7-9-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Daniel 3:1, 3b-6, 12-18 Not Gonna Bow Down Unlikely Heroes of the Bible Series

My children’s faith has been shaped by videos of “Veggie Tales”, “Larry Boy”, and the “What’s in the Bible” series. They hear today’s story and picture “The Bunny” from *Shack, Rack and Benny*.

My faith, however, was shaped by the Christian Contemporary musicians of the 80s.

Amy Grant, Stryper, Michael W Smith, Petra, DC Talk, Newsboys, Steven Curtis Chapman and many more. When I hear today’s story, I begin to sing Russ Taff’s song, “Not Gonna Bow” off his *Medals* album from 1985. The song told the story of Daniel 3 in the verse 1, then in verse 2 told the modern story of the pressure Bobby felt to fit in and the challenge we all face to go against the crowd.

I cannot verify this memory as 100% accurate, yet I seem to recall singing along to this song at a concert at Kings Island many years ago. Russ would sing, “Not gonna bow to your idols. Not gonna bow, oh no,” then we in the crowd would scream “No!”

So much fun to sing.

So much harder to live.

This morning you have heard just a few verses of the story from Daniel 3 of today’s unlikely Old Testament heroes, three young men named Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They lived during the Babylonian exile.

Many years after God’s people settled in the Promised Land, the 12 tribes broke into 2 kingdoms. Yet as the people of God began to worship the idols of their neighbors, and empires rose and fell, those kingdoms did not last long. The northern kingdom of Israel was wiped out in 722 BCE by the Assyrian Empire. The southern kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonian Empire over a number of years, yet the final destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple of God was in 586 BCE.

By the fall of Jerusalem many of the Jewish leaders, skilled tradesmen, and young men and women had been carted off to exile in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar appreciated beauty, grace and intelligence, so began to train the best looking and most intelligent young men to become servants in the king’s high court.

Politically, training the young people in the language, culture and literature of the conquering nation always made sense as a way to assimilate the young people so they no longer yearned for a homeland they barely knew or a past they struggled to comprehend. This also gave the king a fresh supply of new servants, although the Chaldeans were distrustful of the Jews.

Four of the young men from Judah who were chosen to serve in the king’s court were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The palace master gave them new names: Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. I have no idea why we hear the three friends mentioned more by their Babylonian names and not Daniel. Yet would you like to be known throughout history as Belteshazzar or Daniel?

Although these men learned the language and literature of the empire, and were appointed to serve in the king’s high court, they also held firm to their faith in the God of their ancestors.

Their faithfulness to the One True God was not a pressing issue until King Nebuchadnezzar allowed his power to go to his head, believing there was no power or authority on earth to stop him. King Nebuchadnezzar created a huge golden statue, 90 feet high and 9 feet wide.

Imagine an obelisk skinny and tall. 9 feet wide is less than the width of this sanctuary. 90 feet tall is the equivalent of a 7-9 story building. It was the original height restriction for residential buildings in D.C. The Beast roller coaster at its tallest is taller than the King’s statue (110 feet).

King Nebuchadnezzar created his huge golden statue, then called all of the officials to assemble for its dedication. The chief administrators, the prefects, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces assembled for the dedication. Yet as they did so, King Nebuchadnezzar changed the game plan. No longer were they there to dedicate the statue. Instead, King Nebuchadnezzar commanded them all bow down and worship the statue—or die.

As commanded, when the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble began to play, everyone bowed down—except Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Their refusal to bow down may have gone unnoticed, except the Chaldeans, who didn’t like the Jews, were shrewdly watching them while bowing down to the statue. So the Chaldeans went to the king and squealed on the three Jewish friends.

“Long live the king! 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. Anyone who wouldn’t bow and worship would be thrown into a furnace of flaming fire. 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.” (v10-12)

King Nebuchadnezzar flew into a violent rage and ordered the three young men immediately into his presence. He asked them if what the Chaldeans accused was true, that they don’t serve the king’s gods or worship his golden statue. He gave them one more chance to bow down and worship or be thrown into the fiery furnace. Then he mocked their god, daring them to put their god to the test to save them from his power. King Nebuchadnezzar did not believe their god would rescue them from death if they refused to bow down.

