

**TRINITY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
MINOCQUA, WI
SERMON FOR SEPTEMBER 13 & 14, 2020**

King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue. It was ninety feet tall and nine feet wide. He set it up in the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. ² King Nebuchadnezzar sent word to assemble the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all of the rulers of the provinces to come to the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ³ Then the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all of the rulers of the provinces assembled for the dedication of King Nebuchadnezzar's statue. They stood in front of the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁴ The herald called out loudly, "To you peoples, nations, and languages, this command is given: ⁵ When you hear the sound of the horn, the flute, the lyre, the harp, the triangular harp, the drum, and all kinds of musical instruments, you will fall down and worship the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar set up. ⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into the blazing fiery furnace."

⁷ Therefore, when all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, the flute, the lyre, the harp, the triangular harp, and all kinds of musical instruments, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshipped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸ At that time, some Chaldeans approached the king and maliciously accused the Jews. ⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "Your Majesty, may you live forever! ¹⁰ You, Your Majesty, gave an order that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, the flute, the lyre, the harp, the triangular harp, the drum, and all kinds of musical instruments must fall down and worship the golden statue, ¹¹ and whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into the blazing fiery furnace. ¹² There are Jews whom you appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely, Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego. These men do not pay attention to you, Your Majesty. They do not serve your gods, and they do not worship the gold statue that you set up."

¹³ Then in a furious rage Nebuchadnezzar said to bring Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king. ¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and that you do not worship the golden statue that I set up? ¹⁵ Now, if you are ready, at the time when you hear the sound of the horn, the flute, the lyre, the harp, the triangular harp, the drum, and all kinds of musical instruments, you must fall down and worship the statue I made. But if you do not worship, you will immediately be thrown into the blazing fiery furnace. What god will be able to save you from my hands?"

¹⁶ Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar, "We have no need to answer you about this matter. ¹⁷ Since our God, whom we serve, does exist, he is able to save us from the blazing fiery furnace. So, he may save us from your hand, Your Majesty. ¹⁸ But if he does not, you should know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods, and we will not worship the golden statue that you set up."

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and the expression on his face changed against Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego. He said to heat the furnace seven times hotter than it was usually heated. ²⁰ He ordered some men, who were soldiers from his army, to bind Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego in order to throw them into the blazing fiery furnace. ²¹ So these men were bound in their coats, their pants, their turbans, and their other clothing, and they were thrown into the middle of the blazing fiery furnace. ²² Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace was extremely hot, those men who carried Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego were killed by the intense heat of the fire. ²³ But these three men, Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, who had been tied up, fell into the blazing fiery furnace.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar was startled and immediately stood up. He said to his advisors, "Didn't we throw three men, who had been tied up, into the middle of the fire?" They answered the king, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

²⁵ He said, "Look! I see four men, who are untied and walking around in the middle of the fire, unharmed. What is more, the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods."

²⁶ Then Nebuchadnezzar approached the door of the blazing fiery furnace. He said, "Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out!" Then Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego came out from the

middle of the furnace. ²⁷ *The satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the royal advisors gathered together and looked at these men. The fire had no power over their bodies. Not a hair on their head was singed, their robes were not damaged, and the smell of fire had not stuck to them.*

²⁸ *Nebuchadnezzar said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, who sent his angel and saved his servants, who trusted in God and ignored the king’s command. They gave up their bodies and did not pay homage or worship any god except their God.* ²⁹ *So I have issued an order that every people, nation, and language that speaks any blasphemy against the God of Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego shall be cut to pieces, and his house shall be turned into a pile of rubble, because there is no other god who is able to save like this.”*

³⁰ *Then the king promoted Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.* (Daniel 3 EHV)

In Daniel 3, “faith under fire” isn’t just a catchy theme or a figure of speech. The three men at the heart of the story – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – find themselves and their faith literally in fire, in a blazing fiery furnace. No mere turned-up-to-the-max sauna here. The furnace is so hot that the soldiers who throw the three into it are killed by the intense heat. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Let’s go back to the beginning.

More than 500 years before Christ, King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians conquered Israel and carried off into exile tens of thousands of Israel’s best and brightest, among them Daniel and the three men at the center of our story. These four young Jews were quite gifted and blessed by God, and rose to prominent positions of government leadership in Babylon.

