

But If Not

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[0 : 00] As we said at the beginning of this service, the Easter vigil was originally a preparation for baptism, an all-night vigil kept by candidates before they would be baptized at first light on Easter morning.

And as part of that preparation, candidates would read passages like we're reading tonight. They would read passages like Daniel 3, the passage that we just heard read, very well done, by the way, as they prepared for their new life.

Daniel chapter 3 is the story of three young Israelites who have been taken into captivity with many of their people and forced to live in Babylon.

But this does not mean that God has abandoned his people, as many thought had happened.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God reveals that he has actually sent his people into exile in Babylon to seek its welfare, to be in the city but not of the city, that God might bless the city through their presence there.

And God has given the same mission to his people all around the world, to live like exiles in captivity, to be in the world but not of the world, to be an extension, a vehicle of God's blessing to the nations.

[1 : 42] And so this passage, as we look at it, shows us, for those of us who are Christians, three things about living this life faithfully.

For those of us who are here who are not Christians, it helps us understand why the world needs to be rescued, why God needs to send his blessing out to the nations.

The three things we'll see are this, the danger of captivity, the way to freedom, and the God of the furnace. Let's pray. Lord, we ask that as we have unfolded your story, as we have opened your word, that you would be true to your promise, to be the God who speaks through your word.

This is not mere ink and paper. Lord, this is your voice that we seek to hear. And we pray that as we hear your voice, that we would come face to face with the living word, Jesus Christ.

And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. The danger of captivity. The Babylonians had a very innovative approach to conquest.

[2 : 50] They would conquer a people with their military, and then they would take the best and the brightest of those people into Babylon, and there they would assimilate them into Babylonian culture.

It was subjugation through assimilation. It was quite a brilliant tactic. But it makes one wonder, how do you bring many people from many different cultures and traditions and religions into your city, and then assimilate them?

And here's where King Nebuchadnezzar's brilliance really shines, because he understands something about human nature that many of us don't. He understands this.

He says, So Nebuchadnezzar sets up a great tower, a 90-foot golden idol, a representation of all the glory, all the values of Babylonian society, a monument to human greatness.

And he tells the people, you can have your own religion in private. Believe whatever you want in your own home. But when you're in public, you must bow to this idol.

[4 : 36] When you hear the music, you will bow, and if you do not, you will be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. The spiritual conquest has begun.

If you want to control people, you have to control what they worship. Because whatever we worship ultimately controls us.

So he builds a statue, and he ascribes divine value to this statue.

And this is how anything might become an idol in our lives. We take some created thing. It could be anything, such as an object, or another person, or a relationship, or an ideology.

And we imbue it with divine significance. We set our whole heart on it. We say to this thing, or to this person, or to this ideology, my life's not worth living unless I have this thing.

[5 : 46] If I lose this thing, my life is no longer worth living. You set your whole heart on it. And it becomes more important to you than anything.

Even God. We look at this society, and we can't imagine listening to music and bowing to a great golden statue. We say, I would never do such a foolish thing.

Think about our lives here in D.C. Those of us who live in the metro D.C. area, we don't bow to a golden statue, do we? But many of us do bow to other idols.

Perhaps the idol of achievement. We set our hearts on being respected. On being successful. So we begin to elevate our grades, and our college admissions, and our jobs, and our careers above everything else.

We drive ourselves, and we drive our children to succeed. We're willing to sacrifice friendships. We're willing to sacrifice time with our friends, with our children.

[6 : 58] We're willing to sacrifice our own health. We're willing to work all the time through nights and weekends, which, by the way, is much easier to do now that many of us work from home. I saw a thread on Reddit a few years back about the best places in Washington, D.C.

to cry. And it became wildly popular. Now, why would people want to swap secret places to cry in Washington, D.C.?

It's because of the pressure. People say living here is like being in a pressure cooker. You're living in a meritocracy where you're constantly struggling to prove your worth.

