

Reformation Sunday, November 4th, 2018 – Pastor Daniel Waldschmidt – St. John’s Lutheran Church

In the year 1528 Martin Luther visited some of the churches in Germany and he was distressed to find out that most people were not able to recite the Lord’s Prayer or the Ten Commandments or the Apostles’ Creed. So Luther wrote a little book called the Small Catechism so that every Christian would know the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the words to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. And he not only wanted people to know the words, he also wanted them to know what the words mean. And so he attached explanations, usually starting with the question, “What does this mean?” One of his greatest explanations is his explanation to the First Commandment. The First Commandment: You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love and trust in God above all things.

In our first Scripture lesson today, we see an example of three young men keeping the First Commandment. Today we will see that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego kept the First Commandment. I. They feared God above all things. II. They loved God above all things. III. They trusted in God above all things.

First, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego feared God above all things. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were young men, probably around twenty years old (See the People’s Bible, Daniel, page 54-55). They had been taken away from their home in Jerusalem and forced to live in the far away country of Babylon. They did very well in Babylon. They were even appointed to high positions in the government. But they ran into a problem when the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, made an enormous golden statue, 90 feet high. And Nebuchadnezzar ordered all his officials to bow down and worship the statue. Shadrach Meshach and Abednego couldn’t do that. The first commandment says, “You shall have no other gods.” Deuteronomy 6:13 says, **“Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.”** They couldn’t bow down to the golden statue, but the king’s decree said, **“Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace” (Daniel 3:6).**

Humanly speaking, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had a lot to be afraid of. They could have been afraid of the king. At first Nebuchadnezzar was relatively nice to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. In the verses right before our passage he gave them a second chance to bow down and worship the golden statue. But then the three young men refused and our passage says, **“Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed” (Daniel 3:19).** The Aramaic of this passage says “the image of his face changed.” The three young men had refused to worship the image of gold and so the image of Nebuchadnezzar’s face changed. You could see on his face that he was angry. And the passage says, **“He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual” (Daniel 3:19).**

Humanly speaking, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had a lot to be afraid of. But Shadrach Meshach and Abednego feared God above all things. They feared God more than they feared the king and the fiery furnace. If they fell down and worshiped the golden statue, they would be sinning against God and they feared God more than they feared Nebuchadnezzar and the fiery furnace. Now I want to be very clear here. Please don’t misunderstand me. God is our loving heavenly Father and so when the Bible talks about fearing God, it is much different than fearing Nebuchadnezzar. The biblical concept of fearing God includes having loving respect and awe for God. The biblical concept of fearing God includes knowing God as our loving Savior from sin. But one aspect of fearing God is also recognizing that God is holy and that God punishes sin. Jesus himself said, **“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul (people like Nebuchadnezzar). Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell (and that’s God)” (Matthew 10:28).**

You see, our sinful natures want us to think, “I can say whatever I want to and do whatever I want to and God will just have to accept it.” When we start to think like that we need to hear what Martin Luther said at the conclusion of the Ten Commandments, **“God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments, therefore we should fear his anger and not disobey what he commands.”** Sometimes our sinful natures need to hear that.

Shadrach Meshach and Abednego feared God above all things. But as I said the Biblical concept of fearing God is not just knowing that God is holy and that he punishes sin. The biblical concept of fearing God includes knowing God as your Savior from sin. And so Shadrach Meshach and Abednego also loved God above all things.

Did you notice that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego leave open the possibility that God will not save them from the fiery furnace? They say, **“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Daniel 3:17-18).** Even if God doesn’t rescue them, they’re still going to love God above all things. You see, Satan’s accusation against us is that we only love God as long as God blesses us. In the book of Job, before Job suffered, Satan says to God, **“Does Job fear God for nothing? ... You have blessed the work of his hands. ... But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face” (Job 1:9-10).** Satan said that Job only loved God because God blessed him.¹ But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said, **“We love God above all things, whether he rescues us from the fiery furnace or not.”** The People’s Bible Commentary puts it nicely: **“Their faithfulness to God did not depend on a happy outcome. The object of their affections was God himself, not the kind of treatment he saw fit to give them” (John Jeske, Page 60).**

We have to admit that many times our love for God has been dependent on whether he has blessed us. But one of the central truths of the Reformation is that God’s love for us is not dependent on how faithful we have been to him. The Bible says that when we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Christ went through the ultimate fiery furnace for us. He suffered the curse of God’s law in our place so that we will never have to. The central truth of the Reformation and the central truth of the Bible is that we are saved from our sins by grace alone. Grace is God’s undeserved love. We didn’t deserve it. But God saved us from our sins by Christ’s death on the cross. And the forgiveness that Christ won on the cross is ours through faith alone. We don’t have to do anything to earn it. God gives us heaven as a gift through faith in Jesus. That makes us love God above all things.

