

Several years ago, my kids and I started playing a game called Monster and Super Hero. Nina invented it but she's now outgrown it, but Julian still loves it. The concept is pretty simple. I'm the monster and Julian's the super hero and the game is that she is trying to steal my backpack that has within it the top secret weapon that I plan to use to destroy the world. But if I catch her, I torture her...also known as tickling. So she'll take off running for the backpack and I'll start chasing her and just as I'm about to catch her and win the game...and Julian cheats. She decides she has a special super power that we had not agreed to before the game begins.

"Force field!"

Or "Ice freeze"

Or "Fire magic."

And these powers that she somehow just acquired do different things. They might protect her or injure me, but the effect is that I can't catch her and she steals the backpack and saves the day.

I wanted to tell you about that game because it reminds me of our Bible story we read this morning about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abedenego in the fiery furnace. I think sometimes many of the interpretations I've heard of this passage – even from adults – are not that much different than the game that Julian and I play. An evil monster, or in this case, the king of Babylon is up to no good. And just as he is about to destroy the good guys in the story, they scream, "Force-field," or according to the Scripture, they scream "Our God will deliver us." And, lo and behold, they are saved. The furnace, even as it was cranked up 7 times hotter than usual, does not harm them.

It's a story about trusting that God will deliver us when we stand up to the monster, and that's certainly part of the point the writer wants to make. But here's the thing, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abedenego did not know that they would be saved when they defied the king. Here's the whole quote of what they said, "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 God deliver us.^[b] 18 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."

Their speech of defiance begins with that small word, "if."

"If God will deliver us"

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abedenego were willing to live in the tension of the "if..." when the outcome was far from certain. And the writer was hoping his own audience would live into that tension as well. The book of Daniel was reminding the people of a time in their past when they had to resist oppression to give them courage to confront those in their own day who were currently oppressing them. The setting for the book of Daniel was early in the Babylonian exile.

In the year 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar's army conquered Jerusalem, burned the city and the temple to the ground, and forced the people to live in Babylon as exiles and, in essence, as slaves. The people faced many hardships.

How to find hope in the midst of oppression.

How to hold on to their unique cultural and religious identity.

How to keep faith in God while resisting Empire.

The writer of Daniel wants his audience to understand that faith in God and accommodation with the Empire are incompatible. You can either bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar's statue or you can remain true to your faith, but you can't do both. And he has his reasons for doing this. While Daniel's setting was the Babylonian exile, the book was actually written much later during the time of Antiochus IV.

Now I need to tell you a little bit about biblical history to understand why that matters. After the Babylonians conquered the people of Israel, the Persians conquered the Babylonians, Alexander the Great and the Greeks conquered the Persians, and after Alexander died, his kingdom was divided into quarters as various people vied for power. Israel/Palestine was ruled over by Antiochus III who was succeeded by his son Antiochus IV who seems to fit the very definition of a corrupt tyrant. He slaughtered his political opponents. He offered the position of high priest to the one who paid him the highest bribe. And he installed an idol in the temple.

Daniel was written during a time when many Jewish people were calling for resistance. Resistance against Antiochus IV. Resistance against Hellenistic culture. Resistance against idolatry. But resistance is risky. The entire region knew how ruthless Antiochus could be and whatever technological and educational gains the Greeks offered, none of that changed the fact that the Jewish people were still occupied, still oppressed, and still, in essence, slaves.

Daniel's original audience had a choice. Would they be people of the Empire? Or would they be people of God? And this choice that has such heavy consequences and comes with so much risk seems to find humanity over and over again throughout human history. There are moments that we live through that ask more of us than other moments. These are moments where the people of God are called to resist the powers of Empire, the powers of oppression in ways that may well cost us something. And what's even harder is that I'm not sure those moments are always clearly seen when we are living through them, but, as we look back in history, we know what they are. Resisting Nazi Germany was one of those moments. The anti-apartheid movement in South Africa was one of those moments. Marching on the streets of Birmingham for Civil Rights was one of those moments.

As we continue our sermon series about community, I think we have to recognize that one of the most important qualities of God's people throughout the ages is courage. There are times when we have to be a courageous community to not only maintain hope in what lies ahead but

to witness to God's reality of love and peace and justice when it feels like the forces of the world are moving in the very opposite direction.

