

## **Advent Sermon #1: Be Amazed Hope in the Furnace**

The theme that we are using for this advent season, is Be Amazed. As we move towards Christmas, we will look at how God shows up in amazing ways. When we celebrate Christmas, we are celebrating how Jesus showed up in an amazing way. When a saviour with a message of healing shows up as an infant born in a stable, we are amazed. How has God shown up in amazing ways in scripture, and how has God shown up in amazing ways in our own lives?

In the story from Daniel 3, we have a clear example of God showing up in an amazing way. This story is one that is memorable, and is often taught at Sunday School. While we may have heard this story before, let's see if going through it slowly we can find some interesting thoughts to take with us.

### **Patriotism and the Right Thing**

The story begins with a decree. A problematic decree for our Judean friends. Nebuchadnezzar builds a big beautiful image out of gold. It does not say what this image is of. I always assumed it was a statue of him, but we aren't really sure. What we can be sure is, this image represents an allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom. He wants people to come from all over, and participate in some fan fare, and ceremony. He wants them to bow in submission to the large golden monument he has constructed. Repeatedly in the book of Daniel, we see the exiles walking the line as they try to balance being members of this foreign kingdom, while maintaining their distinctive morals, beliefs, and customs. In the first chapter, these exiles are willing to receive and education from the Babylonians, but are not willing to eat the same food as the king. Here another line is crossed. They are unwilling to bow, or submit to this golden image, and everything it represents.

The problematic decree, also contains a threat. Paul M. Lederach says this about the threat made by Nebuchadnezzar.

“Nebuchadnezzar’s threat is clear- bow or burn! Nor is Nebuchadnezzar’s command an empty threat. Two prophets, Ahab and Zedekiah, were burned by this ruler (Jer. 29:21-23). The threat of “bow or burn” is a logical position for the totalitarian mind- one empire, one king, one worship! Anything placed above the state is unpatriotic and considered treason.” (Lederach, 81)

Nebuchadnezzar has a history of burning his opponents. While Jeremiah calls Ahab and Zedekiah false prophets, who misused God’s name, the fact remains that Nebuchadnezzar executed them by burning them. Nebuchadnezzar demands patriotism, at the very real threat of death. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are left to decide between being patriotic to a tyrant king, or dying. It is interesting that their good work that has got them promoted to high positions, is not enough to convince Nebuchadnezzar that they are loyal. What he is asking isn’t hard work or diligent service. He is asking for blind patriotism and compliance.

Often the action that is seen as “patriotic” is not the right action. This is one of the many ways that this story is timeless. To this day people are looked down upon for abandoning patriotism for what is right. In many circles being a conscientious objector is seen as unpatriotic. That does not make it the wrong thing to do. In July, several teenagers in Israel made international news. In front of crowds of people in Tel Aviv they burned their draft papers into the Israeli army. When asked “In one sentence, why should people refuse to serve in the Israeli army” Yona Roseman responded simply “Because there is a genocide, and you don’t enlist into an army that is committing genocide”. Yona Roseman was imprisoned for her refusal to enlist in the Israeli military. The right decision, is often not the patriotic one.

### **A Picture of Tyranny**

Nebuchadnezzar is the prototype of a tyrant in this story. While he gives his officials on trial one last chance to comply, he is willing to execute them. After they stand firm on their beliefs, Nebuchadnezzar sentences them to burn. In doing so, Nebuchadnezzar’s guards die trying to carry out his orders. He is unbothered. For him it is comply or die, and no person is

above his goals. He lives a life of violence, fear and paranoia. He is not throwing unknown minions into the fire; these are high ranking officials. This picture of tyranny is unfortunately relevant to us today. Nebuchadnezzar is a tyrant, without regard for human life. There will always be parallels to this kind of leader- the kind that eliminates minorities, and dissidents, and sacrifices their allies to do so. Building their power and easing their paranoia comes before anything.

When Jesus was born, a small baby in Bethlehem, he was seen as a threat. Imagine the vastness of your paranoia to be threatened by an impoverished baby in Bethlehem. King Herod does not care about the cost of easing his fears. He massacres all the infants in the area, so that he does not have to worry about an uprising. This story is relevant to us, because tyrants still exist.

### **Questions About Miracles**

These three followers believe that God can save them. They are not sure if God will save them, but they make it clear that whatever happens, they believe in their cause, and their god. "The three Israelites believe God can perform miracles. They also believe God is free not to perform miracles" (Lederach, 83)

Despite being thrown into the fire, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego survive. In fact, they super survive. No clothing is singed, and they don't even smell like smoke. God comes through for them. As far as I know, no one in this congregation has been thrown into a furnace. We all have difficult things that God has rescued us from. In ways that seem ordinary and amazing. When has God rescued you? Did it feel like it was from divine intervention? Or was it through someone you love? Was it something you saw in the moment, or only in hindsight? When I was a bit younger, I suffered from panic attacks very frequently for a period of time. It was really difficult, and it often felt isolating and hopeless. When I look back at that time, I really believe that God put the right people in my life. It was in this period that I met Becca and we fell in love. A lot of the people I was surrounded by at the time spiritualized struggles, and often used platitudes as a comfort. But God put Becca in my life. Someone full of compassion,

gentleness and empathy. Someone who encouraged me to get the help I needed. She didn't make me feel like a failure, or a faithless person. She just helped me in a hard time. Hopefully you can think of a time when God rescued you from something.

While this is a wonderful story of God rescuing their people, for me it raises some questions. I am not sure if there are others who think like this, but sometimes these stories discourage me more than encourage me. I can't help but wonder why God performs miracles for some and not others? Why does God save Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from religious persecution, but does not save countless others? While Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego survive the flames, so many early Anabaptists were killed by burning at the stake. Why didn't God save them?

Perhaps I am looking at this wrong. These three Israelites say that regardless of the outcome, they are going to do the right thing. Can this at times irrational hope that God will intervene, motivate us? Instead of being discouraged by the differing outcomes between martyrs, maybe we should be inspired by what they all had in common. They all had hope. A belief that their cause mattered so much, that whatever happened was worth it. A hope in a God so big, that live or die, everything would be alright. Questions may arise when we look at miraculous events. It can be discouraging to ponder why God acts in some cases and not others. These stories can give us hope in difficult times. They can give us that little push to step out and do the right thing. We can do the right thing, even if it will cost us. Hoping that God will protect us from the bad things, but knowing it is still worth it, even if God does not respond. We can be inspired by those who lived like this before us.

## **Where Do We Go From Here?**

The theme of the first Sunday in advent is hope. How can we leave here hopeful, despite the fact that we just discussed patriotism, tyrants, and asking questions about miracles. There is so much hope in this story, and what it teaches us as readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This story is relevant to us today. That is a bit unfortunate. Tyranny, nationalism, and oppression are all things that still exist in our world. This story is a list of obstacles that are applicable to us. But there is a positive outcome in this story. Tyranny seems here to stay. Oppression has stood the test of time.

But far more importantly, resistance is here to stay. People have always, and will always, stand up against evil in this world. When we hope for something better, we are joining a long line of people who had an unwavering faith in the importance of love. We follow in the very footsteps of Jesus, our ruler, when we stand for what is right. Jesus is our ruler, who is the opposite of a tyrant.

There will always be obstacles. There will always be furnaces that try and take us out. In the midst of the darkness, in the bowels of the furnace, God is with us. God can use us to do something amazing.

In that darkness, and in that heat, we also have each other. In the church, we have a group of people who say no to violence, nationalism, tyranny, oppression and all things evil. We stand together, with hope that God will help us. And if God does not help us, we have hope that it is always worth it to do what is right. Amen.