

The Heat is On
The Monroe Congregational Church
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Daniel 3:1, 8-26

What had happened, you see, was King Nebuchadnezzar found himself in the wilderness. No, not the kind with sand dunes and dried up vegetation, but an emotional wilderness... that vaguely unsettled place of not having all the answers. Every night in this restless state he dreamt of building an obelisk, a 90 foot high golden statue representing the rising of his kingdom of Babylon. He hoped that this incredible achievement would bring honor and glory to his legacy forevermore.

One fine day he decided to put his dream in motion and construct this golden statue. Yes, he knew it would use so much of the country's resources, but he just knew in the end it would be worth it. Because he would be remembered! Once it was complete he'd require ... No, command! ... all the people to fall down and worship it whenever they heard the royal music. It would bring them all together, and if it meant that his power and strength would be honored too... well, that was just the icing on the cake.

Then everything would be just fine in Babylon, wouldn't it?

The king was grateful to Daniel; he took his advice and appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of Babylon. Initially, they were wise and capable bureaucrats. But before long, the king was informed that these three refused to bow down to the golden statue because they worship the LORD. So he calls them into his court.

Now... maybe these three never got the memo. Perhaps it was just a simple misunderstanding. He'd give them one good chance to defend themselves, to save their lives and bolster his authority. But no! They won't bow down, so they force his hand. Their disobedience sent the king into one of his signature rages. This time he had the furnace seven times hotter than it needed to be before throwing the three men inside.

After a few moments, King Nebuchadnezzar looked into that furnace and was shocked by what he saw. I wonder if there is ever a moment in his dreams that he doesn't see the LORD standing in the flames staring right at him? I bet that's something he could never unsee.

This was not the first time a king like Nebuchadnezzar challenged God's authority, and it definitely won't be the last. Think of the Wise Men coming from the East to seek the Christ-child. They ask King Herod where this "New King" might be located, which worried Herod. He probably felt the child's very existence was a challenge to his power and of course it was.

It's the arrogance of despots to believe themselves to be bigger than God.

In the waning days of World War II, UK's Prime Minister Winston Churchill told Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to reach out to the Pope and get the Vatican's opinion regarding the future of Eastern Europe. To which Stalin famously responded: "*How many divisions (of soldiers) does the Pope have?*" Stalin understood power. He knew that he had tanks and soldiers and firepower at his disposal, while the Church had none of these.

And yet, in 1989, millions marched peacefully across Eastern Europe to protest Soviet domination in favor of democracy... and the walls came tumbling down. It seems that finally, Stalin had his answer: Hope Wins.

There are always those who covet the power of God, and we are always tempted to give our allegiance to them. If we say Jesus is Lord, just how far are we willing to go?

The life of faith was never meant to be popular, or easy, or socially acceptable. The prophets were harassed by the kings. John the Baptist was beheaded. Jesus was rejected and killed on the cross. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated. And so forth, and so on. Living a life rooted in the love of God and neighbor has consequences.

And Jesus himself never quite promised us bodily comfort and ease. No. "Take up your cross", he beckons. "and follow me".

In a culture that values power, security, and self-sufficiency, the call of the Gospel to open our hearts and homes to God's beloved children – our neighbors, sisters and brothers, and even our rivals and enemies – is a challenge, *to say the least*.

But the gospel makes us vulnerable. We want to close ourselves off to others, to build up barriers, to be safe. It's in our nature. Yet there is the fiery furnace, and the cross, and the stones cry out, and Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is Lord, and nothing else.

If Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not. This was a powerfully controversial statement in the days of the Roman Empire among those who believed Caesar to be a god on earth.

If Jesus is Lord, the Caesars of today – the rulers and politicians, the executives and corporate leaders, the pop culture superstars and fashion trend setters and rap artists and Instagram celebs – are most certainly not.

And If Jesus is Lord, the myth that your value is defined by your paycheck, your job title, your good looks, your comfortable home, your age, or even your fitness level, is simply not true.

Oh, and how our culture wants to make us believe our value depends on those material things, rather than on what the God of Love does through us!

If Jesus is Lord, nothing else is.

Follow me, the Lord says, not the false claims and golden calves of a broken world.

Follow me, the Lord says ... even to the cross, even into a fiery furnace.

In today's story Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego say that if God will save them, that's all well and good, but if not, let it be known that they will still not bow down to the gods of empire. And they come out of that furnace unscathed.

The three stick together all the way through the story. That's an important detail for us to remember. Sticking with each other is so important when we are trying to do something hard. If it is true that our God does not abandon us, well then neither should we abandon each other.

They say that the fourth man seen in the furnace was a divine presence. God was with them in their fiery furnace, just as God was with John the Baptist, Jesus on the cross, Reverend King, and so many others. Our Lord is with us in our most vulnerable places.

When we are tempted away, God is with us.
When we are in a place where we can't find God, God is with us.
When we don't have faith, God is with us.
When we are standing strong, God is with us.
When the heat is on, God is with us.

As one of the wise people who attend our Bible Study said this week, "*Only the finest steel can be made with fire.*"

As we enter this time of Advent expectation, and as we come to this communion table, may you know God's presence in those places of your greatest vulnerability.

May you be comforted by the presence of a faithful community that shows you, and invites you to participate in, the love of Christ.

May you see in each other the promises and presence of Hope for this beautiful, messy and tragic world that is in such desperate need of the Good News.

And may we all dare to accept the call of faith which can lead us to places and people we might never otherwise go. Amen.