Just think about all that is happening in the world right now. Both Eastern Europe and the Middle East are at war, and perhaps on the brink of something so much worse. White supremacists are feeling more emboldened than any point I can remember in my lifetime. The most grave threats to our democracy since the Civil War with members of Congress being minutes or even seconds away from being executed by an insurrection mob and we have to live through another election in such a divisive time. We lived through the worst pandemic in 100 years. And as we see the devastating pictures and hear the reports of Hurricane Helene through the Southeast and especially Western North Carolina, as yet another once in a life time storm seems to now happen several times a year, we are confronted with the existential threat of climate change. And unfortunately, trying to address any of these can be controversial because there are powerful forces at work that are either causing these events or benefit from them or don't want to sacrifice enough to deal with them. We are living in a time when it's easier, at least in the short term, to go along with these forces, the forces of Empire, the forces of destruction...or, if not to go along with them, to simply not stand against them.

But what the writer of Daniel understood is that accommodating the Empire because it's easier in the short term does not actually bring us life or healing or justice. Instead, the writer invites us to remember how the story ends. God...not Nebuchadnezzar would have the last word. God...not Antiochus IV would have the last word. And the question the writer is really posing to the people is which story will be our story. Will it be the story of the Empire that orchestrates oppression and destruction or will it be the story of God who brings healing, justice, and life?

But here's what the writer also understood – the answer to that question is often not obvious in the moment. It's not always obvious which story is more real or who will have the last word. It's not always obvious that the Empire is bringing about our destruction or that God is offering us life because the power of the Empire seems absolute and the propaganda of the Empire maintains that it is righteous. It's a two-fold approach. The Empire is good so you should bow down to the statue. And the Empire is so mighty that if you don't, we'll kill you. It's a hard thing to resist both the propaganda of the Empire and the threat of the Empire. It was hard for Daniel's original audience and it's hard for us too. It is the call to live into the tension of the "if." "If God will deliver us," from that which we seek to resist.

So let me do what the writer of Daniel did and remind us of a time from our nation's history. When I lived in Birmingham, Alabama, a few miles northeast of where I lived stands Bethel Baptist Church. Bethel was the church where Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, Birmingham's most important Civil Rights leader, was the pastor during the 1950s and 60s. Rev Shuttlesworth, emboldened by the Supreme Court decision ruling segregation unconstitutional and inspired by the Montgomery bus boycotts, announced that he would lead a non-violent direct action campaign where hundreds of African Americans in the city would refuse to sit in the section reserved for blacks on city buses. The campaign was set to begin on the day after Christmas in

1956. In Shuttlesworth's Christmas Eve sermon, he issued his call to action. "If it takes being killed to get integration, I'll do just that thing for God is with me all the way."

There's that "if" again.

"If it takes me being killed..."

"If God will deliver us..."

Just as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abedenego chose to risk death rather than bow down before Nebuchadnezzar's statue, Fred Shuttlesworth, too, was willing to die before he would bow down to the idol of white supremacy.

And he almost did. The very next day, on Christmas, his home was bombed while he, his wife, and his young children were inside. In fact the bomb went off right next to Shuttlesworth's bedroom, it blew him up in the air, and he landed on his mattress as the room caved in around him. He was unhurt. And this made him even more bold, even more convinced that God had called him just for this time. Civil Rights historian Glenn Eskew writes about Shuttlesworth's experience, "As Shuttlesworth emerged from under the rubble that Christmas night, he interpreted his survival as a sign that God had chosen him to direct the civil rights struggle in Birmingham. The Lord has protected me, I'm not injured."

I don't know this to be true, and I hope I'm wrong, but we may just be living through one of those consequential times in history where living out our faith requires a lot of courage. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abedenego were. Like Fred Shuttleworth was. And if we do find ourselves in that time, I think both the story from our own past and the story from our Scripture have at least two points into which we can take courage.

The first is the hope in how the story ends. The three Hebrew leaders in our Scripture and Rev. Shuttlesworth trusted that God has the final say. The "If" tension was not about the final outcome. The final outcome is that God is more powerful than the Empire. The final outcome is that the "arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice." The final outcome is that "love wins." But that doesn't mean it wins right now. Right now is the time of the "if." But precisely because Shadrach, Meshach, and Abedenego trusted in the end of the story, precisely because Fred Shuttlesworth trusted in the end of the story...they could persevere through the "if."

And secondly, we can rise to meet the challenge this time asks of us because none of us are asked to do that alone. Neither Shadrach, Meshach, or Abedenego tried to defy the king by themselves. I have to believe they found strength in each other. Fred Shuttlesworth not only had a congregation but a movement of hundreds of people behind him. And look around. One thing we learned during the pandemic is that the importance of community. Musicians figured out how to offer meaningful music. Preachers can preach to a camera just fine. But church is not just about the music or the sermon. It's about the community of people who have chosen

God's story as our story. It's about knowing that we are in this together. And I don't know about you, but I find it a lot easier to be brave when I have other people willing to be brave with me.

So friends, may we together live into God's story. May we together courageously choose life and justice and peace over power, and greed, and violence. May we together be the people of the "if."