

PENTECOST 12 - DANIEL3:1,8-30

The Fiery Furnace

The Book of Daniel is an amazingly complex work. The third chapter offers a glimpse into the lives of a group of young refugees whose existence is threatened in a new land.

The Hebrew version of the text, which contains large sections of material written in Aramaic, contains two distinct parts: stories of Jews living in exile in Babylon and apocalyptic visions shown to the title character, Daniel. The Greek version of the tales is distinctly longer than the Hebrew version.

Daniel is a prominent character throughout the book, depicted as a young, wise and pious Jew whose prophetic abilities are recognized by even the pagan Babylonians. Today's chapter is the only one where Daniel does not appear. Instead, the story tells the tale of three other Jewish men who face dire consequences for their piety.

While the book is set during the Babylonian exile (586-538 BCE), it was written down during a period of Greek colonization, some 400 years later. It is not interested in presenting an historical account of the Babylonian exile. It contains several historical inaccuracies, not the least of which is that fact that the Babylonians did not force their religion on others.

Instead the book explores the vulnerability of peoples living under a religiously oppressive regime, a situation that fits the time of the Greek overlord Antiochus IV Epiphanes (167-164 BCE). The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego represents the choices faced by those who must either support an oppressive regime or face certain death.

Last week, we learned that the names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had been changed from their birth names; Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. This change in names is quite significant as names not only signify one's

identity and heritage, but in the case of these particular names, also one's religious beliefs. So all three original names of these Jewish men contain references to God such as "God is gracious" in the case of Hananiah, "Who is like God?" in the case of Mishael, and "God keeps him" in the case of Azariah. These references to the God of Israel have now been substituted with references to the Babylonian gods, such as Nego — Abednego means "servant of Nego".

By transposing their current challenges to a time long ago, the narrative raises the central question: How does one survive under a foreign empire, and how does one remain a faithful Jew amidst all the threats to Jewish identity? Further evidence of these deliberate attempts from those in power to compel immigrants to change their religion is evident in the king's order to force Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to bow down and worship the golden statue of the Emperor, and hence to submit to his authority instead of the God of Israel.

While loss of cultural identity threatens exiled populations, those who are colonized face a different but no less serious threat. An exiled population often maintains the sense of being "Other" in their new place of residence; even if they try to assimilate, they are often treated as perennial outsiders by native populations. Those who are colonized have their status inverted. Although they are the native population, regimes that practice cultural colonization try to wipe out that native culture and replace it with a foreign one that now becomes hegemonic. An applicable example is the shameless colonization of our Indigenous siblings.

Colonized peoples face different choices than exiles. Often the choices made by a colonized individual affects whole families who still may be trying to preserve property and autonomy. Some choose to cooperate with the colonizers, others subvert it, while still others participate in active resistance. This was as true for the Judeans colonized by the Greeks as it is today.

Why Nebuchadnezzar set up the golden images is not explicitly stated and no reference is made to the name of the god his statue is to represent. What is stressed, rather, is that Nebuchadnezzar himself inspired it and set it up. Nebuchadnezzar has placed himself beyond God.

At the end of last week's introduction, he had fallen to the ground and confessed that the God of Daniel is "God of gods and Lord of kings", but that posture recedes quickly as we heard today. In the form of a question he boasts that there is no god capable of freeing Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. His power, he presumes, is beyond challenge. He even has the power to set up gods.

The story of the three men gives a glimpse into those choices. They could accept the religion of the king as superior to their own. However, like their fellow Israelite Daniel in the chapters that surround this one, the three young men refuse to bow down before the king and forsake their God. They could go through the motions of bowing to the statue while still maintaining their own belief. Or they could organize a rebellion against this oppressive religious practice. They choose none of these.

Instead, they decide to become living witnesses to what they believe in, offering their bodies as martyrs as an act of faith in their God. It is a form of peaceful resistance often associated today with people like Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bishop Oscar Romero. Amidst very difficult circumstances, the three young men remain faithful to their cultural and religious identity as Jews in the diaspora.

