

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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The Most Powerful Words in the Bible

Matthew 26.30-35; Daniel 3.1, 8-18

Russ Dean, July 27, 2008



“But if not...” These are the most powerful words in the entire Bible. *“But... if... not...”*

Of course, they hardly make any sense standing alone, but for which of our statements of faith is this not true? These words only speak their truth and their power in the context of the lives in which they are lived out. So it is with all of our statements of faith. What you believe is true, and has an urgency, only so far as it is “experiential”. Only so far as you have known its truth, and tested its power, by your own living. So this morning let us explore these simple, but most powerful words of faith, in the context of the lives of the three Jews who spoke them in the face of certain death. *“But... if... not...”*

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, arrived in Babylon along with Daniel and everyone else who was anyone else from Israel. The story is set sometime after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians six centuries before Christ. The glorious Temple was destroyed, and anyone of wealth or knowledge or specific ability was carted off as an exile. These Jews were held in captivity for nearly two generations before the Persians overthrew the Babylonians and the Edict of (King) Cyrus allowed the return of all Jews to Israel. The Babylonian Exile is the cause of the Psalmist’s famous lament: *By the waters of Babylon we lay down and wept... for thee, Zion... how can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?* (Psalm 137)

But it was just this that the Jews learned – how to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land. It was a time of liberation for the Jewish people, which reminds me of a comment Dave Odom once made of this church’s own pilgrimage under the grappling leadership of Charlie Milford. It was a struggling time, he said, a growing, moving time, a difficult but good time, in which “the

church and their pastor became liberated together... it must have been a wonderful experience.”

This is the kind of thing that happened in Babylon. Painful though it was, in the testing of their faith, and the challenging of their parochial and possessive concepts of God, God became bigger, and in order to hold on to this bigger, more mysterious God – their faith had to expand as well.

It was in Babylon that the Jews met this challenge, and there that Daniel, and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah surprisingly met with the king’s favor, and were appointed to positions of leadership, and given new names. I don’t know why we don’t know Daniel as Belteshazzar, because his three friends immediately become known by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego. Their story is a story of great faith. But as I read it, there is a deeper truth, still, to their story. It is for this reason that I chose only to read the first part of their experience to you this morning.

I continue to find myself saying to you something like those last words: but there is a deeper truth... something else to see... a different take... The more I read and study our amazing scripture, the more I continue to find an alternative message to the story, as I was told it, and I want to acknowledge this to you lest you become subtly convinced that my preaching is a kind of talking down to you. (As if only I really get it!) This is hardly what I intend. Most often I do not intend to disparage the traditional teaching itself, but I do want to be willing to see if there is something I have missed all these years.

For example, in today’s text, the truth as the story is generally taught, the story in basic form which I have just shared with our children, is a lesson that is worthy of teaching. For centuries it has been the conviction of the people of God that the God whom we worship is, in fact, able to deliver us. Is capable of miracle. Is worthy of our awe and worship. By the way I am telling you this story today, I do not intend to suggest there is no truth to such a telling. Such a

truth has been experienced many times over the centuries, and the Shadracks, Meshacks, and Abednegos who have walked through the fire unscathed have always been willing to share their testimonies loudly, proclaiming the power and faithfulness of their God. They are stories we need to hear.

In October of 1942, World War I flying ace, Eddie Rickenbacker, and the crew of his B-17D were delivering a message to General Douglass McArthur in the Pacific Theatre. Due to a malfunctioning navigation device the aircraft became lost, and Rickenbacker and his crew were forced to crash land into the Pacific, near Japanese-held territory. Several members of the crew, including Rickenbacker, sustained injuries in the crash, and their meager rations lasted only three days. After this they survived in their life rafts for the next week, eating a few small fish and drinking rain water. Rickenbacker, a Christian, was the inspirational leader of the survival team, encouraging his comrades with the words of Psalm 46: *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble...* And on the eighth day, the crew got the miracle they had been praying for. A seagull landed on Rickenbacker's head, was captured, killed and eaten, and some of the bird's remains were used as bait for fishing. With this meager sustenance, all but one of the crew survived another sixteen days at sea, being rescued on the 24th day of their ordeal.

Rickenbacker's story has doubtless been told thousands of times as a contemporary example of the miraculous provision of God for God's people – a modern-day Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego story. And I do not want to take anything away from Rickenbacker's powerful experience. He rightly viewed the landing of that seagull as his salvation, and as a Christian, he gave thanks to God. But isn't there more that really ought to be said?