And so people need to know that if they feel the urge to run out of their office weeping, they can find a place where they won't be disturbed.

Right? So for those of us who are Christians, we may be Christians in private. We may believe in and talk about and teach Sunday school classes on the value of Sabbath and the value of rest and a balanced life, the priority of friendship and family and community.

[8 : 14] But in public, we bow like everyone else. And there's no difference between our priorities or work habits and those around us.

Or consider the example of politics. Many of us can tend to make politics more important than anything else. And that begins to define our view of other people.

Surveys show that we on both sides of the aisle tend to view those on the other side of the aisle, not merely as people with whom we might disagree on policy, but as evil, as immoral, as unintelligent, as representing an existential threat to the future of our society.

And again, for those of us who are Christians, we may be Christians in private. We may believe that we're all part of Christ's body, that we're all one in Him, but in public, we tend to bow.

There's been a big reshuffling of Christians over the last three years who are changing churches, not for theological reasons, but for political reasons.

[9 : 21] Wanting to be in churches where their political views are going to be supported rather than critiqued. There are many Christians who have changed their church because of their politics.

How many Christians have changed their politics because of their church? The point of these examples is this.

Everybody worships something. Even if you consider yourself non-religious, and by the way, if you consider yourself non-religious and you're at a three-hour Easter vigil, I'm so delighted that you're here.

And I would love to talk to you after the service and to know what got you to come. Did somebody trick you? But if you consider yourself to be non-religious, I guarantee you, with all due respect, you are still worshipping something.

It could be achievement or politics. It could be affirmation. It could be security. It could be comfort. Whatever makes your life worth living, whatever you can't imagine living without, that is your idol.

[10 : 26] For those of us who are Christians, that doesn't make us immune to idols. When we bow to the same idols as everyone else, it means we are in spiritual captivity.

And we don't have Nebuchadnezzar to contend with, but great politicians, great influencers, great leaders, great advertising companies know this spiritual truth.

If you can control what people worship, you can control them. The real danger is not physical captivity. It is spiritual captivity. That's the danger of captivity. Now, what is the way to freedom?

This brings us to the climax of the story. The music plays, but these three young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they refuse to bow. You need to understand, they were surrounded by Israelites, all prostrate, and they're standing tall.

Some of their co-workers tell Nebuchadnezzar, who brings them up front of everyone, and he says, if you do not worship, you shall be immediately cast into a burning, fiery furnace. But look at what they say.

[11 : 34] Oh, Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us from the burning, fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king.

But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

Now, we know how the story goes. We know that when they're thrown into the furnace, God miraculously saves them, but they had no idea. They had no idea this was going to happen.

This is the Holy Saturday moment of Daniel chapter 3. And they're staring into the unknown, and they have no idea what's going to happen.

But if not, signifies a single-minded devotion to God. We know God has the power to deliver us, and He might. But if not, we will serve Him and Him alone.

[12 : 49] The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermon on this passage is by far one of my most favorite sermons he ever preached. And he talks in that sermon about the difference between an if faith and a though faith.

And an if faith says, if God saves me from the furnace or helps me get this job or makes sure I have enough money or helps me feel fulfilled, then I will worship Him.

It's faith that is contingent on God holding up His end of the bargain. It's transactional. A though faith says, though God may allow me to suffer, though God may refuse to answer my prayers the way I want, I will still worship Him and Him alone.

That is a faith with no contingencies where we're worshiping God for God's sake alone. Now you say, what does this have to do with idolatry? Well, remember, Nebuchadnezzar allowed his people to worship their own God as long as they also worshiped his idol.

That way he could still control them. And this is the real problem with an if faith. With an if faith, you're not actually worshiping and serving God.

[14 : 17] You are co-opting God in service to your idol. When you say, if God makes me successful, then I will worship Him, then the thing that you're worshiping is actually success.

And you're trying to force God to serve your idol. And if your true idol is success, then success is your master. And guess what? Whoever holds the keys to your success is in control of you.