To say that Nebuchadnezzar was a proud man would be an understatement. His little building project in chapter 3 leaves no doubt. Nebuchadnezzar would have loved today’s selfie craze. There were no cameras 2500 years ago so he made a literal selfie. A ninety-foot-tall statue that probably looked like him, covered with gold, quite imposing. 90 feet tall! (Our ceiling here is about 25 feet tall. Statue was more than 3X as high) Just how important this was to him, how narcissistic, selfie-crazed, Kardashian-like he was about this is made clear by the fact that seven times in the first twelve verses the text speaks of the image of gold Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ***“He made it...he set it up... (and these words several times) the gold statue that Nebuchadnezzar set up.”***

He then summoned all the leaders throughout his empire to the dedication and commanded them not only to acknowledge it, to ooh and aah, and know that he was a great ruler, but to bow down and worship... ***“To you peoples, nations, and languages, this command is given: When you hear the sound of the horn, the flute, the lyre, the harp, the triangular harp, the drum, and all kinds of musical instruments, you will fall down and worship the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into the blazing fiery furnace.”*** (vv. 4-6)

Very simple, very clear. Worship the statue or die. Fail to fall before the statue would result not in pink slips or unemployment lines, but in being burned to a crisp, literally.

As soon as the music began, people hit the dirt, racing to show the king how devoted they were. Everyone, as far as the eye could see, fell down and worshipped. Everyone, except for three men – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – who no doubt stood out like three sore thumbs.

Of course, there were people who made sure Nebuchadnezzar knew about these three, people who hated them for their meteoric rise in government, for their Jewishness, you name it – they had every reason to tattle on the three. And they knew how the king would respond. It was quite predictable. ***“In a furious rage Nebuchadnezzar said to bring Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king. 14 Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and that you do not worship the golden statue that I set up? 15 Now, if you are ready, at the time when you hear the sound of the horn, the flute, the lyre, the harp, the triangular harp, the drum, and all kinds of musical instruments, you must fall down and worship the statue I made.*** He is giving them another shot. ***But if you do not worship, you will immediately be thrown into the blazing fiery furnace. What god will be able to save you from my hands?”*** (vv. 13-15)

This last is a rhetorical question. When a speaker asks a rhetorical question, he is not looking for information...just making a point. When I grew up, a parent’s favorite rhetorical question was, “Do you want a spanking?” No kid would ever say, “Well, I was thinking about going out to play. But you know, now that you mention it, yeah, I think that would benefit my character. Let’s go ahead with your idea.” So Nebuchadnezzar

asked, ***“What god will be able to save you?”*** He is not looking for information here. He is just reminding them they have no choice.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego do not respond as might be expected. No fear, no trembling, no cowering. They refuse to bow down. Listen to them: ***“O Nebuchadnezzar, “We have no need to answer you about this matter.”*** These are unbelievable words. ***“Our God... is able to save us from the blazing fiery furnace. So, he may save us from your hand, Your Majesty.”*** (v. 16,17) In a very real way, they fight fire with fire, they fight the fire of persecution with the fire of faith. “The God we serve is able. He is not a myth or fairy tale. He is not like this statue you yourself have just built out in the desert. He is real. He is the Creator of the universe, the Ruler of all things. He is able to save us from the furnace. He is able to deliver us from your hand. The God we serve is able.”

Are you ready to stand up and stand out? We serve the same God. The God we serve is able. Perhaps the three remembered the words of Isaiah recorded 150 years earlier. We do well to remember them: ***“But now, this is what the Lord says— he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.’”*** (Isaiah 43:1-3).

Our God is able. Paul says exactly this in the New Testament: ***“God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”*** (Ephesians 3:20) Martin Luther and the other 16th century reformers stood up before some of the most powerful people in the world of their time. Their standing up took courage and strength, and was tempered with respect and principle. They relied solely upon the Word of God, faced the threat of death and fought the fire of persecution with the fire of faith.

Even more amazing is the statement of faith uttered next by the three. They’d refused to bow down even though it would likely cost them their lives. They’d said, Our God is able. He is able to do anything. And then, ***“But if he does not, you should know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods, and we will not worship the golden statue that you set up.”*** (v. 18) Essentially, we trust God no matter what. He may not answer our prayers in the exact way we’d like him to, but he will do what is best. God is able, but what about when he does not? Think of Job who went through intense suffering without relief or explanation and said, ***“Though He slay me, yet I will trust Him.”*** (Job 13:15) Think of Esther who decided she would confront a king bent on genocide even though it could mean her death and said, ***“I will go to the king even though it is against the law. If I perish, I perish.”*** (Esther 4:16)

What faith! ***“But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we trust our God no matter what. We will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”*** And we trust him and take him at his Word because he is God over all, God over you, O king.

