

11-30-2025 Worship Service -- Advent 1

Welcome! Announcements...

Following in Justine's example from last week I thought I'd share this short Advent poem...

An Advent poem by Madeleine L'Engle

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.
He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.

Let's join together in the **Call to Worship**

Prayer – O God, it seems that the world is still not ready to receive and fully embrace the presence of Jesus. The heavens are still unsteady and prisoners still cry out for release. But we are gathered here, as your people. Faithfully waiting, trusting you, hoping in you, anticipating again, the celebration of the birth of our savior. Be with us as we worship. Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Offering Prayer –

Thank you God, for each person who has given their money, their time, their talents and passions with the intention of offering those things as a gift back to you, the giver. It's when we're thoughtful and intentional about honoring you with our lives that we shine your light, share your love and bring your kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. Bless us in our giving. Amen.

Message – Pastor Lois Harder

Let anyone who thinks the Bible is a dry and boring book with no sense of humor read this story. This is a Jewish storyteller's dream! The storyteller gets to say Nebuchadnezzar 9 times. They get to let Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego roll off their tongue no fewer than 14 times. There's this rhythmic little list of instruments that the storyteller gets to say twice – horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute (and every kind of instrument). And...King Nebuchadnezzar is just over the top ridiculous; he had this gold statue built that was 90 feet high and only 9 feet wide – a puff of wind would blow the thing right over! He's a violent, raging man whose face gets twisted beyond recognition when he's angry. He has the furnace heated to 7 times its usual temperature for the certain burning of these three fellows. And then when they don't burn he yells at them to come out and come here! Finally, just in these 30 verses he does a complete 180 – going from trying to incinerate anyone who won't show complete allegiance to him to declaring that anyone who speaks disrespectfully about Sh, M and Abed's God will be torn limb from limb and their house made a trash heap. The guy's a little wackadoodle. And telling and hearing this story is kind of fun! Let's listen now to a fun and wonderful musical rendition. This is from the Master's Messenger's recording in 1990. We'll hear Myron Hiebert, DeAlan Unrau, DeWayne Hiebert,

and Bruce Funk with Mary Lou Unrau at the piano. This is their rendition of the Statler Brothers' song, "Fourth Man Standing".

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were three Hebrew refugees in a foreign land. This mouthful of names is only familiar to some of us because we heard them as children when we were told this story in Sunday school, but these were not their given names! They were originally called Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The Babylonians re-named them in an attempt to acculturate them and "help" them to give up their identity, their language and their religion.

As I've mentioned, King Nebuchadnezzar was a typical tyrant, a little crazy as he struggled to gain and then maintain absolute control over his fragile and diverse empire. There were people from many different cultures, religions and political persuasions in Babylon and King Neb wanted every one of them to bow down to him. So he built this giant golden thing – a monument to his pride. The thing was not functional; it served only to symbolize his wealth and power. And by demanding that everyone bow down to it, the King had established a symbol that he figured could capture the people's allegiance. And the people were apparently subdued by Neb's demands – afraid of what his irrational thirst for power might lead him to do. So they complied, behaving as if they had no minds of their own. So that when Nebuchadnezzar made the decree and all the people bowed down to worship the gold statue, there was, actually a strange sort of common unity among the people. It was a unity based on common fear, but they were all in it together.

Now Sh, M and Abed had done alright in Babylon. They had been appointed by Neb as administrators of the province and it was some Chaldeans who turned them in for not complying with the king's demands. So Neb was rightly aware that there were factions and divisions among the people and the Chaldeans had found "an opportunity to bring down these recent immigrants from their positions. They were also immigrants, rivals and jealous of the skills the Hebrews had. So they were hoping to recover lost favor with the king and at the same time unseat their immigrant equals..." (pg. 81)

Nebuchadnezzar never asked Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego NOT to worship their own God, he simply demanded that they add his gods and his idol to their worshipping palate. But – their ultimate allegiance would have to be to him. The threat of 'bow or burn' is a logical position for the totalitarian mind – one empire, one king, one (allegiance). Anything placed above the state – above the tyrant – is unpatriotic and considered treason. (True faith in God and faithful discipleship can be costly." (pg. 81)

When the three are called before the king they are unyielding, unapologetic and even a little sassy. Their faith in God "is of the deepest order. They are convinced that their God has both the authority and the power to deliver." Nevertheless, they also realize that there's no guarantee that God WILL deliver them. Basically, they say to the king, "God doesn't *have* to do what we know he *can* do. If our God performs a miracle of deliverance from the fiery furnace, well and good! If not, we'll continue to be faithful... The issue is faithfulness, rejecting idolatry and refusing to divide their loyalty" no matter what.

Neb actually offers the three Hebrews a second chance. But that only causes them to be more recalcitrant and stubborn. They assure him that they don't need to answer his questions and that they will never serve his gods or worship the gold statue. He's infuriated, and sends them to the furnace.

But when he sees for himself the stunning death of his own strong soldiers due to the heat of the fire – and then he sees not just the three men that fell, bound into the furnace, but a fourth with them – all unbound now and walking around, he's astonished. He's defeated on his own ground, in his own courts and without an army or a war.

And so, in a moment of complete conversion, king Neb praises the God of Sh, M and Abed, *now* commanding that *all* peoples of *every* nation speak respectfully about the Hebrew God. He declares, "There is no other god who is able to deliver in this way!" And with that announcement, King Neb "introduces the Redeemer God to the world."

When this story is told in Jewish circles, the listeners likely hear a deeper, symbolic meaning. "The Egyptian captivity was likened to an 'iron furnace' and the Babylonia exile was referred to in Isaiah as the 'furnace of adversity'. Symbolically, 'furnace', 'crucible' and 'refining fire' are all terms understood as 'proving', 'testing' or 'trying' one's faith.

These apocalyptic stories were very valuable to the early Anabaptists who faced persecution and death – often by fire – for their faith.

How do we hear these ancient stories in 2025? How does this story ring true for us on this first Sunday of Advent? Paul Lederach wrote this in his commentary about this passage. "The temptation has always been present to try to make God and country equally important, but in practice that always results in country being regarded as the highest authority. Today this takes the form of civil religion, or religious nationalism in which the nation is the object of glorification and adoration... and national values are recognized, national heroes are divinized, and the actions of the nation are equated with God's redemptive work." He goes on, "To make God and country equally important, makes it possible for an individual to follow the demands of the state even when those demands contradict the will and way of God. Sh, M and Abed saw with great clarity that their worship of God and allegiance to God stood alone. They could not add the worship of Neb's statue to their faith. Then and today such refusal is seen not only as unpatriotic but also as subversive..."

Lederach asks, "Are Christians to be, first of all, citizens of the country in which they live, or (first of all) followers of Jesus?" Way back in 1994 when the Believers Church Bible Commentary that Lederach wrote was published, it was "estimated that if 25 percent of the world's annual expenditure on military preparedness were used to improve living conditions over a period of ten years, food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, employment and caring for the environment could be provided for all of humanity." (pg. 89)

"The God of Sh, M and Abed has now revealed himself in Jesus Christ and calls his people to offer him primary allegiance... Faithful believers do not set aside or silence (Jesus') teachings."

Let us follow Jesus' teachings, to the best of our abilities, helping one another along the way as we remember that God's purposes embrace the whole world. Amen.

Resource: *Believers Church Bible Commentary Daniel* by Paul M. Lederach, 1994.