

## **“THE FIERY FURNACE.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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### **Scripture Texts: Daniel 3:8-30**

**Prayer:** Holy Father, help us to hear the Word that became flesh, help us to see Jesus and to delight more in Him than in anything the world has to offer, more than all the world has to offer.

### **Introduction.**

Merry Christmas and let's talk about three guys being thrown into a fiery furnace. What does this story told 500 years from the birth of Jesus have to do with Christmas? Who spiked the pastor's eggnog?

This advent we have been talking about theophanies, events in the OT where heaven and earth meet, where the divine encounters the human. Theophanies are unique, visible appearances of God, when something completely out of the ordinary happens and we get a glimpse of the nature and character of God.

There is an irony in this theophany. The theophanies of God in the OT often involve fire, the pillar of fire, lightning, fire coming down to consume sacrifices, the burning bush, etc. God is the author of those fires.

But in this story a pagan king sets a fire, and God comes into that fire and renders it harmless.

Let's get the background of the story in mind so we can understand its meaning and relevance.

### **Context.**

Israel, the people of God, have sinned and sinned again against their God. Their sin has taken the form in one way or another of breaking the first commandment which then lead to breaking all the rest. Idolatry is the fundamental, foundational sin, the sin from which all other sin flows.

Idolatry is why we do wrong things, why we sin, why we do anything contrary to the Word of God. We never break commandments number 2 through 10 without breaking the first one first. We sin because there is something, we want more than God and His will and His Word.

So, God brought down His righteous judgment on Israel in the form of the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar who destroyed Israel and carried the people of God into captivity back in Babylon. And Israel wasn't the only nation, the Babylonians were the big bully of the day and they ruled ruthlessly over many nations all over the Middle East from Egypt to India.

As kings are want to do, they like to exert their power and authority, to command the allegiance of their people, and force their compliance. So, King Nebuchadnezzar made a 90-foot-tall golden statue, most likely of one of his favorite gods, to be worshiped by all the conquered nations.

Bend the knee, pay homage, just go along to get along, when in Babylon do as the Babylonians do. If not, a fiery furnace awaits you, and what god is there who can deliver you from that? Well, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had an answer to that question.

**Daniel 3:17-18** 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. 18 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.”

The words “which you have set up” are repeated in this chapter over and over. The point is clear, this statue is nothing, it's a man-made worthless piece of art work. It has no power, it is not life giving, it doesn't save or help or heal.

They are absolutely confident God can save them, and He will if He is pleased to do so, but nevertheless, if He doesn't, it doesn't matter. They aren't questioning God's power, His omnipotence. God is God, He will do whatever He decides to do.

Their faith and boldness rather than impress the king, drives him into a rage. He orders the furnace to be made seven times hotter. He ordered his strongest men to bind them. They are covered head to foot in highly flammable clothing and bound tightly. There is no escape. Even those who stood at the entrance to throw them in died. Death is imminent.

The king thinks his exertion of power will win the day. Remember the Pharisees making sure the tomb of Jesus didn't just have a huge stone rolled against it, but it was sealed, and guards posted. Such is the folly of the world. God welcomes this sort of thing, since it only serves to display His greater power.

All of this is meant to prepare us for the magnitude of the miracle that is about to happen.

They were thrown into the fire with a clean conscience, without fear. At first it appears that God does desert them, He doesn't keep them from being thrown into the fiery furnace. They were prepared to die, and indeed that is exactly what it looks like happens.

What Nebuchadnezzar saw next profoundly impacted him. He went quickly from being filled with fury to astounded, perhaps even terrified. Not only didn't they die, they didn't even so much as have a hint of smell of fire or smoke. Phama notices when I have been to Katz or Woods or Dutch Mothers. She can smell it. Odors penetrate everything. This is amazing.

Nebuchadnezzar makes a bold confession, he acknowledges the power of their God. He confesses the truth about God without being converted to God. He is saying no more than that the Most High God is just a chief among gods (sort of like Zeus). He is just a God who is able to save His servants. He is not willing to curse his own gods or submit to the true God.

Miracles can certainly prepare us to believe, but here is evidence that miracles don't save us apart from the Spirit and Word of God in our hearts.

There may be someone here who is impressed with this God, and is willing to say Jesus came, and lived and died on a cross for the forgiveness of sins. But you aren't ready or willing to bend the knee, to bow your heart, to truly repent of your own gods and turn your life over to the one true God. Don't be this guy, don't be Nebuchadnezzar. Certainly not in the face of so great a miracle of power and grace as God come to earth as one of us so we could be like Him.

How can someone praise another God and praise those who follow Him for their faithfulness and for their refusal to worship other gods, and not imitate them? It's called lip-service. He says no other god should be worshiped, and then doesn't do it.

### **Who is in the fire?**

With each of the previous theophanies we have asked the question who is it and then looked at the evidence. Who is this being that the pagan king refers to as one like a son of the gods?

It is not human that much we can say with confidence. He is either an angel or a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God.

*First*, the being appears in the fire suddenly out of nowhere. He doesn't prevent them from being thrown in but is with them while they are in the fire.

*Second*, he looks human like the other three men, yet he is also very much unlike the other three men, something about his appearance is god-like.

*Third*, the being has great power to be untouched by the fire, and great authority and power to unbind the men and command the flames to keep them from touching the other three in

any way. This is a divine miracle, an extraordinary display of the power of God to rescue and save.

*Fourth*, Nebuchadnezzar first calls him a son of the gods and then an angel. Pagans are often made to utter divine truth unconsciously (like when the centurion at the cross said surly this was the Son of God).

