

## **Furnace of Fire**

Back to School: Part 5 “Furnace of Fire”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – September 10, 2023

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

**Readings:** Daniel 3

**Reflection:** Psalm 13

**Greeting:** Scripture helps you to be wise in seeking salvation. All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching. Scripture equips each person to do what is good. Let us learn and continue to grow in Christ our Lord!

**Prayer:** God, we believe that you provide us with all that we need in this life. You have not set us adrift in a sea of ignorance but have set us on the path of wisdom. Help us that we may grow in your love and knowledge. Let us never stop learning about your mercy and grace. Give to us a spirit that is eager to always know more so that we may do more for your sake. Help us to walk in your ways and that we may always seek your truth. And give to us a heart that we may love you more day by day as we share your love with the world. And may you guide us and lead us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Reflection:** Psalm 13

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me.  
(Psalm 13 NRSV\*)*

We read the words of Psalm 13 and we hear of seeking God in distress. Of trusting that God’s steadfast love will be there for us even in times of trouble. Do you take comfort in the love of Christ when things aren’t going according to plan? Do you bring the peace of Christ to others when they are troubled? How can we come together in love to support each other in times of distress? How can we help others to experience God’s steadfast love and faithfulness? How can we join together to always learn more in God’s love and care?

**Prayer:** Lord, we turn to you in all things knowing that you are always there for us. Help us to continue to grow in knowledge and truth by your Holy Spirit. Help us to grow in mercy and grace through our risen Savior. As we come before you this day we bring to you the concerns and joys that we have shared aloud together. We bring before you the unspoken worries and

celebrations of our hearts. May you guide us and lead us so that we know your blessing in our joy and our sorrow. We pray you will help us to grow in love through our laughter and our tears. May your steadfast love and faithfulness be our constant guide and companion. And may we always continue to grow in faith and in love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **Sermon:**

Our scripture reading for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our reading for today comes from Daniel 3, the story of the furnace of fire and Daniel's friends.

*King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue whose height was sixty cubits and whose width was six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent for the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to assemble and come to the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. So the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces assembled for the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. When they were standing before the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire." Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Accordingly, at this time certain Chaldeans came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, shall fall down and worship the golden statue, and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men pay no heed to you, O king. They do not serve your gods, and they do not worship the golden statue that you have set up." Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought in, so they brought those men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? Now if you are ready, when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, you should fall down and worship the statue that I have made. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. 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 him deliver us. 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." Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage*

*against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace heated up seven times more than was customary and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, "Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?" They answered the king, "True, O king." He replied, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt, and the fourth has the appearance of a god." Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men; the hair of their heads was not singed, their tunics were not scorched, and not even the smell of fire came from them. Nebuchadnezzar said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way." Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon. (Daniel 3 NRSV\*)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This week in our "Back to School" series we take a look at the book of Daniel. Except that Daniel himself isn't in the story. It is about three of Daniel's companions. They are named Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah elsewhere but here are called by the names given by the Babylonians, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Today's story has them going through the ordeal of the furnace of fire. There are some lessons that we can learn as adults about faith and power. The children's version is mostly a story of God saving these three people, and that's the entire focus. That's completely appropriate for the children's version of the story. But I think there are layers to this that we need to understand as adults because it helps us to have an even better understanding, not only of our faith, but of the responsibility that comes with power. Something else to mention here is that we don't always note when something is humorous in the Bible. Within this account is a bit of comic relief in the way that things are presented. We might miss it this if we aren't able to see comedy as part of the Bible. You might be wondering why it is important to be able to identify something funny in Scripture. The reason is that if we can't laugh, we are missing part of the point that is being made. And we can miss it if we refuse to laugh at the Bible, thinking that it is being disrespectful. To the contrary, we end up missing what the author is telling us if we cannot see the humor. So, if you are worried, I give you permission to laugh.

Now, our story today has King Nebuchadnezzar making a golden statue. A very skinny golden statue. Measuring 60 cubits tall and only six cubits wide, this is roughly 30 meters tall and 3 meters wide, or about 100 feet tall and about 10 feet wide. So, everyone is gathered together for the dedication of the statue. We get some comic relief in the story because of the constant repetition in the narrative. We see it in the listing of the officials that are called together. We see it with the listing of the instruments to be played that will signal the time for everyone to fall down and worship. They keep listing these people and instruments to point out the absurdity of what is going on. It is at this point that some people come forward to report on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for not worshipping the statue. So, Nebuchadnezzar calls for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. He asks if they have refused to worship the golden statue. And once again we are given the entire list of instruments. He offers them a choice. Worship or be thrown into the furnace of fire.

