

Reformation Sunday

November 7, 2012

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Daniel 3:16-28

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, 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.” Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. Then King 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, O king.” 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.” Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. 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. (NIV)

Have you ever thought about what you would have done if you were in the shoes of one Martin Luther? He stood before the emperor. He stood before men who were hand-picked representatives of Pope Leo X. He was asked two questions as a pile of books were placed in front of him. “*Martin Luther, do you admit that you have written these books? Do you defend them all, or are you ready to recant what you have said in them?*” Remember what was at stake here for Luther. He was told that if he did not recant he would be declared a heretic, a false teacher. If Luther did not recant he would also be declared an outlaw, meaning that anyone who saw him had the right to end Luther’s life. So what would Luther do as his feet were put to the fire?

Luther, after hearing a listing of the books, admitted they were his, but when it came to recanting he was given another 24 hours to think about his answer. Even some friends told him to just take back what he had written. Luther said that night as he thought about what he would say he realized he would be confessing not just to men, not only before the emperor, but also to God Himself. The next day Luther began his defense

in which he said: *“I can’t take back what I have said in defending God’s truth. If I did, then sin and evil would increase their power. Show me from the Bible where I have taught falsely. If you can, then I will be the first to burn my books.”*

The emperor and other officials left the room to discuss Luther’s words and they decided he did not give a clear answer. So they returned to the hall and Eck looked right at Luther and demanded: *“Martin, we are not interested in your argument about what the Bible does or does not say....I now ask you, Martin---and answer clearly and without double talk—do you or do you not recant your books and the errors in them?”* This was it. Luther had to answer. Beads of sweat appeared on his face as he began: *“Since your Majesty and your lordships want a simple, clear, and true answer, I will give it. Unless I am convinced by the teachings of the Holy Scripture or by sound reason—for I do not believe the pope or councils alone, since they have often made mistakes and have even said the exact opposite about the same point—I am tied by the Scriptures I have quoted and by my conscience. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither safe nor right. Here I stand. God help me! Amen.”*

Wow! Talk about being put to the test! Talk about standing firm under fire. Yet, this was really nothing new. We see the same thing happening in our Old Testament lesson many centuries earlier. The same thing goes on today as those who take a stand on the Word of God are under attack. Jesus warned us this would happen and it is happening. People want those who hold to God’s truths to cave in and give into what everyone else is doing. They sometimes even apply a little heat in the hope that those who believe God’s Word will melt under the pressure. But as Jesus also promises we are assured by our God that ***“he who stand firm to the end will be saved” (Mark 13)***. So the question I want us to consider as we celebrate the Reformation this morning is this: **What happens when our feet are put to the fire?**

We have before us probably one of the most beloved Old Testament stories. At least it is one of my favorites. It might be helpful to review just a few of the details in the lives of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, or perhaps better known as the three men in the fiery furnace. They were Jews who were carried away, like Daniel, into exile in Babylon. Like Daniel they distinguished themselves by serving King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon faithfully – so much so that at Daniel’s request these three men were appointed as administrators over the province of Babylon. This made others, especially other officials jealous. When Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold ninety feet high and nine feet wide and gave the orders that all fall down and worship it or pay the consequences of being thrown into a fiery furnace, the enemies of these three men saw their chance. They knew the allegiance and faith Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had with the God of Israel. And when just as they thought, these men did not worship the image of gold, they quickly reported it to the king.

I am not going to take time to retell the whole story this morning except to point out the example of what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did when their feet were figuratively and literally put to the fire. They obeyed God rather than man. They did not give in. They refused to back down. They would worship the Lord their God and serve Him only. Oh, they could have had plenty of excuses and ways to rationalize such a sin. They could have blamed the Lord for having put them in this situation in the first place, allowing Israel to be defeated by such a terrible enemy as Babylon, by allowing them to be carried away from their homes into a foreign and unfamiliar land. They could have

said to God what other choice do we have but to bow down because you allowed us to be here in this miserable place. But they did not do any of this.

Instead, we read now my favorite words in this whole account: ***“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.”*** I love these words because they show as all those around, including the king, saw that these men trusted the Lord their God. These words display a firm trust in God, in His power, in His promises, in His Word. They trusted in His Word without adding to it for although they knew God had the power to save them, they did not know His will in this situation and whether He would use His power to do so or not. But they trusted the Lord either way. What happened when their feet were put to the fire is they were rescued and their God was glorified!

So what happens when our feet are put to the fire? I can tell you what happens all too often in my life – I sin. I know that none of us probably ever have or will be tempted or forced to openly bow down to an image of gold. But aren't we all at times guilty of sin when it comes to what is called secret idolatry? When our feet are put to the fire with a financial setback or money problems, it becomes so easy to rationalize not being a generous giver or perhaps even a cheerful giver for the work of God's church. Are there other things we have placed in our hearts over worshipping God or studying His Word and then rationalized it in our minds because after all we are busy and these things are important too? Are you able to think of occasions when your feet were put to the fire and you melted? Have we ever turned away from God and not toward Him in times of suffering and trial? Have we ever missed an opportunity to display our faith or speak for the Lord? Instead, we keep silent and were more cowards than courageous to speak when the situation called for it – whether it was among family, friends, or neighbors. Have we ever followed the world in sin and given into peer pressures so we didn't stick out? Many times in my life when my feet were put to the fire I foolishly sinned by running away from God's Word rather than standing firm on it.

This is why the Word upon which Luther stood, upon which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stood, and upon which we now stand is so wonderful! For we get to hear again and again the promises of our God and the good news of a Savior who takes all these sins away. Each of us knows exactly what Jesus did for us when His feet were put to the fire. He sent the devil reeling every time. Jesus knew that for Him there would be no rescue – not there in the hour of torment on the cross. No angel would come to save Him – not even God would be with Him there. Jesus knew that He would not walk away from the cross without having a single one of His hairs singed, for Jesus understood He would not be walking away at all – He went there to die! Yet, Jesus went willingly to the cross to suffer the fire of hell, to suffer the fire of God's wrath upon all sin, to make payment for us. And on the third day we get to witness the best news of all as we see in the empty tomb Jesus' rescue and ours. How awesome it is to stand firm on the Word which tells us it is by grace we have been saved through faith through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus! How awesome it is to know that the one who stands firm to the end will be saved!

So what happens now when our feet are put to the fire? What happens when we have challenges as a church, troubles in our homes, and suffering in our life? What

happens when the pressure is there to give up and cave in? What happens when we are standing in shoes similar to one Martin Luther? Like Luther, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, we too have a Savior to fix our eyes on, a Savior who endured the shame of the cross to bring about our eternal rescue. We too have a Savior who not only gives us His Word, but keeps His Word. We have a God who strengthens us and guides us by His Word. This is why we too refuse to give in or give up even when our feet are put to the fire. I pray we hold to our name as Lutherans by looking to the Word of God and that we always say – here I stand. For God’s Word is our refuge and strength – even in the fiercest of storms! Amen.