So if your boss asks you to do unethical things in order to be successful, you'll do them.

That's captivity. But when you are able to say, though God may allow me to fail, though I may miss the promotion, though I may lose my job, I will still serve Him and Him alone, then the idol of success no longer has any power over you.

And you, my friend, are free. The only way to be free is to worship God alone. If we try to worship God plus anything else, we will be taken captive.

[15 : 36] So how do we get a though faith that leads us to freedom? Only in the God of the furnace. We think of this story as a story of God miraculously saving these men.

But look what he does. He could have hurled a meteor down and destroyed Nebuchadnezzar and the idol and the furnace. But he does not prevent them from going in.

He allows them to be thrown into the furnace. And yet, when Nebuchadnezzar looks in, to his astonishment, he sees four men walking around unharmed.

The first three he recognizes is Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But he is awestruck by the fourth man who looks like a son of the gods. This has such a profound impact on the king that at that moment and for a time, for a time in the story of Daniel, he's willing to worship and honor the God of Israel.

Christians look at this story and recognize this as a foreshadowing of the coming of Jesus Christ.

[16 : 52] And what we recognize is that when Jesus died on the cross, he went into the ultimate furnace of God's wrath. But he went alone.

And this begins to open our eyes to the way, the only way, that we might be able to have a though faith. It's in realizing that Jesus is the only one who's willing to go into the furnace for us.

See, no idol would ever do that for you. Whatever other thing we worship gives us nothing in return. Never delivers on the promise it makes.

but Jesus is willing to plunge into the furnace on our behalf. And because of the cross, Christians know that we have nothing to fear.

Because if you are in Christ by faith, then you know the worst thing that could possibly happen to you has already happened. It will never happen to you.

[18 : 00] And because Jesus went into that furnace of sin and death and then rose again, he transformed death into a mere doorway.

See, eventually Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego died. They were preserved this time, but eventually they died. And one day we will all die.

God does not promise. He never promises to save us from death. God promises to save us through death. The furnace is really a metaphor for the suffering that Christians face throughout our lives.

You know, we read this passage and we wonder, will I ever have to go into the furnace? Will I ever be plunged into the furnace? not if you have an if faith.

With an if faith you have a shot at living a long and reasonably pain-free life. With an if faith you have a shot at being relatively reasonably comfortable.

[19 : 16] With an if faith you have a shot at fitting in, at being well-liked, at being esteemed even. With an if faith you'll have a religion that is a source of encouragement to you when you're feeling down, that gives you a sense of meaning and direction that provides some structure for your children and a source of friendship for you.

But someone else is calling the shots in your life. And you will never really experience closeness with Jesus because Jesus is in the furnace.

And you will live your whole life standing on the outside looking in. If you want to be free and if you want to be with Jesus you have to go into the furnace.

And that means following Jesus no matter what it might cost you. And that means a hard life where you most certainly will suffer. But in that furnace you will never be alone.

because Jesus Christ is already there and he will always be there with you until he leads you out the other side. And because of the cross you know you have nothing to fear.

[20 : 38] See for those early Christians in those early Easter vigils as they prepared for their own baptisms they were clear on the meaning of what they were about to do.

Baptism my friends is a death. But it is a death that leads to new life. That's why the early baptistries looked like mausoleums.

They looked like tombs. That was intentional. You're going to die a death and then emerge into new life. A life that is free.

And a life that is fireproof. A life that no amount of suffering can ever diminish. Because it will be a life that will go on into glory in eternity.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you that you went into the furnace.

[21 : 39] We thank you for the example of these exiles who in their holy Saturday staring into those flames.

Not knowing what would come. Nevertheless trusted you. And we pray that as we sit here in our holy Saturday staring into the emptiness of the tomb.

Wondering what we might find on the other side. I pray that you would give us the same reassurance. I pray that you would galvanize us and strengthen us to have a single-minded devotion to you, knowing that you already have a single-minded devotion to us.

And we pray this in your holy name. Amen.