

*First Sunday of End Time – Reformation Sunday*

November 1, 2015

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)*

I bought out some books from my office. You may recognize some, especially this one (Luther's small catechism) for children or parents of children in confirmation. These are all writings of Luther. If you read Luther's work you know the one main source He used as the basis for all His writing – the Bible. In everything I've ever read from Martin Luther it is full of one passage after another from Scripture. This is because Luther wanted to share with everyone the truths he found in God's Word. He wanted all to have faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior just like he was brought to faith by hearing the Word of Christ. He wrote because he wanted to share the love of God he had experienced. He wanted all to understand the all important truth of salvation completely won for us by Jesus and ours by grace alone through faith alone.

Seeing these books here is a reminder of one of my favorite moments in Luther's life. His writings were placed in front of him and Luther was asked two questions. Are these writings yours? Will you recant? In front of the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope's hand-picked Cardinal and other church officials Luther was asked to take back all he had written,

to say he no longer held to such beliefs, to admit he was wrong and had changed his mind. After realizing they were not there to debate or even discuss the Bible and some awkward moments of not answering the question, Luther was given 24 hours. Some say that was the toughest night Luther ever had. Even some of his closest friends told Martin to just give in and recant. If Luther did not he would be excommunicated from the church and condemned as an outlaw who by law could be killed by anyone. What will he do? More importantly what is at stake?

This is the question that another one of my favorite stories has us consider today. This is the account of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, also known as the three men in the fiery furnace. As we review this Old Testament account I want us to consider this (for them, and for Luther, and for us now) - when God's Word and our faith is challenged: **What is at stake?**

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were the Babylonian names for three Jewish exiles carried off to live in Babylon. At the request of their friend Daniel, another Jewish exile, these three men who had proven themselves as faithful workers in this land were appointed as administrators over the province of Babylon. They were also men known for their love and fear and trust in the one true God. This is where things got difficult for them. King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold. We are talking about a massive image 90 feet high and nine feet wide! Then he gave the order that when the music played everyone in the kingdom was to bow down and worship this image of gold. Anyone who did not bow down and worship it would be thrown into a fiery furnace. So the music began to play and everyone ***“all the peoples, nations and men of every language”*** bowed down and worshipped, or at least almost everyone. Three men did not - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Of course, some men couldn't wait to tell the king about these Jews who would not bow the knee. They said to Nebuchadnezzar ***“(they) pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.”*** Now the king was furious! Filled with rage he called these three men in front of him and put it in very clear terms. The music was going to play again and they were to bow down and worship. He wanted them to change their mind, to say they were wrong, to basically recant, or they will be thrown into the furnace to burn in the flames. ***“Then what god will be able to save you from my hand,”*** Nebuchadnezzar declared. What will they do? More importantly what is at stake?

What would you do? Have you ever thought about that? How would we act if our feet were put to the fire like this? I wonder what I would have done if I was Luther under all that pressure to recant. I have tried to image how I would have reacted to the threat of being tossed into a furnace if I did not bow my knee to a false god. One thing at stake for sure for all these men was their lives. They would not have been the first to have been put to death for their faith in God nor would they have been the last. But they knew there was so much more at stake. Luther said the night before he gave an answer he knew he would not just be confessing before a cardinal and an emperor. He would be confessing before God. He also knew and even said as part of his answer that if he took back what he said in defending God's truth ***“then sin and evil would increase their power.”***

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego also knew there was more at stake than just their lives. If they bowed down to this image they would be doing so not just in front of a 90 foot gold statue, not just in front of the king, but also in the presence of their God. They would be

giving glory to another. They would be showing that they did not love or fear or trust in God above all things. How would they ever be able to tell others about the only true God if they bowed here? How would they be able to teach His Word? There was much at stake!

So listening to the word of our Savior when He says: ***“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul...Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell,”*** (Matthew) Luther gave a brave answer. He came back the next day and replied: *“Unless I am convinced by the teachings of Holy Scripture—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 Word of God 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”*

There was much at stake! So not willing to share God’s glory with another Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego gave the king this bold and beautiful answer. ***“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.”*** When their feet were literally put to the fire ***“they trusted in (God) 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.***

And I pray you know the rest of the story. God spared Luther’s life and continued to use him to write, and teach, and preach, and proclaim the Word of God. God sent an angel to miraculously deliver Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the scorching fire in that furnace. More importantly they were able not just to keep serving Babylon but their God. They had even more opportunity to tell others about the only God who can save. I have wondered if the bold confession and steadfast faith of these three men in the fiery furnace had any influence on why Daniel was so bold to pray to the true God even if it meant being tossed to a bunch of hungry lions – but that’s another story for another day.

There was much at stake! So what about for us now? When God’s Word and our faith is challenged what is at stake? I don’t know if we will ever have to face the choice of confessing the truth of God’s Word or being killed. I pray it never comes to that. But there is no doubt that we are under constant pressure to take back the truths of God we hold on to, to say we no longer hold to such beliefs, to recant certain parts of God’s Word. What is at stake? As we have been studying in the Gospel of John we know why God has given us His Word: ***“These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and by believing you may have life in His name.”*** (20) What is at stake is the eternal Gospel which has been given to us to proclaim!

Don’t we too want all to know Jesus as their Savior? We want all to experience the love of God like we have. We want all to know the glorious truth taught in Scripture alone about how we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ’s redeeming work. For when everything was at stake Jesus came through for us – with His perfect life and innocent death. When Jesus’ feet were put to the fire He never gave in to temptation to bend from God’s Word even a little. When the stakes were highest Jesus willingly endured the hellish fire of God’s wrath for all sin on the cross and died for us. There no angel came to rescue Jesus – not even God would be there to save Him. Instead, God sent Jesus there to save us. His empty grave is all the proof we need that our salvation is complete. So now why would we ever want to recant a single Word of our God! Here we stand – may God help us! Amen.

