

“Together, the Courage to Stand”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 17, 2016
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Texts: Daniel 3: 13-25; 7: 1-3, 15-18; Matthew 5: 1-12

Daniel 3:13-25 (NRSV)

¹³ Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought in; so they brought those men before the king. ¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? ¹⁵ Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?”

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. ¹⁷ If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. ¹⁸ But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.”

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace heated up seven times more than was customary, ²⁰ and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. ²¹ So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. ²² Because the king’s command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. ²³ But the three men,

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, “Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?” They answered the king, “True, O king.” ²⁵ He replied, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god.”

Daniel 7: 1-3, 15-18

In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream:

² I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, ³ and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.

¹⁵ As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me. ¹⁶ I approached one of the attendants to ask him the truth concerning all this. So he said that he would disclose to me the interpretation of the matter:

¹⁷ “As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. ¹⁸ But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever.”

Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSV)

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they

persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon

Together, the Courage to Stand

Yesterday Chaplain Wendy gave me permission to share this with you

because this is her beloved church community,
and we have been praying for her lo these long
times.

She said that on Friday morning she was in the pre-op room.
Her boss, Robin Brown-Haithco who is also a chaplain, was by
her side.

The surgeon who was about to operate on her spine came in to
touch base.

Wendy asked the surgeon whether the procedure would alleviate
her pain.

He reiterated what he had told her before in earlier
consultations, saying,

“Wendy, I cannot promise that this will take away the pain
you feel.

I can only say that I hope the surgery works
to clear up the problems in your spinal
column.”

At which point Chaplain Robin reached over and took Wendy’s
hand

and said, “Wendy, God is here, and God will take care of
this.”

Only one full day after her surgery is in the rear view mirror,
Wendy told me to tell her church family,

“I already feel so much better. Yes, God is taking
care of this.”

Together, the Courage to Stand

The Book of Daniel is filled with magnificent stories.

In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah,
King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and
besieged it.

“The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power,
as well as some of the vessels of the house of God.”

Daniel was captured and carried away to Babylon while he was
still a boy.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon ordered that four young men
from Israel

be brought into his court
and instructed in the ways of Babylonian teachings
and wisdom.

They were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the
tribe of Judah.

“The palace master gave them other names:

Daniel he called Belteshazzar,
Hananiah he called Shadrach,
Mishael he called Meshach,
and Azariah he called Abednego.”

One night King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had vivid dreams
that, try as he might, he could not understand.

None of his enchanters, priests, or advisors understood the
dreams.

In his frustration and rage the king threatened them all with
death,

yet Daniel bravely asked for a hearing of the dream.

That night God spoke to Daniel and told him the dream’s true
meaning.

The next morning Daniel told the king what God was seeking to
communicate.

He bore witness to the king about the one true God.

The king spared the advisors lives and rewarded Daniel richly.

Later King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon made a golden statute for

all to worship.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow to any god but the Lord.

These three men were thrown into a fiery furnace.

Their bravery and faith in the midst of terror gave witness to God.

When the king gazed into the furnace to see three men

he saw a fourth figure in there as well.

He ordered that they be freed from the fire;

he discovered that they were unharmed.

Not one hair was singed.

So it was that the king himself gave witness to all who would listen

that an angel of God had walked among them and saved their lives.

Paul Tillich wrote, *"We want only to show you something we have seen*

and to tell you something we have heard...

that here and there in the world

and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation."

--The New Being

A witness for Christ is one who shows what she has seen;

a witness for Christ is one who tells what he has heard.

Witnesses for Christ stand together with joy and sincerity and share

"...that here and there in the world

and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation."

Together, the Courage to Stand

In time, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon passed on

and his son Belshazzar was made king.

Later at a celebratory feast a mysterious hand appeared in the air,

writing a message on the wall that said, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin."

