

“Taking Calvary to the Community: Fire Houses”
Rev. Brian Henderson · August 28, 2011

Text: Daniel 3:19-28

Our text today which Shelby has just read tells a great story about three individuals who did their best to be true to the faith they professed. This account of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is told with great drama and yet still with great seriousness.

There are any number of theological themes which this story illustrates: (1) the power of God to save and deliver even from the most difficult circumstances; (2) how to live in a pagan culture when the pressures for conformity are severe; (3) how a pagan moves from intolerance to tolerance; (4) the risks of commitment; (5) the cost of discipleship; (6) the courage of faithfulness; and (7) how fidelity is rewarded.

At one level...Daniel chapter 3 is a preacher's delight because she or he can preach from any number of angles with significant principles to proclaim.

For us today here at Calvary...this story which centers around a fiery furnace connects with our theme of the Denver Fire Department. I suppose this connection isn't the strongest...but I think you can tell why Anne and I chose today's scripture.

For me...I stand with many scholars who suggest that quite possibly...the primary reason for this ancient story out of antiquity...was to give emphasis to the prophetic message of the prophet Isaiah who recorded the words of the Lord as saying:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord...

I wonder...if perhaps this ancient tale is to remind us...even us today...that no matter what God is with us.

It was a cold, wintery Saturday in early 2005. Snow and ice covered the ground. Tara and I were just settling in after a busy morning and early afternoon when all of sudden we heard our neighbors' daughters yelling, "The church is on fire, the church is on fire!"

Those words changed the course of time and reality for us and the church we served in Upper Merion. Within...what seemed like hours and yet just minutes...we stood along with many others watching the very facility in which couples were married...children were dedicated...people were baptized burn away. A building...set apart for sacred ritual quickly turned into sacred rubble.

The next morning...with pockets of smoke and heat still seen and felt...with the sent of burned timbers resting ever so present in the air...a small group of church leaders and I were led through the building's remains.

This space which once was the sanctuary but had become the fellowship hall was where most of the church's storage was kept. Everything in this space was gone...burned away...everything...EXCEPT...believe it or not...the nativity set which is displayed on the cover of today's bulletin.

If you look closely...you can see how this set survived...the straw in which it was stored has been burned permanently into the ceramic...the Christ-child's face has been blackened over...but amazingly...other than being affected by the smoke and heat...this three piece set was undamaged...not a chip or knick can be found on these pieces.

In so many ways...this nativity set...became a symbol...it became a ray of hope for our congregation...in such a profound way...this ceramic set of the holy family reminded us of the story and truth it is to recount...that Emmanuel...God with us...was with us as a congregation even in such a difficult and devastating season of time and life.

The story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego too is a story that is intended to remind people like us that God is near...God is here...God is with us all even when the tides of life are against us...even when the earth shakes and the Dow roller-coasts up and down...when hurricanes come...when we're not certain what tomorrow will bring...God will see us through.

The words of Corrie ten Boom come to mind...Corrie ten Boom who knew about fiery furnace experiences...figuratively and literally...Corrie said: *Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.*

God is with us. In all that we face...in all we experience...with every reality of life...with every disagreement we may have...in dreams realized and in dreams relinquished...God is with you and me...and God can and will see us through.

This is the point and hope of the gospel. This is the significance of the Christ-child, Emmanuel...God knows our realities because God became part of reality through the life and love of Jesus.

When you pass through waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you....For I am the Lord your God...

But before we say, “Amen.” today...I wonder if we ought to think again about who God is with...really... especially as we finish this series on *Taking Calvary to the Community*...

For sure...we can and must believe that God is with *us*. But...too often...when we believe that God is with *us* we forget that God is with *others* too...that God is with everyone...everywhere...all the time.

This isn't as easy to remember as it may seem.

When we turn to the scriptures...both the Old and New Testaments...more often than not...those with whom God is...are often people in trouble...like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego...God is often with those who are in harm's way...those who have been or were being persecuted...God is often with the oppressed and poor...Jesus seemed to spend more time with folk who were pushed to the borders of society and even faith communities...

And so...as this sermon series concludes...may our efforts and creative ways of reaching out to our community only continue. How we do this...is up to all of us. One way we can continue the spirit of this series is to remember that as God *is* with us...so God *is* with and in everyone in our community...people we like and love and who look like us and think like us...and God *is* with and in everyone with whom we have a difficult time relating and perhaps even appreciating or understanding.

As we remember that God is with and in all people no matter who or how they are...we may just discover a renewed sense of life and vitality here at Calvary that reflects more and more *a Christ-like community that experiences and shares God's love.*

Think about that. Amen.