This is where we might get our first change from the kid's version. The three friends offer no defense because they understand what they've done. But their response isn't simply that God will save them. It offers us something a little deeper. They basically say that if God is willing to save them, let him deliver them. But if God will not, then they still refuse. They don't know that they will be saved. They don't simply declare what God is going to do. No, they instead demonstrate their own faith. This is important theologically because they don't act as if they have special instructions. They don't act as if they have foreknowledge about how they are safe. They recognize the danger but still will not betray their faith in God. This incenses Nebuchadnezzar and so Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are to be thrown into the furnace. In his rage, the king has the furnace fired up seven times hotter than normal. He has his guards toss them into the furnace, and it is so hot the soldiers are killed by the fire. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are now inside this blazing hot furnace. But Nebuchadnezzar is shocked. Three men were thrown in and four can now be seen in the middle of the fire and unharmed. There are different explanations of this fourth individual, the Hebrew understanding was an angel of the Lord, while later Christians interpreted this as Christ. The part we are interested in today is that our three friends are unharmed. God does rescue them. The king calls for them to come out. We yet again have a list of officials who are now witnesses of these events.

Nebuchadnezzar blesses the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He grants protection to the Jewish people. But this is where we learn the king has learned very little. Nebuchadnezzar makes a decree that if anyone utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego they'll be torn limb from limb and their house laid in ruins. The king doesn't convert. He just grants protection, and he does it in the same carelessly violent fashion he decreed worship of the statue. His carelessness with violence and his rage have been nothing but harmful to everyone in the story. Nebuchadnezzar wants people to submit to his authority and power. He was willing to kill his own men because of it, as we saw with the guards that died because of the rage of the king. Because this isn't about faith for the

king. He isn't calling for anyone to believe but for people to fear his own power. He sees the grace of God and equates it to power, power that he wants for himself. Nebuchadnezzar sees a God of love and grace and simply wants that same power. And it all could have been avoided if the king hadn't wanted to force worship on anyone in the first place. His desire for control is what started this entire mess to begin with. It wasn't enough to be the king. They had to worship his statue. It wasn't enough for those three Jewish men to do the job they had been given. They needed to worship because of someone else's ego, because of someone else's anger. Had the people been free to worship as they chose, people wouldn't have needlessly died.

This ending can leave us feeling incomplete and continues with the next chapter. But today we learn about being obsessed with power. Everyone is still in danger. So, I hold this up as a cautionary tale of what can happen when we miss God's grace and cling to condemnation. Because we see a very calm and strong faith contrasted with a very violent lack of faith. When we cling to force instead of grace, we do nothing but oppress. We remember that we demonstrate our faith through love and not compliance. We remember that we invite people to faith through mercy and not rage. Because we bring people to Christ so that people can choose Christ. We value that just as our three friends chose faith others may choose faith. And that we may all choose peace in the midst of violence, hope in the midst of adversity, and love in the midst of hate. Amen.

**Prayer of Confession and Pardon:** God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

**Offering:** If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Dismissal with Blessing:** May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### **Our Current Series – Back to School**

Our current series is going to be taking a look at lessons we may have learned in a children's Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. But did we learn everything about the story that we need to know? What more can we learn now as adults? Each week we take on a new lesson as we go back to school!

Next Week: Cain & Abel.

For this we will be looking at the story of Cain & Abel and what we can learn from everything that follows.

### **Prayer List**

Rev Angie Lee	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup	Ambulance Crew	Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Tricia Adkins
Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart	Tom Finley
Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert
Phil Hawickhorst	Ray Carr	Alice Sherwood	Richard Durham
Kathy Hanks	Steve Carlen	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser
Corine Howard	Don Gilmore	Shirley Jester	Connie Brown
Marsha Overton	Linda Carlen	Michael Nichols	Paul Cox
Taylor Waldorf	Harriet Tucker	Becky McGuinness	Janet Yokum
Donna Farley	Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser
Larry Thompson	Evelyn Sue Icenogle	Greg Williams	Martha Roberts
Charlie & Charlotte Baxter	Paul Schulte	Lavon Figgins	Kara Newton

Rev Camron D St. Michael

<https://stmichael.pw>

[cdstmichael@outlook.com](mailto:cdstmichael@outlook.com)

(316)530-3182 (call or text)

PO Box 54, Charleston IL, 61920

\* Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

+ Scripture quotations are from the Common English Bible, Copyright © 2011 by Common English Bible.