

Rev. Zach Moffatt
Adams UMC
22nd Sunday after Pentecost
November 10th, 2019

First Taste—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

Daniel 3:13-30

Focus: Love and mercy are the way, every single time.

Function: The function of this sermon is to proclaim that followers of Christ follow the way of love, even if that leads us to go against the laws of the world.

Will you pray with me and for me: Holy God who shows and invites us into perfect love, move us to embody that love in our world. Empower us to be agents of mercy and peace. Show us the way to be the peacemakers you call us to be. Have mercy on us when we fail. Perfect us in your amazing and abundant love. May the meditations of our hearts and the words of my lips be acceptable and pleasing in thy sight, oh God, our strength and our redeemer. Speak, Lord Jesus, for your servants are listening.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, AND OF THE REDEEMER, AND OF THE SUSTAINER, AMEN.

The story of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azaria is a powerful story that speaks to the depths of identity, loyalty, and how we are to live our lives as followers of God. Now, looking out in the room, I know who knows what I'm talking about and who doesn't—I know who knows their bibles well and who doesn't. Some of you have confused looks on your faces—because you noticed that I am not saying the names of the persons we just read about. But, guess what, they are same persons. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azaria are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—expect, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are their Hebrew names, their names that were given to them at birth. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are their Babylonian names—the names that King Nebuchadnezzar gave to them when he tried to remove their identity as Hebrews and Israelites.

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, as I said are their Hebrew names. And, each of those names calls upon the name of God. They mean, “God is gracious,” “Who is like God?” and “God keeps him.” Their names remind them of who and whose they are. They are God's people—chosen to be a light among the nations. They are called to worship and follow the way of God before anything else. Before their status and position, before the culture and messages of the society at large, before the labels the world or others put on them, their names remind them that they are God's children, called to follow the path of God...which always leads to love and light. Even if following the ways of God causes them to resist or push up against the status quo—or in this case a law issued from the king—they knew what they must do. They knew that love and mercy are the way—no matter what. One hundred percent of the time, love and mercy trump everything else.

This was put to the test. King Nebuchadnezzar knew that it was the right move to have some of the Israelites on his advisory team, but he also knew he couldn't give them too much leeway. He also knew that if it came across that these Hebrew leaders had shaken off their cultural identity, their religious identity, if they had forsaken their God and began to worship the king, then the rest of the Israelites in captivity would give up hope too and follow suit. So, he issues a law. He builds a giant golden statue of himself and decrees a law that whenever a trumpet or lyre resounds, the people of Babylon must bow and worship the statue. And, anyone who does not, will be thrown into a furnace of fire. The plot should sound familiar—it is eerily similar to Daniel and the Lion's Den. However, what is not similar is Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah's conversation with Nebuchadnezzar. They say, "We have faith that our God can rescue us. But, even if he doesn't we will never worship your gods or you—for we are followers of God." They resisted the powers that be because they knew their allegiance isn't to one person, one country, or one single identity, their allegiance was to God.

Well, we know the end of the story. **Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are thrown into the fiery furnace and when the King looks in he sees a fourth person standing there.** And, no one is burned. The flames don't even consume their clothing. When they are freed from the furnace, they don't even smell like the flame. It is almost as if God is saying, "My way is greater than your way of death, doom, and destruction." And, at the end of the story, Nebuchadnezzar is so moved by this miracle that he himself professes faith in YHWH—the very God who rescued his political enemies.

What I love about this story is how deep it goes. Yes, it is certainly about the power and faithfulness of God. Yes, it is certainly about the majesty of God who calls all people to profess faith in God. Yes, it is certainly a story of hope. But, I think it also paints a powerful image of how we are to live our lives as followers of Christ. I think this story shows that there are times in our lives when our calling as followers of the living God leads us down a path where we resist the powers that be, the status quo, and at times the unjust actions and decrees of the powerful. The way of love and mercy demands that we resist injustice, evil, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. That statement is a part of the covenant that each of us made when we decided to enter the waters of baptism. And, when we look at the life of Jesus—we see that his was a life of radical love that pushed up against and even resisted the status quo. The status quo which says people are dispensable, those on the margins should remain there, sinners shouldn't be welcomed in, you have to have your life together to come to church, you have to vote a certain way to call yourself a Christian, if you don't believe exactly like me you are my enemy, reconciliation is not possible and shows weakness, compassion is a fairytale, and violence should be utilized no matter what.

But, Jesus shows us another way. Jesus shows us that we are to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and forgive and seek reconciliation. Jesus shows us the way of forgiveness. Jesus shows us the way of inclusion. Jesus shows us that the circle can get wider than we could possibly imagine. Jesus shows us that even sinners like me and like you can be redeemed. Jesus shows us that love can't be quieted. Jesus shows us that love pushes the boundaries, crosses borders, and welcomes the undesirable and unlikable people into the

room. Jesus shows us that even criminals can be forgiven and changed. Jesus shows us that there is indeed enough love to go around. Jesus shows us that even our enemies are welcomed to sit at the table. Jesus shows us that the brokenhearted can be healed. Jesus shows us that the addicted and the afflicted will be comforted. Jesus shows us that death has no say in our lives anymore. Jesus shows us that we can be reconciled back to God and back to one another. Jesus shows us that we can live in unity despite our differing ideologies, opinions, and thoughts. Jesus shows perfect peace, perfect hope, perfect joy, perfect love. Jesus shows us that the kingdom of God is coming—it's here but not fully. Jesus shows us that no matter how hard, death, evil, violence, and destruction rear their ugly heads, they are the walking dead—lifeless, not knowing they've been defeated by the love of God incarnate whose name is Jesus.

The world doesn't need more Christians. The world needs more disciples who are willing to follow this way of Jesus. The way that says all—all—all—all—all are invited and no one is turned away from the table of grace and love. The way that says there is an abundance of love, grace, mercy, and physical resources to go around. The way that says humility is all that is needed to succeed. The way that says all of humanity is created with original goodness and that every single person is called beautiful in the eyes of God. The world needs more disciples who have the faith that Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah had—the faith that believes that God can do abundantly far greater than we can possibly imagine. After all, God shut the mouths of lions, God stopped the flames from consuming these three men, God through Jesus calmed the stormy Galilean Sea, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus healed the sick, Jesus fed thousands with just a few loaves of bread and some fish, and to top it off God proclaimed for all the world to hear that death and evil have no power over God and God's love, and just imagine what great things God can do if we just follow God's Spirit wherever she leads. The world needs more disciple who are willing to follow the way of Jesus and his love—no matter what.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, AND OF THE REDEEMER, AND OF THE SUSTAINER, AMEN.