

But if Not

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If you are familiar with this story from the book of Daniel, what you might remember is that there were some guys with kind of funny names who went into a furnace and lived to tell about it. Which is ultimately what happens, but I think the most important part of the story is what happens before they are thrown into the fire. What happens before the fire is a story of three young men of faith having the courage to stand, while others bow. Which, though this story is several thousand years old, is certainly a question we have to answer for ourselves today – will we bow to other gods or have the courage to stand in our faith, even if it puts us at risk?

But let's back up and look at the story more closely for a minute. Let's take a minute to recognize the outrageous and ridiculous nature of this story and how its high drama is meant to provide some humor, as well as serve as the most extreme example.

First, there is the golden statue King Neb builds. The measurements are absurd. Converting the cubits ends up with a statue 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide so rather than being a grand, awe inspiring statue, it would be a bit more like a toothpick. Or perhaps the dimensions are given just to show how ridiculous the King was being – a 90 foot statue of oneself? How power hungry, how insecure is a person who needs something like that?

And then there is all that repetition – first of the long list of people the King called “satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials” and then of the instruments “horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music” that will sound before people bow. The repetition help us get a sense of how big a deal this is – all those very important people, all those musicians needed- it all screams “this is a big deal!!”

And then the King's demand that every single person of every race and language bow whenever the music sounded. It's ridiculous. Every person must wholly devote themselves to him whenever he makes the music play? What kind of a narcissist is this?

And then, in the King's anger, he demands his soldiers make the fire seven times hotter...as if that would burn them more?

This whole story depicts a leader so power hungry, so insecure, so desperate, and such a narcissist that he has become ridiculous.

And yet, the people bow. People of all different nations and languages; people in the King's government and not; people who worship other Gods – they all bow. Why? Even as ridiculous and insecure as the King clearly was, he was still King and he could still throw anyone he wanted into that furnace. So, they bow.

Except Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. This is where it is important to know a few other things about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. First, those weren't their actual names. Their real names were Hannaniah, Mishael and Azariah but in the very first chapter King Nebuchadnezzar changed their names along with others. Now instead of being named for the God of Israel with names that mean "God is gracious" in the case of Hannaniah, or "Who is like God?" in the case of Mishael, or "God keeps him" for Azariah, the King has renamed with references to the Babylonian gods. The King couldn't even abide people having names that might threaten his power.

Second, the King had brought Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to Babylon from Jerusalem after sacking the holy city and had brought them with the intention to turn them into advisors of his. He put them under the supervision of someone else who tried to remake them in the Babylonian ways. They were offered all kinds of rich foods, but they turned them away to keep kosher, instead asking for vegetables and water. They were tempted in other ways and turned them away because, despite being brought to a new nation, given new names and offered a new life, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew who they really were. They knew their identity as people who worshipped their God.

It should be no surprise that when the king heard that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego wouldn't bow down to his big, beautiful statue, he sent for them and demanded they bow down on threat of death. King Neb believed he could threaten them, bully them, and make them afraid enough that they would crumble before him.

We could substitute so many names and systems in the place of King Neb here. We know all too well that power and violence all too often go hand in hand. We also know how easy it is for people to choose to bow whether to avoid violence or to gain power for themselves. We know how easy it is to just go along to get along.

But, in the face of certain death, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego *respond*: "*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. 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.*"

I don't think they were trying to be rude or trying to get in trouble. I don't think they were protesting or trying to start a movement. They simply would not bow to the statue.

They knew deep in their bones that they served a higher authority and they did not belong to the King. They didn't even presume to know what God would do in that moment. They didn't beg God to save them or try to tell the King he'd be sorry. Their faith wasn't conditional on what God would do. They just told the King no. Not now, not ever. It's an incredible witness, possible because their identity was rooted in something greater, something bigger than any golden statue, than any furnace, than any government with its threats and terror. They knew what they believed and were clear about the lines they would not cross.

In his sermon about this text Martin Luther King, Jr said there is an "if" faith, and a "though" faith. The "if" faith says, 'If all goes well; if life is hopeful, prosperous and happy...; if I'm not ever called bad names because of taking a stand that I feel I must take; if none of these things happen, then I'll have faith in God, then I'll be alright. But the "though" faith says, "Though things go wrong; though evil is temporarily triumphant; though sickness comes and the cross looms, nevertheless! I'm going to believe anyway, and I'm going to have faith anyway." Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have "though" kind of faith. The kind of faith that stands when others bow.

Now, in our lives, we will not likely experience quite such a dire situation as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, though plenty of people have in the centuries since, so perhaps we will be among them. But even if we never find ourselves facing someone with greater power, threatening certain death unless we do what they want us to do, there are plenty of other regularly occurring temptations for us to worship other Gods. And it is our attention to those daily decisions to turn away from those temptations that will give us the strength and courage to stand when others bow.

Because, as we heard, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn't just wake up with their faith that morning. No. "Though" faith; faith that can withstand the tests and the tribulations of life; faith that can hold onto its convictions even in the face of persecution and death, is the result of a deep and abiding relationship with God.

In the book *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway there is a character named Mike who is sitting at a bar after having gone bankrupt. The bartender asks him how he went bankrupt and Mike replies, "Two ways. Gradually and then suddenly." This idea helps me to picture our relationship with God. If we aren't making time for the relationship with God; if we aren't doing things to encourage and deepen our faith, the foundation of our faith gradually chips away until when a particular stress or challenge comes along and then suddenly we find our faith has fallen away. Gradually, and then suddenly.

But just the same, when we gradually, day by day, give our faith some attention – when we take time to be with God, when we look for God in the world, when we listen for God’s voice, when we see God in other people, when we ask questions and seek deeper relationships, then when we find ourselves in a time of trial, when our convictions are tested and we have to decide if we have “if” faith or “though” faith, then suddenly our faith can surprise us with the strength and courage we need. Gradually, and then suddenly.

Our faith is a journey of lots of gradually and then suddenly’s. It is up to us to pay attention to our gradually’s - the daily walk of our faith. Sometimes that looks like our spiritual disciplines - our prayer life, regular worship, taking time in creation, spending time alone with God. Sometimes that looks like the choices we make in our actions and words to others - how do we treat our loved ones? How do we speak to strangers? How are we working to forgive? Sometimes it looks like how we are serving God in the world. How are we taking care of those in need? Where are we speaking up for justice? How are we tending to creation? Each day there are choices where we decide if we are going to take the path of least resistance; if we are going to decide the end justifies the means; if we are going to retreat to what is the most comfortable; or not. And in those choices we decide if we are moving closer to the living God or deeper into the worship of other Gods.

Every day we will be asked if we want to have “if” faith or “though” faith. It would be nice to think we will never be tested, that we will never find ourselves in any kind of situation remotely like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, but as one pastor said: “Ultimately, our hope is not to always find ourselves in fireproof situations, but to know who is with us in the fire.” Scripture tells us, our ancestors tell us, people in this room right now can tell us, perhaps we even know it in our own bones: God will be there in the fire, no matter what form the fire takes. We will never go in the furnace alone. And when we know that, when we know it in our bones, we too will stand before the kings of this world and their golden statues, all the other gods people bow to, and be able to say “but if not.”

May it be so today and tomorrow. Amen.