front of Montgomery’s Empire Theater, and several white passengers boarded. The driver noticed that a couple of passengers were standing in the now-filled front part of the bus. So he moved that “colored” sign back a row and told four black passengers to give up their seats. Three of them complied. She slid to the window seat, but didn’t get up to move to where she *belonged*. When the driver saw her still sitting, he asked if she was going to stand up. She said she would not. He told her that if she didn’t stand, he was going to have to call the police and have her arrested. She replied, “You may do that.”

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are remembered for surviving the furnace of blazing fire, but their story is bigger than this scene. When they are introduced in the first chapter of the book of Daniel, these exiles from Israel living in Babylon are given new names by the palace master:

Hananiah — “YHWH is gracious” — becomes Shadrach.

Mishael — “Who is like God?” — becomes Meshach.

Azariah — “YHWH keeps him” — becomes Abednego.

When they arrived in Babylon, these guys had names that were just *way* too Jewish; their names talked about the wrong god. So they were stripped of their identities and given nice, normal Babylonian names. They were in Babylon, they would talk and act and worship and live like Babylonians. They would learn the language. They would become Babylonians in three dimensions. They would adjust to Babylon’s time. And in Babylon’s time, there were zero hours carved out for the worship of the God of Israel.

Here is where we need to consider the history of the book of Daniel. The stories told here take place during the Babylonian exile, and they are stories of Daniel and friends sticking it to the empire in heroic ways. These tales developed over centuries after the exile and were written down during another period of oppression under the Seleucid Empire. The Seleucids are the guys that the Jews were rebelling against when that one day’s worth of oil in the temple burned for eight days, which is the festival of lights known as Chanukah. The Seleucids made it illegal to read the Torah, to keep the sabbath, to celebrate the holy days, to keep the covenant. The worship of the God of Israel was illegal, stripping the people of their identity and making them get in line with the empire’s ways.

For the Israelites living under the oppressive Seleucids, the book of Daniel with its heroic victories over the foreign power is a book of politically subversive literature. It’s protest. We’ve talked about how the book of Revelation in a different time served much the same purpose. It’s apocalyptic literature, promising a future filled with hope brought by God to get us out of this mess. God wins in the end, when all glory is revealed, and we realize that the world runs on God’s time, not the Babylonians’, not the Seleucids’, not the city of Montgomery’s.

And so we get the empire. We get a loud-mouthed, raging, political cartoon in King Nebuchadnezzar. He's a buffoon. His face twists and he yells and he's so insecure and petty that he builds this huge statue — the biggest statue, people are saying — and he demands allegiance. He wants people to bow down and anyone who refuses will meet fire and fury like the world has never seen. And all his “yes men” show up and twirl their mustaches.

Then our heroes, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego — already wearing the empire's names — get ratted out to the king. They get dragged before Nebuchadnezzar and he gives them a last chance to bow down and he reminds them about the furnace of blazing fire he will throw them into and they say, “You may do that.” They tell him: “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.”

And wherever we are as people of the covenant, we jump up off the couch and high five everyone in the room. Take that, Nebuchadnezzar! Take that, Seleucids! Take that, everyone who has asked people of faith to abandon their beliefs and to conform! Take that, everyone who has oppressed foreigners and minorities and people with names that don't fit in!

We are thrilled and awed by the faithfulness of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Perhaps we too can survive the current trials with our faith intact. Being faithful to the point of death is hard to ponder for mild-mannered Presbyterians. It would be more comfortable to jump the end of the story. But we must linger here on one phrase that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego speak: “But if not...”

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King preached on this text and he zeroed in on this phrase. He said that there are two kinds of faith. There is “If” faith: “If all goes my way, and if I don't meet struggle and if I never get in trouble for my convictions, then I will be faithful to God.”¹

And then there's “though” faith: “though I have been through so much turmoil and though they call me names and though my very life may be lost, I will trust my God.”

Our heroes in this story believe in a God that has a grip on their hearts so strong that they are willing to say “But if not...” As Rev. Dr. King said, “Somehow you go on and say ‘I know that the God that I worship is able to deliver me, but if not, I'm going on anyhow, I'm going to stand up for [what I believe in] anyway’...because it has gripped you so much that you are willing to die for it if necessary.”

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are informing King Nebuchadnezzar that, in fact, they do not operate on the empire's time. They are tapped in to something so much bigger than this king and the statue he has set up, and bigger than his kingdom and his life, and bigger than Babylon and the very concept of empires. They are on God's time, and on God's time, there are already carved out moments of resistance and protest and sacrifice and the people of God will find a way to worship, even if it must be hidden in the shadows. On God's time, this king's furnace cannot burn away their faith. And these three men may be consumed by flame, but they will not be consumed by fear and they will not deny the one whose name is their true name. This emperor is weak, it turns out. He just doesn't know it. The faith will survive, on a different timeline, should Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego die this day. But if not...

We get a last miracle in this story, after the miracles of faith and of the furnace: King Nebuchadnezzar changes.

¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, November 5, 1967

He has seen great faith and he has seen salvation and he doesn't call it fake news. He instead finds himself convicted, and puts in place protections for this group of religious minorities living in his empire. Dare we pray that our modern world might act with such compassion? Of course, first it would need to see great faith and salvation.

And this is why each Advent we start with apocalyptic stories. They shake us up as we enter the season of God's time, where revelation comes in ways not perceived, and love comes in ways unforeseen, and peace arrives in sacrifice, and hope shows up in a manger in a weird little backwater of the Roman Empire. We are reminded that God is not bound by our understandings of geography and politics and how you tell a good story. God rewrites it all and gives out new names and works through the most unexpected characters with the most unusual plot twists to bring the advent of God's reign on earth. This land is not your land and my land, but God's land. This time is not the empire's, the bank's, or the church's. It is God's time.

We begin Advent with apocalypse because time has changed and we must prepare. We prepare for the revelation of God in our world. And not just revelation, but God's ongoing presence and transformation and movement toward all that is good and perfect and true.

Advent is upon us. It's never enough time to prepare for the arrival of Emmanuel — God with us. We will not be truly ready when the Christ child appears. We won't quite understand how all this could be happening. We will look around at our world and think, "Good luck with us, God."

And yet, despite our doubts and heavy sighs and worry that we won't have enough faith to see anything that night and that the heavenly host won't sing and the shepherds will be oblivious and that the emperor will put an end to all this nonsense, God will show up. God will listen to our fears and lovingly respond that all that sounds plausible in your time and maybe your time is the true time, *but if not...*