Now Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had a choice to make. Do they compromise their faith to appease the king and save their own lives? Do they break the second commandment to bow down—let alone worship—an idol of the king’s making?

.. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had all kinds of reasons at their disposal for why it could have been in their best interests to compromise.

1. They could have said, “Look, if we get ourselves killed, who is going to look out for the welfare of the Jewish people? We’re no good to anyone if we’re dead! Even if it means bowing down to this idol, we need to survive.”

2. They could have said, “When in Babylon, do as the Babylonians do. We’re just trying to fit in so that we can stay relevant in our culture. God will excuse us.”

3. They could have said, “We’ll bow down, but we won’t actually worship the idol. We’ll just make it LOOK like we’re worshipping the idol, but we’ll really worship Yahweh in our hearts.”

4. They could have said, “We’ll worship the idol just this one time, then we’ll ask for forgiveness. No harm done!”

5. They could have said, “The king gave us these really sweet jobs, so I guess we owe him. We’ll bow down to his idol.”

..Ultimately, they did not compromise. They knew that nothing was greater than living by faith in the One True God.

..In the first season of the popular TV show "24," Jack Bauer was a federal agent charged with protecting a presidential candidate from an assassination plot. He was given that responsibility because in the uncertain world of espionage he possessed that rare character trait of integrity.

In the show’s first episode, Jack’s integrity was already put to the test. Because he turned in other federal agents for bribery, some of his own comrades turned against him. In particular, Jack’s immediate boss came down hard on him and tried to persuade Jack not to be so honest in his job. Jack had an explosive confrontation with his boss and would not budge on this point.

Just after the confrontation, Jack bristled with intensity as he explained his actions to his closest partner.

“You can look the other way once, and it’s no big deal, except it makes it easier for you to compromise the next time. And pretty soon, that’s all you’re doing—compromising—because that’s how you think things are done. You know those guys I blew the whistle on? You think they were the bad guys? They weren’t the bad guys. They were just like you and me, except they compromised once.”

-David Ward “Trial by Fire” 6-14-06 sermoncentral.com

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not know whether or not God would save them. They did not presume to make God’s choice for God. They accepted the reality that they most likely would become martyrs for their faith. Yet no matter what, they trusted God. So they responded to King Nebuchadnezzar:

“We have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. 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.” (16b-18)

This response further enraged the king, who heated up the fire 7 times hotter than its normal heat. At that time a typical furnace was a large beehive shaped kiln with a shaft opening at the top and an opening on the low side in which to add fuel.

Breaking custom King Nebuchadnezzar left the men clothed and bound, where normally they would have been stripped of all they wore. Strong guards were assigned to throw the men into the furnace. The fire was so hot that these guards were killed as they lifted up the three Jews and dropped them into the fire.

Moments after the three friends were dropped in the furnace, King Nebuchadnezzar looked through the bottom opening and was astounded at what he saw. Instead of listening to their screams of pain, instead of seeing the three men flailing about as they were being burned alive, King Nebuchadnezzar now saw four men in the furnace unbound, walking around, unhurt by the flame. The fourth was an angel of the Lord. Quickly he called them to come out of the furnace, and the three friends emerged to face the king and several of his officials unharmed and fully clothed, with not a hair singed and nary a whiff of smoke.

This amazes me, for from my big hair in the 80s to even my short hair now today, anytime I am around wood smoke my hair collects that smell. Yet the three young men emerged unscathed from the fiery furnace with no scent of smoke whatsoever.

King Nebuchadnezzar was amazed. While he did not become a believer in the God of the Jews, he did at least respect their God’s power to the point that he issued a decree of protection that no one could speak disrespectfully of their God “because there is no other god who can rescue like this.” (v.29)

Throughout his successors the Jews were protected until King Artexerxes, whose story we heard associated with Nehemiah, allowed the Jews to begin to return to Jerusalem. God preserved a remnant of God’s people who remained faithful no matter where they found themselves or what they faced.

When we are challenged in our lives to worship other idols or to turn away from God, how faithful do we remain to God? When tempted by success or money, by pleasure or comfort, by the pressure to fit in or the pressure to look the other way, how likely are we to bow down to the idols of this world rather than Almighty God? In the midst of our storms and our fires,

in the dark valleys and still waters of our lives, how much do we trust in the promises and presence of God when we don’t know what tomorrow may bring?