You see, as powerful as Rickenbacker's story is, and as powerful a story as it makes for Christian preaching... it is the easiest sermon to preach, the one that gets the most "Amens," the

one the masses want to hear, but it is also the sermon, if we are honest, that misses most people, most of the time, from the reality of their living. Week in and week out, preachers feed their flocks on the stories of miraculous salvation at the hand of an intervening God, creating in the process a mentality of expectation, even divine entitlement.

But what happens when the seagull doesn't come?

I know it doesn't seem very exciting to preach the other sermon, because in that sermon the crew on the raft stay lost at sea, dying, one by one, from exposure and starvation. Folks, please understand that I have no morbid fascination with death, and mine is not a theology of fatalism. But the realist in me will simply not let me rest with only the story of the Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednegos who walk out of the fire, as our text goes on to say, not even smelling of smoke! It happens that way sometimes. But the truth is... it doesn't happen that way often.

If we are to be realistic about our world, and our experience of it (not morbid or pessimistic or fatalistic or hopeless – just realistic), we will need to say that for every believer thrown into a fiery furnace at the hands of an evil tyrant, very few are saved. For every prayer offered to save mama from her disease... to secure for the husband a new job... to turn the tornado or hold back the tsunami... thousands upon thousands have been lifted into what might appear a silent heaven. But it doesn't seem defeatist to me (giving in to defeat) to have the courage and the maturity to admit this. It only seems honest. And, in the words of Leslie Weatherhead, "There is ultimately no comfort in a lie."¹ If the message we are preaching (you and I) does not resonate with the actual reality that people experience, they will either be repelled by it (as many are), or they will be intoxicated by a kind of escapist view of reality that such preaching can represent (as many are), but set up, in the process, for the dismal failure of their faith and their God when their seagull doesn't come.

¹ This is a line that I memorized from his powerful book, *The Will of God*. I do not have a more specific citation.

The three Jewish lads, who are my heroes in faith, can help us prevent such a crushing loss. Look at the reality and the vitality of their faith... In the face of certain death, they offer no trite “God will save us” spirituality of victory. They say calmly, yet with conviction, “*If the God whom we serve is able to deliver us... let [God] deliver us...*” I’m not making this up, folks, just reading it in a text that is nearly 3,000 years old. If God can... may it be so... “God always does everything God can do.”² Their strength begins with the maturity of a faith which knows the reality of this world. Their prayer ought to be an example to us, for it neither sets them nor God up for failure. It simply shows their maturity to reflect realistically on their situation.

And then it reveals their true conviction... *But if not...* we still will serve our God, and not the gods of this world. The gods of this world offer the promise of security, but the faith of the three Jews reminds us that we have but one true security, and that will not be sustained by military or monetary might, not by clinging to what is rightfully mine... but by casting our life’s fate into the hands of the providence of God.

But if not... God is still with us.

In his book called *Servants, Misfits, and Martyrs* James Howell writes these words:

Our culture despises all suffering, and regards pain as something to be avoided at any and all costs. We associate God with what is pleasant; if there is agony, God must be absent or is surely busy arranging to alleviate all discomforts. But if the saints teach us anything, it is that following Christ does not solve all our problems. Actually we encounter a whole new set of problems. If God is to be found on earth, it is not necessarily in the places of bliss and ease but more likely in regions of sorrow. There is a cost to discipleship, and we need not be surprised if the afflictions of Christ begin to manifest themselves in our lives. We carry in our body the death of Jesus.³

Despite what it may seem from the outset, not as exciting to preach as the sermon in which the martyrs are miraculously spared their fate, it seems to me that this is real faith, for a

² I have often quoted this conviction of my professor of Systematic Theology, Frank Tupper. It is a conviction that has changed the whole of my theology.

³ Howell, p.173.

real world, the content of which must be the most inspiring of all. Maybe God will not spare you. Maybe God cannot. But what God will never fail to do is to walk with you through the *valley of the shadow of death* (Psalm 23) – and through to the other side, if need be.

But if not... let us be honest and real and faithful enough to share such a conviction. Come what may, the comfort of God's presence with us is unconditional. Come what may, let our convictions remain firm. Come what may, hell or high water, success or failure, life or death, let us cast our confidence in God, and in God's truth, that the world may know our true faith.

I hope you get the miracle you need this week. I really do. *But if not...* I trust that your faith in the God who never leaves us nor forsakes us will be enough to sustain you through to the other side.

May it be so!