Throughout the Christian traditions, these martyr stories ended with the death of the righteous sufferer, whose reward comes in their post-mortem sanctification. The story of the martyrdom of Perpetua preserves visions she had of the reward awaiting her in heaven. Second Maccabees, a text in the Old Testament Apocrypha, tells the story of a mother who watches the martyrdom of her seven sons by this same Antiochus, all the while exhorting

them to be strong and face death. She and her sons trust that God, who will eventually punish wicked Antiochus, will reward these sons after their death.

Today's story is set against the backdrop of the plight of the exiles during the Babylonian exile after having been forcefully removed from their home land by King Nebuchadnezzar, who is also the main perpetrator in this chapter. Their resistance is met with an incredible show of force when Nebuchadnezzar first repeatedly threatens them with death if they did not obey his command to bow down before the golden statue of the Emperor, and then acts on these threats by throwing them into a furnace that is so scalding that even the guards who throw the men into the fire succumb to its heat.

And yet, similar to Daniel being saved from the lion's den in next week's story, this tale of willing martyrdom ends with the miraculous rescue of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who are not harmed by the scalding flames of the fire. The story makes visibly apparent that those who suffer are not alone. There is a heavenly being who accompanies them as they choose to meet their fate as we saw with the three young men. The text is wonderfully ambiguous about the identity of this divine figure.

In the resolution of the story, the men not only survive, but earn a job promotion as a result of their ordeal. How odd it seems that their reward is their continued service to their king; they now will work for his well-being. This ending calls attention to three important elements of the story that could otherwise be missed.

First, the story maintains its pacifistic attitude. Unlike the book of Esther which ends with the Jews slaughtering the Persians who attack them, there is no retaliation in this story. For this author, the perfect denouement is the conversion of the pagans and the peaceful co-existence of everyone.

Second, the resolution includes the further assimilation of the men into the

colonized system. Shadrach and friends are not just Jews; they have a hybrid identity. Here, their Babylonian Jewishness mirrors the Greek Jewishness of the book's original audience.

Third, the fate of these three individuals is really a story about the fate of a whole people. Notice that at the beginning of the chapter, these three stand up for the rights of all those who live under this oppression. At the end of the chapter, the king declares religious protections for all Jews within his empire.

While the story is not a trickster tale, the narrative does subvert the hegemonic discourse of the colonizers. The king's propaganda rests on his claim of complete power within his realm. All it takes to unravel this claim is the resolute refusal of these three young men, from the margins of that society, to accept his claim as reality. Instead, they replace his claims, not with their own assertion of power, but rather with the statement that Yahweh is God.

The Book of Daniel details the exemplary behaviour of these faithful believers who, despite the worst kinds of trials and tribulations, remain faithful to God and refuse to give up their religion. Secondly, this chapter wants to share with its readers the conviction that the reason why these colonized people survived under a hostile foreign empire is because of God's faithfulness. The miraculous nature of the men's survival leaves no doubt that it is only because of God's intervention that they did not succumb to the empire's attempts to wipe them out.

Even more miraculous than the three men being saved from a fiery furnace is the change of heart that this mighty emperor exhibits at the end of the story. King Nebuchadnezzar declares that anyone who prohibits these immigrants from practising their religion or who harms them in any way will be subjected to an even worse fate. With this declaration, it is possible for the colonized Jewish immigrants to stay true to their Jewish identity and to survive even the most vicious attacks by those in power. Moreover, instead

of succumbing to imperial power, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are promoted in the province of Babylon.

This narrative encouraged its original audience, believers who found themselves under the Greek empire, to persevere. The story of the magical deliverance from the furnace promises that God is with them even in the most difficult of times — including being thrown into a furnace!

In today's context, this story of refugees and the challenges they experience may have a different function. The threat to identity that immigrants experience on many different levels — including language, culture, and religious practices — is a very real concern in a world in which there are more than 65 million displaced individuals. A story that tells what Daniel and his three friends experienced as refugees in a foreign land may be helpful in encouraging us to imagine what it must feel like for immigrants who find themselves in hostile environments.

This story may or should challenge communities today to respect others in their midst, which implies also respecting their freedom and agency to worship as they wish, as well as live out their cultural practices in their own way. It should also encourage us to work diligently to reconcile our relationship with our Indigenous siblings. The interpretation is especially important as it applies to our Indigenous siblings. Although they may not be immigrants or refugees, they have been colonized people who have been mistreated in many ways. We have an opportunity to turn things around with immigrants, refugees fleeing wars and conflicts, and our Indigenous neighbours.

God will not be mocked — that is an enduring threat to the oppressor and hope for the oppressed. Defying hubristic status symbols is both an act of resistance against the oppressor and an act of faith that God will not abandon those whom God has chosen. Where we find ourselves on the spectrum from oppressor to oppressed will create a different engagement

with this chapter and the book of Daniel as a whole. Some will be comforted: the oppressor does not have the last word and God creates a future beyond the oppression. Some will be dis comforted: they don't have the last word and God ends their domination.

Daniel invites contemporary communities of faith to reflect on the long-lasting effects of colonization on themselves and those around them. It provides a model response to violent oppression: the stubborn refusal to be afraid. It seeks a reconciliation of both oppressor and oppressed, through which the world is reoriented to God.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR AUGUST 11, 2024 - PENTECOST 12

Holy God, you knew us before we took our first breath. You uttered your living Word and brought forth light, love, and life. You gathered us from the dust of the earth and called us your people. You sent us into the world to proclaim your mighty and wondrous deeds. Your love never ends. You are with us even now as we continue to live out your call to follow you.

Generous God you promise to be with us in all circumstances. Strengthen us that we might be generous givers of your grace to others. May your steadfast love be known through our actions and words to all of your children. Give us hearts of courage to tell others of your righteous acts and deeds of salvation. Send your Holy Spirit to empower our hands to clothe the naked, feed the hungry and love all as you have first loved us.

Abundant God, be with those of us that yearn for your restoration and healing. Today we ask your blessing of healing and strength upon Pr. Kristin Steele and Bishop Kathy Martin. We pray for those who are homebound. We also lift up to you those who we bring before you with our lips or within the silence of our hearts. (....)

Caring God, stand with the Palestinian people of Gaza, that ancient land where the death tolls mount and tens of thousands have been forced to leave their homes in preparation for further continuous bombardment, Lord, bring your peace.

Compassionate God, watch over the people of Syria, Ukraine, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Haiti, where many have been forced from their homes and the lives they have known, only to become homeless refugees in strange and often hostile places. Lord, lead them to new life and safety.

Sorrowful God, tend to the countless others, unknown to us but known to you: those who roam the streets of cities with no place to lay their heads and nowhere to call home; those in the grip of dark depression who have lost all hope of ever having a meaningful life; those whose homes and communities have been impacted by fires, flash floods, and other extreme weather occurrences; and those of us who are so far removed from the suffering of our sisters and brothers that we remain oblivious to what is their everyday reality.

Protecting God, strengthen your beloved church and its leaders; We pray for Bishop Kathy, Bishop Susan, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers. Fill their hearts with your love and mercy. We pray for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara. Today we lift up Hope Lutheran in Nanaimo - Rev. Terry Richardson, Luther Court and other institutions in our church that care for our seniors, and the ministry of hospital and military chaplains.

We also give thanks for the many blessings in our lives. We pray for your continued blessing on those who are celebrating a special occasion or a significant milestone in their lives. We give thanks for these summery days we are experiencing. Keep safe all who are travelling and bring them home safely.

Faithful God, your power and your righteousness are never ending. Hear us, your servants, as we follow you to the day when faith, hope, and love, and wholeness and well being will be experienced by us, your children, and all of Creation. These things we pray in the name of your Son who taught us to pray ...

Our Father ...