Singer Rich Mullins once said:

“You meet the Lord in the furnace a long time before you’ll meet Him in the sky.”

--David Ward “Trial by Fire” 6-14-06 sermoncentral.com

The hurting, skeptical, hopeless world around us watches what we reveal about our faith in our fiery furnaces, in the tough times in our lives. Do we abandon our faith, or cling to our faith?

Do we compromise or stand firm in faith? Do we turn away in doubt and uncertainty, or do we keep on moving forward in faith in spite of our doubts?

Our God can move mountains and perform miracles. Yet too often we act as if God will do only what we say God will do. We will have unwavering confidence in an expected outcome, yet leave no room for God to be God and no room to be open to God working in a different way than we anticipate.

Or we expect that if we are faithful to God, and life throws us a curveball, that God will care for that curveball and spare us pain and grief and consequences and tragedy. Then when God does act in a way different than we expect, when God doesn’t protect us from the harsh realities of life, we question God rather than reflect on our own faith. We bow down to the cynicism around us rather than trusting God no matter what.

.. One of the early church fathers, John Chrysostom, lived in the late 4th and early 5th century.

One day he was brought before the emperor and commanded to renounce Christ. The emperor threatened him saying if he would not renounce Christ he would be banished from the country forever—he would be separated from his father’s land for the rest of his life.

John responded, “You cannot. The whole world is my Father’s land. You cannot banish me.”

The emperor then said, “Then I will take away all of your property and treasures.”

John replied, “You cannot, for all my true treasures are in heaven.”

The emperor then said, “I will send you to a place of absolute solitude where there is not one friend for you to talk to.”

 John said, “You cannot, for I have a friend that is closer than a brother to me. He is my elder brother, Jesus Christ, who has promised to be with me always—to the very end of the age.”

In anger the emperor then said, “I will then take your life.”

John said, “You cannot. For my life is forever hidden in Christ with God.”

-Freddy Fritz “What is Faith?” 5-4-06 sermoncentral.com

What we can learn today from Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is a faith that stands on the promises of God, yet still allows God to be God, and not some magic genie in a bottle.

This is the faith of all of the heroes listed in Hebrews 11, who did not always live to see the outcome of their faith, yet still followed God in faith, trust and hope.

This is the faith of brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who daily face persecution because they are the minority, yet who would give their lives to proclaim Jesus is worth it all.

This can be our faith as well.

A faith that proclaims God can rescue us. Yet if God doesn’t rescue us, it is also a faith that proclaims we still trust God to be God. We still trust God to be with us no matter what we face in life. And we still trust so much in God that we will never serve other gods.

We say to the world through what we believe, we’re not gonna bow to your idols. And we’re not gonna turn our God into an idol of our own making.

To have such faith in God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, in God the Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit, in God who was and is and is to come, we don’t have to be heroes, celebrated or forgotten, we don’t have to be saints, faithful men and women who are role models for so many.

We simply have to be faithful followers, step by step along this journey we call the Christian life.

Our journey begins in the water of baptism, in God’s claiming as beloved children. This journey continues when we confirm our faith, proclaiming to others that we believe in Jesus as our Savior and our Lord. This journey continues in our daily lives, at home and at work, in church and in the community.

Russ Taff’s signature song from 1987 is “I Still Believe.” As we ponder following the faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, how many of us can relate to Russ’ lyrics, which include these words:

Flat on my back Out at sea
I'm hoping these waves Don't cover me
I'm turned and tossed Upon the waves
When the darkness comes I feel the grave
But I still believe I still believe
Through the cold And through the heat
Through the rain And through the tears
Through the crowds And through the cheers

Through the pain And through the grief
Through the lies And through the storms
Through the cries And through the wars
I still believe

--taken from Russ Taff “I Still Believe” 1987

Brothers and sisters in Christ, may we still believe in the God who loves us, the Son who saves us, and the Holy Spirit who sustains us on this journey of life and of faith. When the world around us wants us to bow down to anything or anyone other than Almighty God, may our lives proclaim a loud “no!” May we stand firm in faith, in worship, in trust, like our predecessors in the fiery furnace. May our lives proclaim that in spite of our struggles, we still believe.

May it be so. Let us pray.