

Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego

Text(s): Daniel 3:1-30

- Pastor Mike Pancoast

In the days of classical Greek theater—and we’re talking about the frame of time that coincides historically with today’s reading from Daniel...in the 400’s BC—the theatersmiths of the day had contrived of some marvelously simple yet effective contraptions for special effects. When the script called for the sudden intervention of one of the Greek gods or goddesses into the story by which the conflict of the story now came to an abrupt resolution, ending with an unexpected, and immediate “...and they all lived happily ever after. *The End.*”, the stage hands would use a wooden crane called a *mechane* (from which we get the word “machine” or “mechanic”) or a trap door. And even though the general public thought it was just great, the rather snooty critics warned playwrights from resorting to this sort of unrealistic, unsatisfying ending, what they called a “*god from the machine.*” After all, life just never quite works out “...and they all lived happily ever after. *The End.*”

Neither do any of the Bible stories that we’ve been reading this fall. They are filled with the depths of human suffering, tragedy, and pathos...some of it brought on by self-centered, fallen human action...some of it brought on simply by the actions of a fallen world in which no action remains untouched by the taint of sin. Abraham and Sarah suffered through the long years infertility and impatience, wondering if God’s promise to them that they would indeed have a child was some sick joke. Joseph finds himself down and out, time and again, let-down and betrayed by everything anyone would normally find reliable: his family...his own hard work...even just a general sense of fairness. Moses and the Children of Israel find themselves enslaved in hard labor. Ruth finds herself as a stranger in a strange land and an untimely widow. David, the shepherd boy and most unlikely of kingly candidates, finds himself as but a boy and unexpectedly selected by God as the king against which all other kings in the story ever after will be measured. On and on it goes...with God intervening... preserving... protecting... guiding... saving... his people. Which, as a story before the withering stare of theater critics who demand realism, just might get it ripped to shreds...if it wasn’t for the human element, the suffering, tragedy, and pathos that every single one of us knows and has experienced in countless forms... though the numerous stories that each one of us could tell... which have had VOLUMES added over the course of this year. The biblical story...and with it, the stories of our very lives, it turns out are completely UNLIKE a Greek tragedy with a clear-cut beginning, middle, and end. There very well may be some resolution to incidents and episodes in which we find ourselves, some “*happily every after.*” And we might very well be invited to name it as the presence and grace of God...at least we should, anyway. But there always seems to be another incident...another episode right around the corner. Those Greek critics were at least right in this respect: life just never quite works out “...and they all lived happily ever after. *The End.*”

That’s the amazing power of this story from the prophet Daniel, one that mirrors the great story of Mary & Joseph and their baby into which we are preparing to enter, and one that we are invited to see how it mirrors our lives, as well. The faithful resolve of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is commendable enough—those 3 young Jewish men who find themselves along with the rest of Israel in captivity in Babylon after hundreds of years of unheeded warnings by God’s prophets that the nation was headed to disaster through its greed, its wanton idolatry, and its lack

of care for the weak. We should mark well their lack of compromise in the face of everything else that demands that they sell out on their deepest convictions.

But what is as remarkable and powerful in this story and in these 3's convictions is one little word in verse 17 and 18, and that one little word is "IF...". *"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. 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 you have set up"* (v. 17). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego assume that God can do what they hope he will do. But they don't know IF God will. They don't assume that they're the ones calling the shots here or that they can control what God will do, and that's a depth of faith that I want to have.

It's virtually impossible for me to imagine the fear that these 3 must feel. The uncertainty. The thoughts of an impending and painful death...even and especially as they are thrown into that fire... it's that moment of dread, of terror, of horror, of panic that is most human, that is most real for every single one of us who have really lived life. And yet it is in that very moment where God meets them. In the same way that it is in that hour of greatest need that God meets Mary & Joseph, clothed in the humble form of compassionate innkeeper...or grubby shepherd. In the same way that it is on the cross itself that God meets Jesus, when that same child whose celebration of birth we await breathes his last. And far from "God from the machine"... far from some actor playing the superhero suspended from a crane... far from a *"...and they all lived happily ever after. The End"* nice, clean resolution, we know that by faith (a) this is simply what God does; and (b) the story continues...right into the tragedies and fears and uncertainties of very lives...right into this very moment of hearing that Word of good news and hope.