

## Reformation Sunday – Nov.4, 2018 – The Word: Daniel 3:16-28

They lived at a time and in a land where the prevailing view was: “You can have your belief. You can have your God. Everyone can.” It sounds deceptively like the religious freedom that we enjoy in our country today. But it wasn’t the same. Far from it. The idea that *you can hold your own religious views* was very main stream in the culture. Except one addition was pressed upon all: you also must be willing to participate in this one activity, intended for unifying the people of the great nation of which you had become a part. And that act? Worship also the god which the ruler of your land had set up.

Are you thinking of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego’s time, as you hear that description? I could just as easily be speaking of another time.

Peter, Paul, John, and the Christians in their generation - and the ones after them - lived in an almost parallel spiritual landscape to that of S, M & A. I read recently: “Rome [the empire] was surprisingly tolerant of other faiths... Rome did not insist that everyone convert to their religion. They merely insisted that ... every citizen make a sacrifice to the emperor as if he was divine.” Like us, those who held the truth that there is one God and He alone is to be worshipped couldn’t go along with what was being asked.

The interesting thing about that article about Rome is: it drew parallels not between Rome and ancient Babylon. It made matches between Rome and our present culture. Well, what about today? What are we being asked compared to then? As we take a close look, we might conclude that we live in a *similar spiritual setting*. Obviously there is no king (or emperor) pushing a “unifying belief” upon us, so there is no immediate threat of death. And the action being pressed for - in our time – isn’t so much to worship *a specific* god. But there is this: the mass of our culture says, “You can have your god. You can have your belief. Everyone can. Only also do this: accept that all religious ideas are good.”

And aren’t we really right back where we started some 2,500+ years ago: standing, as it were, right alongside S, M and A? The one belief that is really “on the outs” is: to hold the truth that there is One God and no other, and no one comes to Him except through the Savior, the Christ, who is God over all.

King Nebuchadnezzar, powerful king of Babylon, had decreed everyone must bow down and worship the massive golden statue he had built. Would the truth about God be all but hidden to those masses of people, buried under an imperial-decreed idolatry? Proclamation of the truth was sorely needed.

It was a different time, in a different place. 95 statements went up on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The statements brought up places where what people were being taught strayed from the truth of the Bible. Martin Luther sought a discussion about the very heart of the Christian faith. That’s what was under assault by the devil. The truth that we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ, and not by anything we could offer, but only by God’s undeserved love to us – that truth had been all but hidden to masses of people in ML’s land of Germany. It was no different in the surrounding countries. A clear confession of truth was sorely needed.

Back to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They knew exactly what they were getting themselves into when they refused to worship before the golden statue. Do you think someone maybe suggested to them: “Are you sure this is a hill you need to die on – literally”? Someone might suggest: what difference could this make? If they were dead, how could they help the goal? Was this really a way for the truth to be brought out, so that more people might hear it?

Martin Luther, as well as the German leaders who stood up for God’s truth in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, may have had to answer that same question: Was this a hill to stand upon, when they couldn’t know going in whether they’d live or die? About a century earlier, John Huss had taken a stand for God’s truth. And he was burned at the stake. Would their stand now really do any good, so that more people might see the truth which had been hidden under so much error?

It’s tempting to think that way, even when *whether we live or die* isn’t at stake in the stand. If we remain standing on God’s unmoving truth, is it really going to make a difference in the truth being heard and seen?

Take a look back. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not deterred by whether they’d live or die. Look at what gave them such conviction and what really mattered to them. They replied to the king:

“... we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Daniel 3:16-18).

This is the truth – whether they lived, or died – the Lord would rescue them. It wasn’t, then, for them to decide the circumstances when it would be good to stand on God’s truth unmoving. They understood: this is the place for God’s

people to always be, regardless of the circumstances. God will decide the way to best defend his truth, whether that would mean – in their case – allowing their lives to go on here on earth or taking their souls to live in heaven.

Nebuchadnezzar, no matter how terrible his threats, had no power to change that. This was an opportunity to tell the king - and however many others would hear their words - who was really in control. No matter the outcome this particular day, the Lord was in control. And He alone is God. And having that truth locked-in, S, M & A didn't need to find a way to save their lives, so that they could make a difference in the battle for the truth. God was – and always is – perfectly capable of taking care of things, like saving people and preserving His Word. This was an opportunity – the circumstance God gave – to point the attention of a king, and who knows how many others, to the one true God – the only One who saves.

Even though you and I may never be called before a king or a president to take a stand upon God's truth, we have plenty of others as an audience: like our families, our friends, our coworkers, our classmates and neighbors. And while the circumstances might not seem as dramatic as what we see in Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's life or in Luther's life, there are times when we too don't know what's going to happen. There is a kind of heat we can face without being thrown into literal flames.

- You may work in an incredibly rough environment, where the language thrown around is awful and the way people are treated is almost as bad – or worse. Your faith may not only lack appreciation, and the way you season your life with the truth and love of God may not only fail to be received warmly. You may be outright scoffed at and ridiculed for your beliefs and the way you handle yourself. You may face some heat.
- In the high school or college halls, or in teenage or young adult circles, your restraint to save sex until marriage and to not chase after whatever pleasure is being thrown at you, may be taken as not only “ok, that's different.” You may get labeled, and face not only rejection but attacks for the stand you take for simply doing what is good. You may face some heat.
- As people from Generation Z and Millennials ask questions about spiritual truth, and you lovingly share answers like... hell is real, pornography is sinful, the Bible is 100% reliable, and Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life... you may be labeled as narrow-minded, unenlightened and even unloving.

Like S, M and A, it isn't for us to decide the circumstances when it is good to stand on God's truth unmoving. This is the place for God's people to always be, regardless of the fire we may face for where we stand.

Well, how did God work everything out in today's Bible section in front of us? These three children of God were dumped into the furnace. Suddenly a heavenly figure appeared with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And while the ropes that bound them were consumed, when they came out their clothing didn't even smell like smoke.

“Then Nebuchadnezzar said, ‘Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God’” (3:28).

This doesn't mean Nebuchadnezzar had completely abandoned the idea of other gods. It does mean: a clear witness had been given to him... and to so many others.

The same thing was true in Worms in 1521 and Augsburg in 1530. A clear witness was given to God and His truth found here (the Bible). And in each of those cases – going back 500 years and back 2500 years – God worked through His truth, which had been shared, to bring people to know Him and trust in His saving work.

It's easy for us to feel all the “push back” from the world to the realities that we've talked about today. The realities that there's one God and one way to be right with Him. It might tempting to wonder: what chance do we have against such a mass of society moving in unison down the path that Jesus says is leading to destruction? Is anybody going to listen?

Well, look around you this morning. Let's not forget about the spiritual Reformation God has worked inside each one of us. Were it not for the truth and grace of God at work in our hearts and lives, things would be no different for us than we see in the world around. It was only by the grace of God that any one of us was introduced to the truths of God's Word, and it's only by the power of God that we were given faith to believe in his promises. It's only by the working and gift of God that our sinful hearts were reformed, and continue to be reformed, to admit our daily sin and trust only: Jesus makes us holy and brings us peace with God. And if God has brought that all about for us, He can do the same for others. That happens as He works through His powerful truth.

And that reminds us with laser clarity of where to set our focus, our goal. S, M and A understood that it was not for them to decide the circumstances when it would be good to stand on God's truth. That is the place for us, as God's people, to always be found – regardless of the circumstances. Amen.