

Don't Miss the Forest For the Miracle, Daniel 3
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Bob Stillerman
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Historical Context:

Today's lesson is from the book of Daniel. We often talk about the exile, or the exilic period. When we say exile, we mean that around 587 BCE, or nearly 600 years before the birth of Jesus, the Southern Kingdom of Judah was conquered by Babylon. But it wasn't colonized. It was raided and decimated. The Babylonians captured all that remained of Judah's brightest and strongest and youngest citizens, and took them back to Babylon, and forced them into the service of the king.

The book of Daniel is written in the midst of exile, possibly as early as about 300 and as late as 150 BCE. And it reflects the feelings of an assimilated people. How do we keep God's covenant in a far-away land, in a place with no Temple, among people who do not understand our God? But most importantly, how do we help future generations remember the story of the God we serve?

As we reflect on today's story, ask yourself how you might feel if you were far from home in the service of your captors? How would you balance the demands of your new king with the desire to worship God authentically?

Homily

Don't get me wrong, I love a good miracle story as much as the next person. I do. I really, really do. But...But, too often, I think we miss the forest for the miracle.

For instance, sometimes, when we talk about Jesus, we only seem to remember miracles: the resurrection, or him walking on water, or helping blind men see, or turning water into wine. And these are great things to be sure. But if we spend so much time on the resurrection, we may tend to de-emphasize the kind of life Jesus lived, and the love that was made manifest to us by such a life. If we focus so much on Jesus levitating above the Sea of Galilee, or practicing Lasik surgery before it ever existed, we may tend to de-emphasize his ability to create transforming, sustaining relationships with his presence. And if we spend so much time focusing on Jesus' winemaking abilities, we may overlook the role of his mother Mary – she was a catalyst in helping him to channel and use his gifts. And we may even forget to ask the most important question: Was the wine any good? How did it taste?

Today's story is no different. Don't miss the forest for the miracle.

Yes, it is impressive. Somehow, someday, the Three Young Men survived the fiery furnace – their tunics were fire-proofed long before the textile experts at State and Clemson could ever dream of designing such innovative fabrics. And as Grace Hawthorne's VBS song reminds us:

It isn't hot, Whew! in the furnace man
It isn't hot, Sss! in the furnace man
It isn't hot in the furnace, man this furnace is cool, cool, cool, cool

All of this helps you remember the story. But here's the life-changing detail. The idol was built. The order was decreed. The fiery furnace was stoked. And the king demanded an answer:

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, 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." (Daniel 3:16-18)

The conviction of these three men was not based on an assurance of God's response to an imminent threat. Instead, their conviction was undergirded by faith in a God who taught them what was right.

These men were covenant people. When the Deuteronomist writes about a covenant whose words are to be kept in mind and soul, and bound as a sign on your hand, and fixed as an emblem on your forehead, and taught to your children, and talked about at home and away, during night and day – these men listen. And these men act. Their God is not absent in Babylon. Their God is present.

What they're saying is that if they have to choose between worshipping God in a fiery furnace, or worshipping Nebuchadnezzar in the A/C, they'll choose the furnace every time. Because living a life that doesn't love and honor God, well, it's not really living. Or at least, it's not living free.

And I think that's the real miracle. In every age, women and men are offered Caesar's finest fruit – just one little catch – acknowledge Caesar's lordship above all else. Do it, just say the words, and privilege will be yours.

And in every age, women and men of conviction appear: The system will do what it must, and it may be that the system will do its worst. But that system will not do so at the expense of breaking covenant. Might will not deter right.

Now Sardis Baptist Church, it's highly unlikely that any of us are going to face a fiery furnace in the near future. But that doesn't mean we won't encounter our own golden statues.

God calls us to protect the marginalized, but sometimes that means chipping away at the foundations of our comfort. God calls us to offer a prophetic voice, but sometimes the foreman doesn't want to hear our opinion. God calls us to be righteous and decent and even different, but sometimes that makes us stick out like sore thumbs. And the flag beckons our salute, and they've got a marching band, and the tune is catchy, and shoot, what's the matter with a little A/C? Why rock the boat? Why speak out of turn? What's the harm?

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.^[a] ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem^[b] on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Friends, old King Nebby-K's got the seal, and the band, and the power, and the army, and all the trimmings. And he'll tell you that life's about one thing: "don't get burned." And we think the miracle is that God's got flame-retardant powers.

But the three young men, and I would add, lots of other young ladies and men, too, had it right: the miracle is the love created for one another in a life wholly-attuned to the will of God.

And this morning, I see a whole forest full of Sardis Oaks. And I wonder, if we become a forest full of covenant people, what need have we of golden statues, and what fear have we of a fiery furnace?

After all, we're living in another kind of furnace – God's presence. And it's cool, cool, cool in God's presence. May it always be so!