



Pastor's Pen

*Happy Easter!*

*April 21, 2019*

- Fr. Tom Wilson, Pastor

## FAITH WITHOUT CONDITIONS

Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael are not as famous as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, but in fact are the same people. The three were bright young men among the Israelites forced out of their homeland during the Babylonian exile. The Babylonian's strategy was to separate the "best and the brightest" of their conquered lands from their homeland, so they could not stir anything up against their conquerors, and so that the Babylonians could use their skills and talents for their own empire. When exiled, the three talented young men were renamed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Even while living in the benefits of being in the administration of the occupying force, the three were well-known for their faith in the God of Israel. The most famous story of them is when they were commanded by King Nebuchadnezzar to bow down to the Babylonian statue god, as recorded in the Book of Daniel. Refusing to honor a false god, the king ordered them bound and placed into a "fiery hot" furnace. The image of three young men in a furnace is vivid and becomes more so when the king returns to find them standing erect in the fire with another man with them. As Christians, we see the "son of man" in the furnace as a pre-cursor to Jesus. Nebuchadnezzar, upon seeing the miracle, recognizes that his own god is false, and begins to worship the one true God who revealed Himself to the people of Israel.

Nebuchadnezzar was a king and believed he needed to control those under him. He thought that the Israelite's worship of their God would interrupt his control. He is not unlike many powerful people in the world today. The true God scares people of power, because they know they will never have complete control over others. It explains the reason why people of faith are both feared and pushed around in the public square so often. That fear of the loss of control is not limited to the very powerful, though. The same sentiment stirs in the hearts of us all. We want to cling to the illusion of control, and we know that if we acknowledge the king and lordship of Jesus Christ, we put ourselves in the hands of another.

While relinquishing control presents as scary, it is also the path to authentic freedom. It's hard to imagine any more freedom than to tell the ultimate worldly power that you are willing to be tossed into a furnace rather than worship a false god. That's exactly what the three did. They were free precisely because they honored, worshipped, and trusted without qualifications the one, true and living God. In their response to the king, they acknowledged that God could protect them, but even if He didn't, they would not bow down to a false god. That is amazing.

The witness of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is a testament of great faith. An authentic faith that is not conditional upon God doing what they wanted. It's easy to focus on the miracle in the furnace, but the heart of the story is the fidelity of the three witnesses to the one true God. As God's chosen people in a relatively comfortable environment, it is hard to imagine the kind of choice they were given, but we are given that choice in less dramatic ways every day. The world encroaches on us with its power to destroy our reputations and even our ability to make a living. The list of differences between what the world accepts and what God reveals gets longer every day. And the longer the list gets, the more challenges there will be to honor the one true God.

It would have been easy for the three to just bow down before the false god. No furnace. No angry king. But their testimony and fidelity honored God and led another to Him. Nebuchadnezzar converted after seeing the power of the one true God. Seeing the power of God through the witness of His disciples is a sure catalyst to bringing people to Him.

In the New Testament, the original disciples are in a similar boat. Jesus has been humiliated and has died. They are wandering and wondering what to do, living in deep fear of His opponents. The choice is put before them. Follow Jesus or return to the stability and comfort of their previous lives. One choice will be easy. The other hard. One choice will allow them to blend in. The other will put them as outsiders, but also give them the chance to witness to the truth. Jesus knew the weakness of His followers from Day One and so he leaves them with one more piece of data to encourage them. He rises from the dead, as He

said He would. The resurrection of Christ is the catalyst that lifts His followers out of fear and begins the process of introducing Jesus to the rest of the world.

That introduction needs to be complete. It often is not as we present the images of the three young men being protected from the fire, without reminding ourselves that their fidelity was not contingent on their bodily protection. The one true God is our path to Heaven through the heart of the Risen Christ. He may or may not give us what we want, but He will always give us what we need. Believing this is our first protection against bowing down before false gods. Living it is our first step to witnessing to the living God and opening a path for others to know Him too.

Jesus is risen. False gods and fear are set aside. Nebuchadnezzar and the world can be invited to see it and be given new life. If they are to receive this gift of new life, it is up to us, who have it already, to share it with them.

Happy Easter. Rejoice in the new life of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead!