

Daniel 3 — Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, ^[a] and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. ² He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. ³ So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

⁴ Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: ⁵ As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

⁷ Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸ At this time some astrologers^[b] came forward and denounced the Jews. ⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "May the king live forever! ¹⁰ Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹ and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. ¹² But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."

¹³ Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, ¹⁴ and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ¹⁵ Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us^[c] from Your Majesty's hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹ So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²² The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ²³ and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

²⁵ He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, ²⁷ and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the

fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

²⁸ Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way."

³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

A bit over a week ago, in midweek communion, we read the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, which is in Daniel chapter 3. It is one of the more familiar stories of the Old Testament, and tells of these three chaps, who, along with Daniel, were faithful to the Lord God, even in Babylon, where worship of the Lord was forbidden. They are told to worship an idol of gold, but they refuse. Their 'crime' is found, and they are sentenced to death in a fiery furnace — so hot that the guards who are throwing them in are killed by the heat. But Nebuchadnezzar is watching, and is amazed to see *four* people, walking about, unbound, in the furnace. He calls them to come out and declares 'praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.'

So, they are sent, by an unjust and idolatrous king, into what we might call the fires of hell, and instead of dying, they are joined by another, before they are brought out again, unharmed.

Who is the fourth? TS Eliot was inspired by a story of one of the Antarctic expeditions, in which the explorers kept seeing one more person in their party as they walked through the snow and ice. In his poem, the Wasteland, he writes:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
— But who is that on the other side of you?

This is a passage that makes me think of the road to Emmaus, and other people will think of the poem 'footsteps' — the reminder that God walks beside us and even carries us when we can go no further by our own strength.

I was reminded of another poem, too. 'The Coming', by RS Thomas:

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

I think this is a spectacular poem about Jesus's compassion. Jesus sees all the destruction of war, all the environmental damage, all the emptiness and desolation and says, 'Let me go there.' Jesus sees Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the furnace and says 'Let me go there.' Jesus sees the plight of earthquake victims, he sees the bereaved and displace victims of war, and says 'Let me go there.'

That is Good Friday.

But then there is Easter Sunday. Because Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego *come out* of the furnace. Jonah survives the sea and the whale and is spat out onto dry land. And on Sunday morning, women went to Jesus's tomb and he was not there, he had risen!

Jesus joins us in our hell, so that we can join him in his heaven. Jesus will not let us endure anything without also enduring it. This is our assurance that he will also raise us up to life after death too.

Once Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had survived the fiery furnace there was no question of who was in the right, them or Nebuchadnezzar. Of course it was them! In the same way, in Jesus's resurrection, there is no question about whether he was right. He is the risen son of God! He is the saviour of the world. He is the victor over sin and death. He is the one by whose grace we are forgiven and redeemed.

In him we have hope.

When I was first a Christian, life after death really mattered to me. And it still does, but Easter means more. If Jesus can save from the fiery furnace, and raise Lazarus from the grave he can reshape our world into a world of justice. A world of peace. A world of equity and harmony. A world in which there is not envy, or greed, in which restoration is made to all people. In the resurrection God quietly disagreed with all the sinful judgement that put Jesus on the cross.

At Christmas we speak about Jesus as Emmanuel — 'God with us'. It is on Good Friday and Easter Sunday that we find the truest expression of this. God with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the furnace. God with Jonah in the whale, raising him from the depths of the sea. God with you and me in everything life throws at us. God raising us to new life, with him in his resurrection.

I wish you a very joyful Easter! Amen.