

FACE THE STATUE  
(written in oral form)

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego ~~~

Whenever we hear those three weird names,.... we natural associate them with the fiery furnace--a label from redaction by Biblical publishers.

To emphasize the thermal intensity, the text calls it a furnace of blazing fire.

Regardless, we recall Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as the miraculous survivors of the fire, yet..... my sermon is titled "Face the statue." ???

There are two significant features in this story: the statue/golden image and the furnace.

Without the defiant response to the statue, the furnace would not be a factor. The glorious miracle would not have happened.

The statue is the turning point. It is symbolic, as is the fire, and the statue marks the point of awareness and the time of decision.

The statue is a very clear statement.

That is the reason Nebuchadnezzar had it built.

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This is a fascinating story, and a simplified understanding is that the story is about the three choosing the One God over the Babylonian gods.

But, there is much more to it than that.

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The story follows the patterns of the ancient genre called the "martyr legend."

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were civil servants, working for the great and expanding Babylonian empire. They were honoured and respected.

Life was good. The culture was thriving and prosperous, and so King Nebuchadnezzar had a huge golden statue made to signify Babylonia's success and might.

Kings and governments do this sort of thing, be it to designate a great victory or proclaim their nation's powerful status.

They are symbols; the statues are statements.

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We are told how big this statue was, and that it was made of gold.

Yet, and it's important to note, we have no idea what it looked like.

The statue is symbolic.

Also, note that the statue had Nothing to do with religion. In a way, it stood for another sort of god--the god of nationalism and culture.

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All the dignitaries and ruling elite were gathered for the statues dedication. They and the whole nation were then told that when the patriotic music was played, all.... everyone had to bow down and worship the golden statue or be tossed into a furnace of "blazing" fire. Everyone submitted/ everyone conformed,.....but three.

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A group of people on the fringe, aspiring outsiders, reported to the King that certain "Jews", individuals of political position, did NOT obey / they did NOT conform and bow down when the music was played. Interestingly, religion is suddenly an issue.

This is common with persecution. Suddenly, race and religion are called into question. Generalizations and dehumanizing grows.

Such as, all Muslims are suspected of terroristic tendencies.

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The King was told that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not serve the King's gods. This had not been an issue before. Nebuchadnezzar admired the Jewish God, but.....by association,....attitudes were altered.

The King was told that the three did NOT worship the golden statue.

Did you notice the difference?

The charges were: the three didn't serve the Babylonian gods--Serve!

And, they didn't Worship the statue.

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The statue stood for / the statue demanded conformity and submission to the national culture. All **competing** values and principles had to be discarded on the altar of compliance and conformity. The glowing statue with accompanying music is the Moment of awareness / the Epiphany of consciousness --the light bulb turned on.

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Imagine the scene / the contrast. Everyone subservient / all people bowing to the statue.....while Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego boldly,.... bravely stood tall.

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This reminds me of an incident in Central Kansas in 2003. America was consumed with intense patriotic fever. American soldiers were fighting in two wars. Signs, flags were everywhere. 9/11 revenge was still on the lips of most, especially in cowboy country, and we guests at a rodeo. I opted out of viewing the preshow horse parade of flags, and went to get some snacks. Returning to join Leslie, the American National anthem was playing as I turned the corner in front of the bleachers,. All were standing, cowboy hats off, singing along, but one..... Sitting quietly in brave defiance was Leslie. It was a glorious site,.....and fortunately, except for a few burning stares, No furnace with blazing fire followed.

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The King did not directly send Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to the furnace. They were granted a brief hearing,.....which allowed them to state their reasons for non-conformity. All martyr legends have such a defiant apology.

Both charges of sedition were laid against them: not serving the King's gods and not worshipping the golden statue. And, they were reminded of the torturous punishment.

The Fire was before them; they could have easily submitted.

Yet,.....the first charge clearly introduced God into the picture. Their defence would not merely be humanistic reasoning, such as if you bomb ISIS more angry people will join them.

