



Con- Forming

Daniel 3:1-18

The past 2 Sundays we've been looking at the first two chapters of the book of Daniel. Since Daniel and his three friends were definitely religious minorities in the Babylonian empire, they have helpful things to teach us about how to live as a religious minority here in the South Bay.

Last week we heard about a dream that Nebuchadnezzar had, about a statue that had a gold head, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of a mixture of iron and clay. A rock, not cut by human hands, smashed the statue's feet; the whole statue fell; and was broken into pieces.

After having had that terrible dream, I'm really surprised that Nebuchadnezzar went ahead and built a huge statue of wood that was plated with gold, representing the god Nabu (for whom Nebuchadnezzar was named), and commanded all his people to bow down to it. But he did. Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from Daniel, Chapter 3.

SLIDE 2- 18

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.² He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up.³ So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

⁴Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: ⁵As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

⁷Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. ⁹They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “May the king live forever! ¹⁰Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. ¹²But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.”

¹³Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, ¹⁴and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ¹⁵Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?”

¹⁶Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸But 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.”

Here ends the reading of God’s Holy Word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

How easy it is to get sucked in! Even just the reading of it: “the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials” – repeated twice – the rhythm of those offices just draws us in. Almost like “Lions and tigers and bears, oh my! Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!”

And then there’s the musical instruments: “the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music” repeated 4 times, just in these 18 verses. “As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music”. “Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good.” The hypnotic rhythm of the musical instruments illustrates how easy it is for anyone to get sucked in to what everyone else is doing.

And that’s especially true if we’re in the minority.

A lot of the time, it’s helpful to do whatever the majority around us are doing. We are social creatures. We need each other just to get by. God did not create humans as solitary creatures, like mountain lions. God created us to live in community with one another. Male AND female, parents

AND children. For most of human history, we needed each other just to survive. And even though we are no longer subsistence farmers and hunters, we still depend on one another. Even if you live alone, you depend on hundreds, maybe thousands, of people that you probably will never meet: the engineers who provide you with water and electricity; the farmers who grow your food and the truckers who bring it; the doctors and nurses who help you stay healthy; and the teachers who train all these workers, just to name a few. So yes, usually, it's helpful to go along to get along.

But not always. As Christians, we believe that God has top priority over everything else. Usually there's no conflict between what we want and what the majority of folks in our area want. But if there is, then as Christians, we are called to obey God.

Nebuchadnezzar had had that nightmare about the eventual end of the Babylonian empire, which we heard about last week. So he had all the more reason for building that 60-cubit statue of Nabu out on the plains of Dura (outside the city limits of Babylon), to make sure that the empire didn't crumble anytime soon. He ruled an immense empire that included many different nationalities and religions. He wanted to strengthen the central government, unify everyone and reduce the likelihood of breakaway provinces. So building a statue and then requiring all his various court and provincial officials to bow down and worship it, seemed to him like a sensible thing to do. It would unify everyone. And after all, he wasn't requiring that his officials give up whatever other gods they might have – only that they also worship the one that represents Babylon. It was sort of the equivalent of a loyalty oath.

But. Daniel's fellow Jews – in this chapter, listed with their Babylonian names, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – were not willing to go along to get along. Not with this. The verses from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 were then, and still are, engraved into the very souls of every observant Jew: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." And the first and second of the 10 Commandments are, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."

Okay. That's clear. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would not disobey God even if they were to be thrown into the blazing furnace. Those commandments shaped them into who they were, so they would not break them. And so 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."

God does have top priority over everything else, since he created everything else. And that applies to us Christians now, quite as much as it applied to Daniel's friends back then. Sometimes conforming to the majority is wrong, no matter how easy it is to get sucked in. It is possible for leaders even in our own time to hijack our social needs to manipulate us for their own evil ends. For example: Hitler. That wasn't even very long ago – some of us are still able to remember when Hitler came to power. He was very good at drawing people in, with the seductive power of music and the

rhythmic patterns of speech in his dramatic rallies. Hardly anyone saw what Hitler was doing, for the idolatry that it was- substituting himself for God. And that idolatry brought about unfathomable cruelty, to the very people who taught us of the evils of idolatry in the first place.

And where were the Christians when the Jewish people were being rounded up and sent to concentration camps? In Germany, most Christians accepted the rule of the Nazi party, and rebranded themselves as German Christians – with “German” having priority over “Christian”, and the state ruling over the church. Some of them did not; and they came together to write the Barmen Declaration, which is still today part of our Presbyterian confessions of faith. They branded themselves the Confessing Church, because they confessed that the church obeys only Jesus as God’s one and only Word; and it is Jesus, and not the state, who ultimately determines what the church does.

For example, from the Barmen Declaration, we read, “As Jesus Christ is God’s assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way ... he is also God’s mighty claim upon our whole life.... We reject the false doctrine [that] the church [can be] permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure, or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.” The Barmen Declaration says, essentially, the same thing that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said: we will not worship anyone or anything but God, no matter what. Theirs was the minority position; and they were proven right.

We don’t know why Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were able to look past the hypnotic rhythm and music that pulled everyone else into worshipping the statue of Nabu on the plain of Dura. Perhaps it was because of what they were taught as children about God. Perhaps their minority status made it easier for them to avoid being swept along with everyone else. We don’t know. Nor do we know why the minority of Christians in Germany refused to bow to Hitler, even though the majority of them did. I think that it’s because it takes courage to stand up for what is true, when we are in the minority. As a minority, we may be able to see more clearly what’s going on around us; but it’s also riskier to speak up - and not all of us have that kind of courage.

Fortunately, courage is available! Besides Daniel 3, we also have 1 Peter 2:17, where it says, “Fear God, honor the emperor.” Fear God – i.e., respect and obey him – first of all. Honor the emperor – i.e., obey the government – second of all. That was the priority of Daniel’s friends. That was Peter’s priority. That was the priority of the signers of the Barmen declaration. And that, brothers and sisters, can be our priority as well.

The Christian faith has been summarized for centuries in the Apostles Creed. Let’s take courage by reminding ourselves of who God is and why we obey him first of all. Let’s stand and say together the Apostles Creed.

SLIDE 19-23

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

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