Wow. Nebuchadnezzar is so moved by their devotion that he apologizes to them, sets them free and proclaims religious liberty throughout the land. No. ***“Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and the expression on his face changed against Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego.”*** You know when somebody’s face is just exploding with anger. ***“He said to heat the furnace seven times hotter than it was usually heated.”*** (v. 19) It was so hot that the fire killed the guards who threw them into the furnace.

Well, they gave it their best shot. We certainly commend them for their faith, their fortitude, in the face of certain death. Let’s go to chapter 4... But wait. ***“Then King Nebuchadnezzar was startled and immediately stood up. He said to his advisors, “Didn’t we throw three men, who had been tied up, into the middle of the fire?” They answered the king, “Certainly, Your Majesty.” He said, “Look! I see four men, who are untied and walking around in the middle of the fire, unharmed. What is more, the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”*** (vv. 24,25)

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are not only alive, they have company. Who’s the fourth man in the furnace? Football teams speak of the “12th man,” a reference to loud and supportive fans cheering on the team during home games. Basketball teams call their home crowd the 6th man this referring to their fans. While not actually on playing surface, fans can have an influence on what happens.

So who's the fourth man here? A fan, a cheerleader, someone to offer applause and encouragement? So much more. At the very least, it's an angel. It's even possible that it's Jesus, pre-incarnate, before taking on human flesh. He certainly knows how to deal with the fire of death, he knows how to defeat death. He came to be with us, to be one of us, taking on our humanity. He lived the perfect life we could not, died the innocent death we should have but could not, and cheated death, rising from the grave to live on forever – thus enabling us to live forever with him.

The Holy Spirit brought this message to us, brought us to repentance and faith, and made us part of the family of God. As it was for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego so it was for Martin Luther and so it is for us – we are saved entirely by God's grace alone through faith alone through the message of Scripture alone. And this God not only promises to encourage us and cheer us on from the sidelines, he truly is with us and at work in our lives.

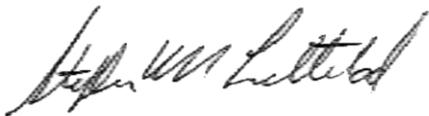
Each day we live with this knowledge, that we have a God who is able and who is with us. He is able to repair marriages and restore relationships. He is able to fix finances and heal broken bodies. He is able to bring prodigal sons and daughters back home. He is able to bring joy and to bring light where there is only darkness. And even when he doesn't do exactly what we might like/what we ask, he does what is best. He meets us in the furnace of life – sometimes he delivers us, sometimes he sees us through. But he's always with us – the 4th man in the furnace, Good Shepherd who watches over us, carries us as on eagles' wings, holds us in the palm of his hand/close to his heart.

Nebuchadnezzar was stunned by what he saw. He called the three out of the fire, found that not a single hair was singed nor did they even smell of smoke and said, **“Blessed be the God of Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, who sent his angel and saved his servants, who trusted in God and ignored the king's command. They gave up their bodies and did not pay homage or worship any god except their God.”** (v. 28)

We are not promised such miraculous deliverance from the heat of life's challenges. But we have the assurance of God's power and presence. And just who is this God? Can he deliver? Is he really a Mighty Fortress? Many today think of God not as a fortress, but as a mere flimsy tent or shack or cardboard box, or even seek to put God in a box. God is easily blown away. He is, I've often heard it said, nice. He can be reckoned with. He can be dealt. He's, well, nice. We are content with a comfortable, convenient God.

That's a manmade god (small g). The God of the Bible is the one true God (capital G). He is almighty, all powerful, Elohim, Yahweh, Savior. He is untamable, unboxable, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. He is the God for whom and through whom everything exists in whom all things hold together. He is over all and through all and in all. And while we do struggle with weakness and difficulties and questions about why God allows something to happen here and doesn't do what we think he should do there, he is the One True God. He is your God. More than just a 12th man, a 6th man, or the 4th man in the furnace.

So stand up and stand out. By faith, lay hold of the God who delivered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. There is nothing in our modern world, seen or unseen, that is a match for the power of God. There is nothing in our world, seen or unseen, that diminishes the greatness of Christ. There is nothing in our world, seen or unseen, that can cause him to abandon you. **“What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will trouble or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things to come, nor powerful forces, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Romans 8:35,37-39)



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