No one knew what these words meant,

until God spoke through Daniel to testify and interpret
their meaning.
That very night Belshazzar was killed and Darius the Mede was
made king.
The bible says that an excellent spirit was in Daniel,
and his work pleased King Darius.
Jealous leaders sought to trap Daniel,
and they spoke ill of him to King Darius
until the king had Daniel thrown into a lions' den.
God sent an angel to shut the lions' mouths and Daniel was
saved.
Darius was so thankful – and we can be sure that Daniel was, too
–
of what he witnessed that the king released Daniel
and for good measure tossed into the lion's den
the jealous leaders.

Together, the Courage to Stand

Jesus of Nazareth stood before the people of his community
and shared Good News.
His “Sermon on the Mount” wove stories and images,
homespun wisdom with prophetic warnings.
Jesus could very well have been thinking about Daniel and his
companions
when he said.
*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you
and utter all kinds of evil against you
falsely on my account.
Rejoice and be glad,
for your reward is great in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the
prophets
who were before you.”*

Jesus and his neighbors would have been well versed with the

story of Daniel.

“Daniel was probably written during the Greek period,
a time of intense and exhausting persecution for the
Jews.”

In the seventh chapter of Daniel, we find before us yet another
vivid dream.

Except now the dreamer is not a king.

“Daniel, the interpreter of dreams for Babylon’s king,
now becomes a dreamer himself.

This is the first of his visions.

He is so affected by what he witnessed that he wrote it down,
saying,

*“I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night
the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea,
and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one
another.”*

His dream is more like a nightmare:

four horrifying monsters are born out of the sea,
featuring wings, teeth, horns, and extremely nasty
trash talk.

This is more than trash talk or talking smack on the basketball
court.

Their speech is arrogant and rough.

You see, the monsters are ravenous and powerful.

They represent the four empires that ruled sequentially
from the 6th through the 2nd Centuries BCE.

We speak of the Babylonians, Medes, Persians, and Greeks.

The nightmare monsters represent surrounding nations,
nations that would oppress and conquer God’s people.

They symbolize the monsters that bring death and destruction
in an awful effort to overcome and destroy
all that is good and faithful and filled with hope.

The monsters also remind us of that which intends or seeks
to separate us from the love of God, as if anything could.

Nothing can, but it doesn't mean they don't try.
We know about forces, about monsters
that seek to separate us from the holy,
or from one another, or from our true selves.

Our hearts ache with each sorrowful act of violence or hatred
that oppress
and cut short the lives of the innocent
or do damage to the fragile nature of God's
beloved community.

The Apostle Paul bore witness to this when he wrote (in Romans 8), saying,
*"Who will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution,
or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?
No, in all these things we are more than conquerors
through him who loved us.*

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus
our Lord."*

Together, the Courage to Stand

As we overhear the Gospel
we the listener are invited to stand up in unison, in unity,
in community,
to stand with Daniel and his people in exile.

We stand to see Daniel, living in exile in Babylonia,
forced to serve the same kings who have captured him
and oppressed his people.

We see Daniel surrounded by people who do not yet know God,
inspired to bear witness for God by first listening to God

so he can interpret others' dreams.
We see Daniel as an interpreter of other's dreams,
suddenly having a vivid dream of his own.
At first he is frightened.
Daniel's dream is a nightmare about four monsters whose will is death.

We bring our own faith into the story, and we stand up and say,
*"Daniel! Be strong.
Trust in God, for hate and oppression never have the last word.
The God of grace and glory is present, and love always wins.
Daniel, trust and stand in that trust,
and if your trust ever runs shallow or weak, faint or pale,
then here, have some of ours
while we stand together."*

In fact, according to the Word, the monsters are themselves overcome
by the Son of God, the Ancient One, the Savior
whose word is love and whose grace is amazing.
What is truly unique and beautiful here in this story is that
we witness Daniel seeing in his mind's eye
the Messiah who will be born in a manger
hundreds of years later to redeem us all.

