

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

May 22, 2016

## **“Trial By Fire”**

*Let the Children Come, part 3*

Daniel 3:8-18

Take a look around this morning. Make eye contact with someone. I may be pointing out the obvious to you, but the truth remains. You are not alone. We have come together as the church to worship God this morning, and you are a vital part of that. It might have taken you three or four cups of coffee to make it here, but you are in the right place. You might be wondering, “Should I have come?” and the answer is a resounding, “Yes!” We cannot be the church alone. God created us for each other, to join and grow this ever widening circle.

I invite you to pray with me this morning, and I encourage you to hold your hands out in preparation for God to fill you this morning with his presence.

Holy God, the Almighty Three-In-One, we thank you for your love this morning. We ask that you fill us now with your Holy Spirit. Teach us, admonish us, challenge us, and encourage us, for we seek to do your will. And I ask, God, that the words of my mouth and meditations of my heart would be acceptable in your sight. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

Over the past few weeks, we have been examining stories in the Bible about young people who had great faith. We’ve talked about Samuel the prophet and David the shepherd. Last week, we looked up Jesus’s words in Matthew 18:3. I have a candy bar for anyone who can tell me what it says.

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)

So in each of these messages, we are trying to discover, What is the faith of a child, and How we can have it? Samuel learned to listen for God's voice. That's something a child does – listens. David was faithful, even though he was young and overlooked. A child is willing to be called for God's purposes.

Ever notice that children are daredevils? At least, mine are. It's crazy how often they get hurt. As God-fearing parents, we try to warn them. "If you jump off that couch, you're going to get hurt!" "If you dive off that dock, you're going to drown!" "If you touch that stove, you'll get burned!" And what happens? They do it anyway!

But do you really know why children get hurt? Because they are brave. Sure, they lack some basic muscle coordination, but would you jump off a couch that was twice as tall as you? Probably not.

A few years ago, my family and I were in California, and we went to Disney. Now, most of the rides there are tame, but they did have one roller coaster called the "California Screamer." I'm not much for roller coasters anymore. I used to love them, but I had a bad experience, and frankly, I got anxious about riding them again. You might even say I was scared. But my daughter, Emily, nine at the time, pleaded with me: "Daddy, will you ride the roller coaster with me?" I wanted to say no, but I couldn't. Not to my own child. So, we rode it, not once, not twice, but four times. Emily actually encouraged me to face an obstacle and overcome it.

Is there a fear in your life you have to overcome? It's probably scarier than roller coasters. But if we want to learn about bravery, then today's scripture is exactly what we need.

The three boys in the furnace in Daniel 3 exhibited legendary bravery. This is one of the greatest stories of faith in the entire Bible. Let me give you a little background. The whole country of Judah had been captured and exiled to Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar was at large and in charge. He was a powerful king who could do anything he wanted. So he brought some Jewish boys into his royal court and had them learn everything they could about Babylon's culture. The language, the customs, everything that a formal royal education could offer. These men were tempted to succumb to the Babylonian way of life, but Daniel chapter 1 tells us, they stood firm and kept their lives pure. The Bible tells us, because God was with them, King Nebuchadnezzar actually promoted them in the government. Daniel and his three friends enjoyed favor in the Babylonian kingdom.

But just when things were going great, King Nebuchadnezzar had one of those "not so great" ideas. He had a huge statue built of himself, and commanded everyone to worship it. By everyone, I mean everyone. "The satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials" had to bow whenever they heard the "horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music." Try saying that three times fast! Everyone was supposed to worship the statue, or be thrown in the furnace.

But there were three rebels: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They knew God commanded them not to worship idols. It's right there in the Ten Commandments. "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God." (Exodus 20:4-5a)

Once again the boys had a choice: conform to the culture or obey God.

Listen one more time to their response:

“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King 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 deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Daniel 3:16-18)

That took some guts. Standing up to the most powerful king in the known world, that’s what I call courage. That’s bravery. But did you hear that “even if” part? Even if God chose not to save them, they would be faithful.

