

10 April 2019
Lent 5 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Walking Through the Fire”

Text: Daniel 3:1-30; The Passion, part 5

They didn't know . . . if they were going to be cremated or not. They knew God was going to save them from the flames, they just didn't know how.

Would He save them *by* the flames consuming them? That was the more obvious, more reasonable answer. They would die and be gathered to their fathers. Just as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses, David, and Solomon, and others. The pain would be brief, but their life eternal.

But, perhaps, God would save them *from* the flames; by not allowing the flames to consume them. That was a possibility. God could do that. I wonder if they were surprised when this is what actually happened?! When they hit the bottom of the furnace and then got up, unharmed? But whether or not this was their last day on this earth, this they knew: they were not going to serve Nebuchadnezzar's gods or worship the golden image he had erected. They would fear, love, and trust in the one true God alone.

It seems like such a small thing, though, doesn't it? Just fall down before the statue. You don't have to mean it. Just do it and you won't have to face the fiery furnace. You can repent later. Surely God would understand. The early Christian martyrs faced the same challenge: just offer a pinch of incense to the emperor. That's all. Such a small thing to save your life. And how about people today, when with a knife to their throat or a gun to their head they are asked: *Are you a Christian?* Just say no and save your life. Such a small thing.

But maybe it's not such a small thing. Jesus would later say: *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it* (Matthew 16:25). Think about those words of Jesus for a moment, and what they mean. Lose your life here and now, and find it. What exactly is it that you find? The confidence to live. To really live, as a child of God. To live not in fear but in confidence, not in uncertainty but in faith, that there is nothing in this world that can take your life from you. The boastful, arrogant threats of the evil one and of those in the world are nothing. In Christ, you have a life that not even death can end. Not an emperor, a mad king, a fiery furnace, a sharp knife, or a loaded gun can end. And with that confidence you are free - free to live as the child of God you are.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego found out in short order how God would save them.

After the *three* of them hit the bottom of the fiery furnace, *four* of them walked and talked in the fire. Someone was with them. ***A son of the gods***, as Nebuchadnezzar thought? No, the Son of God. Neither the flames of a furnace nor the flames of hell could hurt Him.

But that Jesus is with them in the flames, that's no small thing. The Lord could have delivered these three young men by putting the flames out. He could have sent His angels to blow out the flames like we blow out candles on a birthday cake. But instead, He allowed the furnace to be heated even more, and then was with them in it. In the midst of the trial and trouble.

As it is with us. Jesus never promised you a trouble-free life, or that He would deliver you by taking your troubles away from you. But He did promise to be with you in them. And we see that, we heard that, in the final passion reading tonight. Jesus didn't blow out the Romans, He allowed them to hang Him on the cross. He hung there with us, with our sin. He is in the flames of sin with us, to save us. So that when the one thief hanging next to Jesus said to Him: ***Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us***, that's exactly what He was doing. Just not the way that thief expected. He was losing His life to gain the life of the world.

And that life is now given to us through the water that extinguishes the power of sin, death, devil and hell for us: the water of Holy Baptism. There we are baptized into Christ and Christ is poured into us, to be with us through this life and its troubles and trials, its challenges and temptations. That they not harm us. That we have the faith and confidence of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Not in knowing how things will go and how it will turn out. But knowing that no matter how it does, we will be delivered out of the hand of evil to eternal life.

So the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had a happy ending. We know that the story of Jesus' Passion will too - though that is the story that we will hear on Easter. As the story ends tonight, Jesus is at rest in the tomb. A sealed tomb. Made as secure as they could possibly make it. They sealed it with the royal signet - no getting in without breaking that seal. They posted well-trained and well-armed guards. No getting by them either. Secure.

But in reality it wasn't a dead Jesus in the tomb that was secure - through His death and resurrection He made us secure. He secured for us the forgiveness of sins. He secured for us a life after death overcomes us. He secured for us all the promises of God. Many in our world are looking for security - but we already have it. It is what Jesus and His Passion are all about. And so we know that our story will have a happy ending as well, when we rise up out of our graves to life. When we walk out of our graves not alone, but with someone with us, too. Someone who joined us there. Not a son of the gods, but the Son of God.

And when we do, we will be like those three young men, in this way: when they came out of the furnace, we heard that they had been protected and preserved so fully and completely that not only was not a hair of their heads singed and their cloaks unharmed, but not even the smell of fire had come upon them. Which is remarkable, because you know that even just sitting beside a campfire for a short time, you and your clothes will smell of smoke for the rest of the day and night. So completely and totally they were saved.

Well, for us too, when we rise from our graves, not a hair of our heads will be missing and there will be not the faintest smell of sin or death on us. We will be completely and totally new, for Jesus is making all things new. All of creation plunged into sin and death by us. All of creation raised from sin and death by Him.

And so in the Easter Vigil, this is the story that is traditionally the last one read every year, for it readies us for the celebration that will break forth in the morning. When Jesus descends into hell and rises from the dead, victorious. And we with Him. And so in the Vigil we pray:

O God, Your Son protected faithful Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace of the king. Grant us protection in our time of testing that we would boldly confess Your name, reject all false worship, and live and die in confidence, knowing that we are safe in Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.