

Daniel: The Fiery Furnace (3Dec17)  
Daniel 3:1-30

The name Hananiah means "Yahweh (or the LORD) is gracious. Mishael is "Who is like God?" And "The LORD Keeps him" is the translation of Azariah.

And you're wondering why in the world I'm mentioning these three names of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Who has heard of them? Okay, who has heard of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? Well, then you've heard of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah! They're the same guys! Just with different names.

But it highlights an important detail for us. These men with names that directly named their faith, their connection to God, this identity was taken away from them in exile, under Babylonian captivity. After they were dragged away from Jerusalem, they lost their names and were forced into new roles for foreign King Nebuchadnezzar—though judging from his moniker, we have to admit the Babylonians names aren't too shabby but even kinda fun. The prophet Daniel himself gets called Beltshazzar. Maybe I'll start referring to Dan McGown as Beltshazzar McGown.

Although, for Dan and for Daniel and for these three other men, what might be gained in a fun name is a loss of identity and connection. Names ending in -el or -iah (think Nathanael or Daniel, Jeremiah, Isaiah) meant connection to the Hebrew God. But the Beltshazzar swapped that as a prayer to a Babylonian god, as "Bel help the King." Similarly, Abednego is "servant of the god Nebo." These name changes were changes of allegiance.

That gives a sense of what's riding on this story of the fiery furnace. Besides that dangerous conflict of colliding cultures, I want us also to hear some subtlety. I'm not sure this story is best received as the risk of martyrdom

and a faithfulness in the face of death. Sure, there are people undergoing persecutions in large and small ways all over our world today. There were the people killed in the mosque in Egypt after Thanksgiving because they belonged to the wrong sect. In smaller but vital ways, there's also the difficulty of being Muslim in the United States, of the ostracizing and worse. But I'm not sure it's most helpful to hold this story as if it's about a God who will offer salvation and deliverance from enemies and death if you believe strongly enough and confess your faith heartily enough.

Instead, for a more helpful sense of the dilemma these guys were facing, I want to point away from the ordeal of the fiery furnace for a second to what is perhaps an even more terrifying situation of what exile meant. It's not just being stuffed into blazing heat cranked up to seven times its normal searing intensity. No, maybe even worse for some perspectives, these poor guys, these sad captives in Babylon, the tragic fate of these people was that they were forced to be... *VEGETARIANS!* Oh, the horror! Hadn't they already suffered enough! Appalling, right Debra? Because the Babylonian meat would break their dietary restrictions and cause them to violate the religious standards and understanding of how they maintained relationship with God, they refused to eat the normal rations and tried to survive without meat, if you believe that could even be possible.

And if you thought it was miraculous that the three young men weren't incinerated in the fiery furnace, you'll be incredulous at the earlier note that they stayed as healthy as everybody else, even without eating meat. It's shocking! It's amazing! It's ludicrous!

Now, I want to pause for a second for you to understand I'm not being totally flippant. I'm

not poking fun at the story. It's not that I'm failing to take this seriously.

Rather, this story itself is meant to be taken lightly, to be some comic relief. There's importance in that term—that humor can relieve some suffering and some worry. That's what this story intends, for the people back in Bible times and for us now.

See, this isn't only a story about how strong your faith is and whether God will do something about it when you're put into the rotisserie oven. This is meant to reinforce your faith when things aren't particularly going how you'd wish, and to lighten your mood, and to lighten the load a bit.

We heard the reading in the King James Version to highlight some of that, to give it its original sense of theatre. Those long, detailed, repeated lists that go on and on and are repeated over and over are meant to sound silly! There's a pompousness to it that's supposed to portray a farce.

For our ears, that's accentuated when we hear that the marching band assembled to toot the horn of the king not only has cornet and flute, but also a sackbut. If you thought Nebuchadnezzar was fun to say, then you were just waiting for the sackbut! We hear an edge of the ridiculous regal procession of princes and captains, the treasurers and the counsellors. But we may catch some extra sense when the King James Version mentions that amid that ignorant throng were governors, judges, and sheriffs, and we may begin to sense this not as an old one-time story, but as a drama, a comedy of errors that plays out in our life, too. Through the hilarity, a king who started out so authoritarian and arrogant was manipulated by his jealous staff, went into blind rage, full of fury, but wound up praising in exclusive terms the very God he was trying to dismiss.

Now, while admitting truth can be stranger than fiction, I would say that generally if we're looking for a repetition of these events or characters in our lives, then we may have too narrowly confined the meaning of the story. Whether our aim is with a hopeful chuckle about clueless leaders coming around to our side, or is with the serious dread and regret of Jewish lives not saved from the ovens, this isn't really a story of that kind of direct application. If we're waiting for somebody to set up a 90-foot tall golden idol or effigy or whatever and demand we bow down to it, then this is left as a laughable little fairy tale, without impact on our lives.

But if we understand it as hyperbole, as overstatement, as dramatized for effect, then we can see connections all over. If this story is simply about the challenge of where our faith collides with culture and what is dominant, then that turns up the metaphorical heat. Where do we *symbolically* bow down in the wrong direction, offering our lives to what usurps the place of God? How should we be living while in this strange country?

Would we be prompted to confront our leaders? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego didn't need to start this confrontation; they probably could've figured their actions and decisions wouldn't make much of a difference. So should we see this story as a parable about what to do in the face of an ignorant, careless government?

But let's take it down another notch. Forget about being tossed in a furnace. If we determined that it was what we needed to do to live faithfully, would we eat only vegetables? Would we risk our jobs or our social standing at school? Would we sacrifice our place on a sports team, or our income that we prefer to use to give ourselves a little bit of luxury? Would we give up some core part of our identity? This

gets awfully serious and awfully implicating and awfully quick. It means we need some humor in our stories!

But if you're not feeling scorched quite yet, here's a blisteringly timely seasonal paragraph some of you may have read in *Christian Century*, about Christmas as

*glittery rituals [it says] that have no biblical basis or meaning and become a kind of alternative religion competing with Christ. How many children can pay attention to the meaning of incarnation when they are encouraged to focus on gingerbread houses, candy canes, ornamented Christmas trees, and Christmas lights? Santa is no Saint Nicholas. He's a Coca-Cola advertisement symbolizing the complete secularization of Christmas, replacing Jesus' poverty, vulnerability, and self-sacrifice with magic reindeer, a pile of toys, and "Ho, ho, ho!"*

I don't know about you, but that one burns a bit. I like Christmas and our decorations and the lights in the darkness and the mood of it all and am obviously endeared to St. Nick. I certainly don't want to imagine that in any of that I'm venerating an allegorical 90-foot Coca-Cola statue.

But raising those small, hard questions in a humorous, outsized way is only one aspect of this story of the fiery furnace. There's this personal interrogation of what I would do if I were in their place, and—even more difficultly—what I do in my own place.

But the other aspect of this story is God's place. And that is—it should go without saying—the more vital aspect, much more than what you do or don't do. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego recognize it. They didn't see this as putting either their faith or putting God to the test. One of the most interesting lines of the whole story is their statement that it

doesn't matter if God saves them from the fire or not.

I find that to be astonishing and terribly important. It's not that if you believe strongly enough then you'll deserve miracles. The three men didn't earn escape for displaying extraordinary devotion and faith. It wouldn't disprove God if they didn't emerge from the fire. More than your identity or circumstances, this is about God's identity.

For that, three godly wrap-up points:

1. No matter how high and mighty somebody thinks they are or how much they want to claim for themselves, they can never displace God. That's why Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego wouldn't bow down, but also why it didn't matter what happened to them.

2. Still, I think we can tentatively say that God's preference, God's design, the will of God, would not be for people to be chucked into a furnace, not to be made to suffer.

3. And finally, the presence of the fourth divine Son of God in the furnace, that we can take as gospel. Jesus is with you, even when you are oppressed and suffering and in danger, even when things aren't going right. In the words that (at least sort of) ended the prayers at Jean Oliversen's sister's memorial service yesterday, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus: neither death nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor Nebuchadnezzar nor sackbuts, nor loss of identity, nor fiery furnaces, nor barbecued pork, nor a chimney with Santa Claus. And that's no joke.