Shadrach Meshach and Abednego loved God above all things. Remember that they were only about 20 years old. And they had very successful careers ahead of them. They were already high officials in the government of Babylon. But they loved God more than they loved their careers. They loved God above all things. And finally they also trusted in God above all things.

During a sporting event every once in a while an athlete does something so spectacular that it brings the crowd to their feet. Well, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fire, but then God did something so spectacular that it even brought Nebuchadnezzar to his feet.² **“Then Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, ‘Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?’ They replied, ‘Certainly, your majesty.’ He said, ‘Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods!’” (Daniel 3:24-25).**

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego weren’t alone in the fire.³ There was someone in the fire with them. It could be that the fourth one in the fire was Jesus himself, the Son of God, or it could be that it was a created angel whom God sent. Either way *God* protected Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. God was a Mighty Fortress around them. He protected them so thoroughly that it seemed like they hadn’t been in a fire at all. It says, **“the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed.”** Jesus once said, **“Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid.” (Matthew 10:30-31).** Not even a hair of their heads was singed by the fire. God was a Mighty Fortress around Shadrach Meshach and Abednego and he protected them so thoroughly that it was as if they hadn’t even been in a fire. Remember that earlier in the reading it described their clothing: **“So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace” (Daniel 3:21).** When they came out of the fire says, **“Their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them” (Daniel 3:27).** They had been in the fire, but it was as though they hadn’t been in a fire at all. That’s how thoroughly God had protected them. God was a Mighty Fortress around them.

Even Nebuchadnezzar had to acknowledge this amazing miracle. He said, **“Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants!” (Daniel 3:28)** Martin Luther put an evening prayer

¹ Thanks to Dr. Mike Berg of WLC for this insight.

² John Jeske, page 62.

³ I owe this sentence to the People’s Bible, Daniel by John Jeske, page 65.

into his Small Catechism and the prayer says, **“Let your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me.”** God sent his angel (or Christ himself) to protect Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. A few chapters later in Daniel 6 when Daniel was in the lions’ den, Daniel says, “My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions.”(Daniel 6:22) And God sends his angels also to protect you. You can trust in God above all things. Nebuchadnezzar says, **“Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They *trusted* in him.” (Daniel 3:28)** Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego trusted in God above all things.

People who have studied Martin Luther will say that the most striking aspect of Martin Luther is how firmly he trusted in God. One author wrote, **“Luther’s greatness lies in the greatness of his childlike faith. ... Luther believed, believed, believed. That is the secret of his strength and his greatness. ... Luther believed the Lord like Abraham. That is his most striking characteristic.”**⁴

God has told us some impossible things. God has told us that God has told us that he raised Jesus from the dead. God has told us that our sins are all forgiven and we will spend eternity in heaven. Those things seem impossible but he’s God and nothing is impossible with God and so we believe him. It seems impossible that three men could go into a fiery furnace and come out without a trace of fire. But nothing is impossible with God.

Today is Reformation Sunday and the center of the Reformation is hearing the promises of God and believing the promises of God. God has promised you that Christ died for your sins. God has promised you that your sins are forgiven. God has promised you that heaven is yours as a free gift. Believe it. Trust in him above all things. That’s what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did. That’s what Martin Luther did. Martin Luther’s legacy is hearing the promises of God and believing the promises of God. So five hundred *and one* years after the Reformation, let’s fear, love and trust in God above all things. Amen.

⁴ August Pieper, “The Closer to Luther, the Better the Theologian,” Translated by Andrew Husmann. Quoted in Kenneth Cherney Jr., “Luther’s Theological Center,” pp. 2-3.