GOD changes everything.

They boldly and eloquently declared Our God, the one God, is above you and everything.... "We have No need to present a defence to you."

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Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego admitted that they didn't know if God would save them from the fire, but that mattered Not. Their faith, their values and principles were with God/ from God,... and they would Never surrender that love and devotion .....Never.

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Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and he ordered the blazing fire to be made seven times hotter. The fire was to be a pogrom (pug gram).

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Martin Luther King Jr. warned that when society's systemic injustices are confronted and exposed, the embedded **evil howls**.

There is an intense, nasty backlash.....like a furnace of blazing fire.

And, such fires are not easy to endure.....

I think they are nearly impossible to endure...without God.... without clearly defining that God is the source of our values and beliefs.

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Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were tied up; they were bound.

Culture is good at putting people in bondage, be it the power of banks or society's pressure to conform.

Strong servants of the King / pawns to the system....opened the furnace door and tossed the three into the fire. But the backlash was so intense,.....they were consumed and died.

Feel.....perceive the symbolism..... in all this.

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The king watched through the open door, observing Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's dedicated defiance against all that could consume them, the King saw the divine standing with them. **His Epiphany moment was witnessing faith in action.**

The King was astonished--**The God** was over and above all that he could do. Moreover, the test of fire only burned/consumed one thing.

The three, including their clothes were not affected by the fire, but the ropes that bound them were burned away.

In the fire Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were set free.

The test of fire has a way of doing that.

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The King released them from the furnace.....and confessed to the greatness of their God--the one God.

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This is a story about Civil Disobedience. It is about breaking the law.

It is clearly about standing up for what is right / for standing against society's demand to conform,.....and it contains the cogent message: Make sure the motivation for defiance / for the civil disobedience is from God and with God.

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When God is clearly present.....No defence is necessary.

The golden statue had no stated form or shape. It could look like almost anything,....such as the national anthem before a hockey game.. bank perks to those who have more money..... fancy cars... almost anything that demands conformity away from God.

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We Mennonites used to recognize that statue, and our heritage is full of those who stood tall because of their faith in God.

Some of us still do.

Christian Peacemaker Teams is one example. They get in the way to protect the abused and to expose injustices.

A good friend of mine is with CPT, and just returned from Hebron. She stood up against Israeli soldiers who violently demanded that the Palestinians bow down, and some of the peacemakers have been tossed in the fire.

Many people are unaware of the terrible injustices going on there, which also feed the terrorists' fire.

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Most of us in "comfortable societies" don't recognize / don't see the statue that controls so much.

Perhaps, it is because we are already bowing down to it. ???

It truly is easier to go along..... It's easier to accept military violence as a necessary evil.

An evil that is necessary? How does that abide with Christ?

It seems easier to go along. Being free demands real faith in God, AND...it begins with Facing the statue.

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Facing the statue is an Epiphany moment, and it is the time to decide.

Recognizing what demands our time and energy in service to unjust systems that exploit, judge, hurt and destroy, is seeing the statue.

Do we see that golden statue....., and what is our response?

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Moreover, as this story strongly demonstrates, let us clearly state that God is the reason we are standing up before the statue.

Let us proclaim that it is wrong to bomb and kill an enemy because our God is the Lord of life. Our God is a God of love and grace, and that is more powerful than weapons of destruction.

Let us stand up for the poor, the weak and the outcasts in the name of God.

Let us expose injustices for God's sake.

Let us aid and defend the persecuted, be they refugees or those with a different sexual orientation,... and state the reason is that God inspires us to be hospitable, gracious and giving.

Let us openly claim that Jesus told us Not to judge, and so we won't.

And, ..... may we be willing and ready to do civil disobedience / to break the law.... if that is where being faithful to God leads us.

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Face the statue and stand for justice, for love, for peace and for grace, ..... and be sure to bring God with you,.... because there may be a blazing fire waiting.