7-5-20 Armor Up with Truth Rev. Amy Haines

Daniel 3:1-30 Armor Up Series

Armor up! That is the call of the apostle Paul that we heard proclaimed last weekend.

Armor up! Time to put on God’s armor, time to live by God’s ways, in order to stand firm in faith and in the strength of God’s power.

This is not the armor of medieval knights or military members. Rather, this is the characteristics of God that will protect us in the daily battle for our hearts, minds and souls.

Ephesians 6 proclaims:

“Stand with the belt of truth around your waist,

justice as your breastplate,

and put shoes on your feet so that

you are ready to spread the good news of peace.

Above all, carry the shield of faith so that

you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one.

Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God’s word.”

(Eph 6:14-17 CEB)

For the next six weeks, we are going to “put on” a different piece of God’s armor through reflecting on the stories of our faith ancestors. How did they live by truth and justice, by peace and salvation, by faith and prayer? How do their stories encourage our faith journeys today?

Today we begin to armor up with the belt of truth. Have you ever owned a really large, really thick belt, or one of those large belt buckles? I think of the belt of truth and often picture the WWE trophy belts. The belt of truth is large to protect us.

Today, we hear the story of three faithful young men named Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego encourage us to stand firm in the truth of our faith in God.

In the history of God’s people, 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 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.

In today’s Scripture story, King Nebuchadnezzar created a huge golden statue, 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. Imagine a statue less than a church pew length wide and as tall as a 9-story building.

Now listen to what the king demanded of the officials in his empire, as told by Daniel 3:1-7…

King Nebuchadnezzar created his huge golden statue, then called all of his 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 even as they gathered, King Nebuchadnezzar changed the game plan. No longer were they assembled to dedicate the statue. Instead, King Nebuchadnezzar commanded them all to 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.

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? Do they give into the pressure around them to deny their faith in God, or do they stay true to what they know of their God?

Our story continues in Daniel 3:8-18…

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego chose to clothe themselves in a belt of truth. Instead of denying their faith, instead of living a lie, they chose to stand firm in faith and to trust in the strength of God’s power.

C.S. Lewis once said,

“You never know how much you really believe anything

until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you.”

 --C S Lewis, *A Grief Observed, Faber & Faber*, thepastorsworkshop.com:truth

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 could very well die in that fiery furnace. Yet in the face of death, standing before the King, they chose to stay true to their faith and trust in God’s presence and promises.

Their conviction of faith did not set well with King Nebuchadnezzar.

Now listen to the rest of the story from Daniel 3:19-30…

King Nebuchadnezzar was furious that any would go against his rule. Imagine his face turning purple as he was filled with rage.

Then imagine his face full of astonishment when the men survived the furnace without even the smell of smoke upon them.

While he did not become a believer in the God of the Jews, King Nebuchadnezzar did at least respect their God’s power and truth in such a way to protect their religious liberty.

Throughout his successors, then, the Jews were protected until King Artexerxes, whose story is associated with Nehemiah and the return to Jerusalem.

Because of the faithfulness of a remnant of God’s people, men and women like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, you and I are here today to give thanks for the truth of our God’s promises and faithfulness and presence.

What can these three young men teach us today about armoring up with the belt of truth?

We live in a world where truth is relative, media is biased, and not even the online fact checkers are trusted. We live in a world full of lies, gossip, rumors and half-truths, so much that it is hard to sort out what is true.

Unfortunately, even in the church we have allowed rumors and half-truths to divide us. We have allowed our skepticism and distrust to pull us away from one another, so that we cannot even accept the stories of our different experiences.

Warren W. Wiersbe reminds us of the danger of not speaking truth in love:

“Truth without love is brutality,

and love without truth is hypocrisy.”

--thepastorsworkshop.com:truth

..During the Revolutionary War, there was a pastor named Peter Miller whose neighbor constantly riddled him and his small Pennsylvania congregation. This neighbor took great pleasure in mocking the pastor and other Christians in his community. Then the neighbor fell on hard times, and was accused and convicted of treason. Peter Miller was convinced, however, that while he was an unpleasant person, his neighbor was not a traitor. Miller set out 70 miles on foot to see if George Washington would listen to the truth, commute the sentence and free the neighbor of his charges.

When Miller approached the great general, Washington told him he was sorry but there was nothing he could do to save his friend.

“My Friend?” Miller gasped, “he isn’t my friend! In fact, he is the greatest enemy I’ve ever had!”

Washington, needless to say, was surprised: “What?” cried Washington. “You’ve walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That in my judgment puts the matter in different light. I’ll grant your pardon.” And he did.

--Adapted from *Stuart Strachan Jr., Source Material from Stephen Olford,*

*The Grace of Giving*, thepastorsworkshop.com:the truth

Living by truth is not always the easiest path. Standing firm in faith takes strength beyond ourselves.

How can we live by God’s truth in our lives this day, even when that truth calls us to name our own sins and biases, even when that truth calls us beyond our comfort zones to care for one another?

How can we live by God’s truth this day when so many voices clamor for attention in our lives, often telling us half-truths or lies insisting that we don’t measure up, we aren’t smart enough, we don’t have what it takes to be successful, we won’t ever make a difference in this world?

How can we live by God’s truth in our community this day, speaking truth in love, offering grace when we differ in opinion, and together standing firm in the core of our faith?

Hear today the good news of God: We are loved. We are forgiven. We are called. We are equipped. We can make a difference.

Hear today the truth of God: God loves us, Jesus saves us and the Holy Spirit sustains us. There is nothing that will separate us from God’s love. That is truth that will protect us, whatever we face.

Today we are invited to armor up. To put on God’s armor, God’s qualities, God’s ways of being in relationship with one another. Today we are invited to put on the belt of truth to protect us from falsehood, rumors and lies. May we honor one another by the truth of our witness, the truth of our love, the truth of our forgiving grace, the truth of our faith in God.

May it be so. Amen.