

Be the Light

As is evident in the mix of shrugs and frowns and smiles I have witnessed in the past week, the new school year is about to begin. Some students are gearing up for new school buildings with familiar teachers and classmates; others are simply moving up a grade; and still others are heading off to new campuses with a list of entirely unfamiliar faces and places. And in every case, there is are lists—official and unofficial—of what students need to start the year. I was blissfully unaware of there being an official list when I was a student. I also enjoyed the luxury of not worrying about my family being able to afford new pencils or a backpack. I do have memories of creating my own list, insisting that I needed just the right trapper keeper. I can still smell the ever-so-new plastic and hear the joyful sound of Velcro as I opened it. Whether or not there was an official, school-sanctioned list, there was a list, and that trapper keeper was at the very top.

The writer of Daniel loves a list. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abenego...satraps, prefects, counselors...horns, pipes, lyres and a partridge in a pear tree. These repeated lists add to the folk tale sense of the text. They also add to the spectacle. King Nebuchadnezzar wants a spectacle, an undebatable demonstration of his power thus explaining the rosters of every member of the pecking order and every instrument imaginable at the unveiling of the absurdly huge gold statue he insists that everyone everywhere bow down before and worship. The lists—abundant and even redundant as they are—paint a picture and set the scene. The king not only wants to display his might, but he also wants to reinforce it. He therefore choreographs a grand ritual so that the people witness his power AND participate in making that power visible. He commands and they obey. He tells the band when to play and dictates the cue for the people to bow down and worship. And they do as they are told—except for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

In bible study this week, one of you described the Chaldeans as tattletales. And they are. But they are tattletales with an agenda. You may recall that it was the Chaldeans who failed to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream in last week's text. The Chaldeans have fully bought in to this system where currying favor is a matter of

life and death. They will do whatever it takes to maintain their status and dislodge these pesky outsiders. In verse 8 where our translation reads “denounce,” the literal meaning is “ate their pieces.”¹ The language suggests that the Chaldeans have been watching these three, hoping to catch them in an act of disobedience so that they can report them to the king. And catch them they do. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego do not hide the fact that they did not follow the king’s command. When Nebuchadnezzar calls them forward, he offers them another chance to play a part in the spectacle and save their own skins. The men refuse, and they boldly tell the king to his face why they refuse:

We have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. *But if not*, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.²

The answer is, “No.” The king has set up a transaction: bow down to this statue and live. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to play Nebuchadnezzar’s game. Their faith is not a game; their faithfulness is not up for debate. Their faithfulness is not subject to the whims of a petty or vengeful king. Their faith is grounded in the God who is above every king, the God who has promised to be faithful no matter when, no matter what, no matter where. In their refusal to bow to the king’s commands and worship the king’s absurd statue, the men invoke words from another list, the Ten Commandments. As the first few verses of Exodus 20 read in the Voice translation:

I am the Eternal your God. I led you out of Egypt and liberated you from lives of slavery *and oppression*. You are not to serve any other gods before Me You are not to bow down and serve any image.³

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego understand that these words are not simply part of a list of ways to stay on God’s good side. These words, these commands are in fact reflections of an abiding covenantal relationship

¹ Carol A. Newsom, *Daniel*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster, 2014) 99.

² Daniel 3:16-18, NRSVue, emphasis added

³ Exodus 20: 2-3, 5, The Voice

between God and the people of God. This God, our God is not a fickle king who turns vengeful on a whim when his ego is bruised. This God, our God has been faithful throughout generations loving and seeking out humans regardless of how far we may stray.

*But if not...*As you may have suspected, those words take my breath away. Yes, we know how the story turns out, so we may think that the men are rewarded for their faithfulness or that they have an inkling about God's plan to keep them safe in that fiery furnace. That is not what the text says. Yes, the men know God to be faithful. They also know that God's ways are not our ways, and that God does not play the role of puppeteer. There are no magic words that require God to respond as we would hope. There is no hidden scale where God weighs the number of prayers or determines who is worthy of saving. The men's bold words upend the larger world's pattern of tit for tat and reveal a conviction that no ruler is more powerful than the Lord of All. Nebuchadnezzar can kill the three men; he cannot make them bow to another god or anyone else, for that matter.

The covenant relationship between God and God's people is so much more than a game. Faith is not a transaction. Faith is not about my doing this so that God will do that. The life of faith does not insulate us from harm or disappointment or danger. Faith is not bubble wrap or fire retardant pjs shielding us from the very real perils and trials of life in God's beloved and battered world. Faith is born of a covenant relationship with the God who works to free us from the whims of pharaohs and kings, the God who meets us in the wilderness, the God who offers us a holy and faithful way to live in relationship with God and with our neighbors, the God who stands with us in the flames, the God who promises that death does not have the final word.

It is easy to lift up the names of those on the world stage who have hung on to faith in the face of spectacle-making tyrants and bullies, people like Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and our Jewish siblings who find a way to trust God even in the wake of the Holocaust. They are among the faithful who have embraced a "but if not" kind of faith in a way that is difficult to imagine. And yet, I have seen you embody a "but if not" faith, as well. In the wake of devastating diagnoses, ruptured relationships, and uncertain futures, I have seen you show up and worship and sing and pray and weep and play and question and wonder and stare

down all that would turn your world to ashes. And you do this not because you are looking to check off a list. You do this because by the mysterious grace of God, you find a way to trust that the God of ancient Israel is the same God we meet in Jesus Christ, the God who refuses to let death or evil or suffering have the final say, the God who will not be thwarted by petty dictators or evil forces of any kind. And you help others—including me—hold on to that “but if not” kind of faith as well. That is not something that can happen in a vacuum or all on our own. It takes a community to embrace and cling to that kind of faith.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are filled with courage and humility in the face of the furnace not because they have a secret stash of Olympic-sized gumption or strength but because they have been steeped in the faith of a community that spans generations and geography. Their community knows and names out loud what it is to be loved and claimed by the Lord of All. Their community embraces humility and does not pretend to fully know the mind of God. Their community embraces a “but if not” faith, trusting ultimately in the saving love and mercy of God in the face of all that threatens to destroy them. We are descendants of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Their community is our community, spanning generations and geography. And it is that kind of community and that kind of witness that the world desperately needs right now.

As we blessed backpacks and book bags and briefcases (yes, I also love a list), we offered everyone going back to school a tag that says, “Be the Light.” That charge is not another item on a to-do list, nor is it a way to earn God’s favor or deserve God’s love. God’s love is a given, for all of us and all of them. This charge is instead an urgent encouragement to share the hope, the love, and the light we have received from God, the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. It is an invitation to offer a witness to the God reigns above all others and walks beside every last one of us, the God who offers life in abundance, grace beyond measure, and light that will never be dimmed.

In the name of this God, may we go from this place and out into God’s beloved world to be the light in Christ’s name. Amen.