Do you know throughout history, their legendary example has provided strength to Christians facing lions in the arena, Jews facing the Spanish Inquisition, Puritans crossing the Atlantic, and Quakers standing up in trials? All of them were sustained by this passage.

If you don’t know the end of the story, here’s a summary. King Nebuchadnezzar is so furious; he fires up the furnace seven times hotter than before. His soldiers toss the three men in. It’s so hot; the soldiers die when they get too close. And then, the king sees four men walking in the furnace. The fourth looks like a son of God.

To be perfectly honest, we don’t know who this fourth person was. Some think it was an angel. Some even say it was the pre-incarnational Jesus in there with the boys. The point is, God was there to save them. Nebuchadnezzar calls

them out, and the boys are perfectly fine. No burn marks. No soot. Not even the smell of smoke on them. They were faithful, and God saved them.

Let me ask you, though, what choice would you have made in their shoes? If the king was threatening to burn you alive, would you have been tempted to just go along with the crowd, bow with your legs but “not with your heart”? Or would you have sacrificed yourself in order to obey God?

I highly doubt that any of us are ever going to be martyred for our faith. Then again, persecution happens all over the world. Do you know the story of Rachel Scott, who died in 1990 at Columbine High School, because she professed to the gunmen that she was a Christian? Do you know in China, North Korea, North Africa, and the Middle East, people are persecuted every day for their faith? Who is to say that can't happen to us?

If there is one thing we should learn from this passage, it's that true faith in God overcomes any adversity. As Christians, we know that God can be trusted. No matter what you are facing, God will come through for you. Our hope is that in the end, God's justice will make all things right. That's what motivates us to be faithful. We should not be worried about our comfort or our reputations. We should be faithful and trust God.

I want you to hear these promises that the Bible makes about faith in God.  
*(Read by people in the pews.)*

2 Corinthians 9:8 – “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”

Hebrews 7:25 - “He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”

Psalm 91:2 - "I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'"

Proverbs 3:5 – "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding."

God can be trusted. So what should our response be? We need to believe it. We need to seize the opportunity provided by trials and adversity so that we can to grow in faith.

I want to be perfectly honest with you this morning. If you have never had that confidence in your life that these boys had, it can be yours. If you have never trusted in God in any and every situation in your life, you can start today. Right here, and right now.

God formed us for a relationship with him. But we broke that relationship when we rejected God and chose our own selfish way. The Bible calls our disobedience "sin," and the final payment of sin is death. There is nothing that we can do on our own to remove our sin. We can't pay for it, we can't ignore it, we can't cover it up, even if we try to do a bunch of "good stuff" to make up for it. There is only one way to remove our sin and get back right with God. It is through Jesus Christ. Two thousand years ago, Jesus, the Son of God, died on a cross to break the power of sin and death, and on Easter morning, he rose again, proving his love was the only thing that could save us. If anyone believes in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, they are justified, reborn and restored, and enter into eternal life that starts right now, with all the blessings of a relationship with God, and continues for eternity in heaven.

If you feel weak, if you feel like you are being thrown to the furnace, you can come to Jesus in faith and receive his encouragement. If you feel pressure to conform to this world and hide your faith, you can look at the story of these three men and say, “God, I will stand up for you and for what’s right.”

In closing, let me give you one more scripture.

Romans 12:1-2 – “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

It takes guts to be a living sacrifice. To say, “It’s not about me, it’s about you, God.” The world is going to push you, pressure you, ask you to conform, and your God-given conscience is going to whisper, “Don’t conform. Be transformed.”

We can do it. We can serve God. And we can do this together, because God is with us.

### Memory verse

“See, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity.” Isaiah 4:10 (NRSV)

### Reflection questions

1. Recall an experience when you suffered a burn. What happened? How bad was your injury?
2. What is the greatest trial you have ever faced? Where was (or is) God in it?
3. What made the three boys in the furnace so strong in their faith? Would you have made the same choice as they, even if you weren’t rescued?

4. Who are people in your life that directly or indirectly ask you to deny God or “worship” something else? How do you react to them? How easy is it to make your choice?
5. Pray for someone who is going through a trial right now. Ask the Lord to show you how you can help “snatch them from the fire” (Jude 23).