*Finally*, the prophet Isaiah writes that God himself would be with his people in the fire during the exile: “I will be with you. ... When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you” (Isa. 43:2). This is a fulfillment of that prophecy.

Heaven and earth meet in a furnace. The divine came down and broken into the human, at just the right moment in just the right way, according to their greatest need, revealing the glory of God. All the pagans had to agree, this was the power of God. Even if the man was not a pre-incarnate visitation of Jesus, it was a display of the presence and power of God.

### **Idolatry exposed.**

Do you know why this theophany is important and relevant to us in our day? Because we are not living in Kansas anymore, Toto. Like the Jews in Daniel, we are no longer living in the Promised Land. Our nation and our world are looking more like Babylon all the time. A melting pot of nations all bowing down to different gods.

We are exiles, refugees, sojourners and the day is coming when we might end up in a fiery furnace or a lion's den or a jail because we will not compromise our allegiance to our God.

Caesar is increasingly pushing Christians to support abortion, support same-sex unions, transgender confusion, euthanasia, legalized drug use. We will be asked to approve and support a lie, to compromise, to just bow down and keep silent.

Let's be clear, our world is in direct conflict with our worship. The demands of the lords of the earth are increasingly in opposition to the duties we owe to our Lord. The followers of the one true God are going to find themselves increasingly in danger and difficulty, even to the point of putting their own life in jeopardy.

This is happening in Iran today. Tens of thousands of people are turning from the false religion of Islam. They are seeing it for what it really is, worthless, holding out false hope, a religion of violence and hate, destructive to individuals and families and women. And as they are turning away, the fury of the government of Iran which has propped up this false idol is coming down on them.

Let me make one point about rage and fury and anger. Fury is what comes to those who tear down false gods. To attack an idol is to threaten someone and what they have built their life on.

Do you want to know a good way to expose an idol? Follow the anger, look for the outrage, the loudest protests?

Look in our nation where is the most fury? Wherever a sacred cow is being attacked. Attack abortion, sexual immorality, sodomy, porn, gender identity, transgender issues, and what response do you get? Attack the ideologically driven eco-agenda and where does the fury fall? What are the idols of our day? Earth, sex, self. Just look for the strongest anger.

This isn't just other nations, this isn't just our nation, this is in all our hearts. Where do we get the most angry? What most pushes our buttons? What is sacred to us and what do we defend to the death? What makes us most defensive? What do we claim a right to, that can't be touched? Where are we most selfish?

An idol is anything you love more, fear more, value more or serve more than you do God. Whatever the god is, the retirement portfolio, the business plan, the relationship you had put everything into, the marriage, the kids, sports, TV, clothes, house, yard, lifestyle, where are you looking to get your happiness, your joy, your fulfillment, your acceptance, your worth.

Idolatry is not just an OT thing, it is a human thing. John Calvin famously said that all human hearts are idol factories. Our hearts are like a production line, constantly cranking out idols. We are all idolaters, constantly looking for affirmation, pleasure, what we want out of life from something, some created, creaturely, temporal, trivial thing.

These three men recognized the statue for what it was, an idol which demanded allegiance. They saw what it would mean to bow down, and they said no. Can you believe their stand? Who does this today? Who in the face of death, says no our cultures gods?

Holding on to this earthly life was nothing to them compared to the glory of God. God's glory should be of more value to us than a hundred lives and everything this earth has to offer. What do we most prefer?

I asked myself, what idols are in my life, do I recognize them, or do I downplay them, do I dismiss them as nothing really? Or if I recognize them as idols, am I prepared to renounce them, deny them, have nothing to do with them?

When Jesus exposed money as the rich young man's idol of his heart, he was not able to give it up, to renounce it. How hard would it be for Jesus to pinpoint our idols? What do we love, what do we put our time and money and energy into? What do we do for self rather than for God?

How many of us want our idols exposed? How many of us would be angry, defensive, argue back? How many of us would be thankful, quick to repent and turn away?

How many are willing to honestly say to God, examine my heart and see if there be any wicked way in me, any idolatrous way, any way in which I put something above God, any desire or pleasure or thing that has a hook and a hold on me? How many are willing to ask and then wait for an honest answer?

### **Implications and application from this theophany.**

Theophanies foreshadow the incarnation. God doesn't just save from a distance, God saves by showing up Himself.

God saves from the fiery wrath of a king, and more importantly saves us from His own fiery, righteous wrath. God is a consuming fire and He sends Jesus into the furnace to save us from His just and justified wrath.

Why did Jesus come? To rescue and redeliver us from the fires of hell and eternal torment.

Why did Jesus come? To save us, deliver us from idols, from false gods, from worthless images and pleasures and short-term hope that disappoints. To show us the true God.

Why did Jesus come? To walk into our fiery furnace with us. Whatever fire we are in, He is already there.

If we are completely confident that our God is God and He is strong to save, then nothing in this life can threaten us or cause us to fear.

Are you standing in a fire? Are the flames lapping at the edges of our faith? Do you feel like the furnace is getting hotter? By faith do you see Jesus standing there with you? Do you see His scars reminding you of how He has already suffered for you? Do you see His love for you?

Don't grow weary in the fight of faith. Endeavor to persevere in His strength. Say with the three men, "My God is able to heal me and help me and deliver me, but if He doesn't, I will still worship Him and bless His holy name and see His face in glory."

**Isaiah 43:1-3** "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.  
2 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.  
3 For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.