Together, the Courage to Stand

In his sleep, in the midst of his dream the befuddled Daniel seeks help.
Here is when we are reminded that we need to stand, together, with courage.
Helpers need help sometimes.
Parents need a helping hand every now and then.
Pastors have pastors.
Disciples of Jesus Christ seek out other disciples
for wisdom and a welcoming ear and kind word.
Teachers and nurses and librarians and clowns and IT specialists
and all God's people need a helping hand sometime or

other,

someone to stand with them and say,
“I got your back. How can I be of service?”

“While still in the dream, Daniel asks a heavenly attendant
to interpret what he has seen.

The Interpreter reassures Daniel and bears witness:

The Ancient One and the Son of God have come on the scene,
defeating the monsters (while not destroying all of them).

*“The holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom
and possess the kingdom forever – forever and ever!” (v. 18)”*

“There are ravenous and powerful monsters
that have taken the lives of our loved ones – cancer is but
one.

Consider this poem by an unknown author:

What Cancer Cannot Do

Cancer is so limited.

It cannot cripple love.

It cannot shatter hope.

It cannot corrode faith.

It cannot eat away peace.

It cannot destroy confidence.

It cannot kill friendship.

It cannot shut out memories.

It cannot silence courage.

It cannot invade the soul.

It cannot reduce eternal life.

It cannot quench the spirit.

When you stop to think about it,
these ravenous monsters have many, many names.

They are legion. They are, however, not almighty.”

When we stand together,

trusting and following the nature and nurture of God,
no monster, no evil, no pain, no sin,

no terror of the night or day stands a
chance.

“Daniel’s dream acknowledges the horror of the monsters we
encounter,
but provides reassurance that the Ancient One and the
Son of God
do not even muss their hair
in their ultimate defeat of the beasts.”

Together, the Courage to Stand

This is a call to presence.
This is a plea, a prayer, a prophetic alert, a petition
for showing up for one another,
even and especially in times of personal heartache
and fiery heat,
of communal discord and disharmony.

Who needs for you to stand with them, to be a source of courage
and strength?

Who needs for you to be a witness?

Who needs for you to remember their nightmares and needs,
their highest hopes and deepest dreams?

As we step up and stand tall beside one another, together,
we do well to remember, to Re-Member,
to remember those who have gone on before us
the Daniels, Shadrachs, Meshachs, and
Abednegos,
as well as those in our midst today
who enlighten and empower
our own journeys
with such grace.

Remember the folks who emerge from life’s ashes like the
Phoenix,

a new Creation in Christ, offering themselves to God and
the community.

One day we, too, shall stand in the fire, in the lion’s den, in the

face of monsters.

We shall stand up, together, with courage and grace and faith,
to the monsters in our midst whose will is to separate and
violate,

and the Ancient One and the Son of God who
stand with Creation,
will yoke us into a force for love,
and through us will save.

Remember Daniel's story,
and let God be strong for you in your weak places and
moments.

Remember Shadrach's story,
and bear witness, speaking the truth in love.

Remember Meshach's story,
and give thanks to the Ancient One and the Son of God.

Remember Abednego's story,
and be assured that you are never, ever alone or
abandoned,

ignored or isolated, for Jesus is here with you and
so is His Church.

Together, the Courage to Stand

They say that one day Saint Peter was on the watch at Heaven's
Door

adjusting the "All Means All Are Welcome Here" sign.

St. Peter was pleased with the new welcome mat that read:

"WARNING: THIS PLACE IS COVERED IN DOG AND CAT
HAIR."

He looked down through the clouds

and saw that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon
had tossed Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego
into a fiery furnace.

Saint Peter was all in a tizzy by the time he found God.

"Lord! Lord! Nebuchadnezzar has thrown your servants into a
fiery furnace!"

"Oh, my, that is terrible! I better call Jesus and send Him there

pronto.”

So God speed dialed Jesus.

When He picked up God began to say,

“My Son, Nebuchadnezzar has thrown Shadrach,
Meshach, and ---”

That is as far as he got.

“When the [Lord] gazed into the furnace to see three men
[God] saw a fourth figure in there as well.”

Jesus looked up and said, “Relax, Ancient One. I got this. I am
already here.”

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!