

Sermon for Sunday, November 21, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, Pastor
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"KEEPING YOUR COOL WHEN THE HEAT IS ON"
Daniel 3:14-26

Text: "Then Nabuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace and said, 'Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come forth, and come here!' Then Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego came out from the fire." Daniel 3:26

It was the time of ancient Babylon. Nabuchadnezzar was king and his armies ranged far and wide knocking over little dynasties, upsetting the thrones of minor kings, stamping under foot the hopes and dreams and aspirations of many people as they marched from victory to victory. One of those little nations to fall before the might of Babylon was a kingdom called Judah. Its residents were Jews. The leaders of that land were taken back to Babylon. Take away their leadership reasoned Nabuchadnezzar and you destroy their power to revolt. So the cream of Jewish society - the intellectuals, the political leaders, the military men of high rank, the ablest merchants, the religious leaders - languished in Babylon while the rank and file Jews stayed impotently at home. And because those in Babylon were leaders, it was natural that after a time some of them would rise to at least positions of minor importance. Three such men who rose to some favor and position are known to us today because their names have become familiar to us through a Negro Spiritual, "Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego".

The king of Babylon made himself a new god. Because he was a real big man he decided he needed a bigger god. So he had one made that was 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. A god that big deserved something special in the way of a coming out party, so everybody who was anybody was invited. The king got himself together a giant-sized Herb Alpert band and at the appropriate moment, as the band played, everybody was to fall down and worship the new golden image. Everything went according to schedule - the new god was unveiled, the band played, and everybody fell down. Well, almost everybody. Three spoil-sports named Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego stayed on their feet.

Well, King Neb didn't react too well to this. As a matter of fact, when it was pointed out to him that our three Jewish friends refused to worship his monstrous idol, the Bible says of him "in his rage and fury..." he commanded them to be brought before him. At this point, let me make an observation about Nabuchadnezzar. He identified the rejection of his God with a rejection of himself. Most of us are guilty of this sort of error. If people reject our ideas or suggestions or plans or positions we tend to feel that they have rejected us. That is always a sign of immaturity and insecurity. But because he felt rejected, the King was outraged. Two alternatives were given the three Jews. First, the band will play once more and they will be given another chance to fall down and worship the idol or, second, they will be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. We might call this situation the challenge to conform.

I suppose all of us in one way or another face this sort of challenge every day. Take, for example, the so-called new sex morality. While we may still be debating this matter publicly, as a matter of fact it has already arrived. And for the Christian student on campus who is trying hard to live by a different standard, incredible pressures are brought to bear to conform. In the world of business where certain practices are considered by many to be standard, the Christian often finds himself in the difficult business of conforming or else. Even in the social realm many of you here this morning feel that the practices of your particular social set are often meaningless and even harmful. Yet, the pressure to conform becomes intense for if you don't conform you are out.

But I want you to notice that our three Jewish friends found that the challenge to conform gave them the chance to convince. They had now an opportunity to witness to the King and to all the rest. They had now the opportunity to tell them about the Lord God Jehovah. But notice how they told of God, notice how they made their witness! They said, "we have no need to answer you in this matter". That is, this is no time for words. They could have talked all day about what they believed and why they believed it and the King would not have changed his mind at all.

I think this is true in our day. We live in a time of great theological confusion, of moral confusion, and even of confusion about the very meaning of life. And I think the world is tired of words. What the world needs today is not new words, but a new life; not a great sermon, but great men; not more argument, but more action. Men will not be convinced in our day by our words. They are sick of words. What we do long for is a great life, a great example, and great deeds. Our three Jewish friends are in effect saying to the King, "We will not argue with you about our faith. Instead, in this very moment we will show you the deep things of our faith by our living." And after all, that is what the world needs most of all.

So the challenge to conform leads to the chance to convince. But the chance - the opportunity - is not always easy. In this case it demanded the courage of commitment. What was it the king had said? "But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace..." I don't know about you, but I have a sneaking suspicion what I would have done! But Shadrach, Meshak, and Abednego had the courage of commitment. Listen to their response! "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O King. (and now this marvelous affirmation of courage) But if not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up." Isn't that simply marvelous? They are saying that their faith is so firm and sure that even if God doesn't deliver them they are willing to die for what they believe.

Yes, the chance to convince others of your faith demands the courage of commitment. And do you know what bothers me most about our American society today? It is the fact that we see so very, very little of the courage of commitment. Anybody who is deeply patriotic is considered a cornball. The standard of sexual morality is non-involvement, love 'um and leave 'um. To be an ardent anything is considered square. Even to be an ardent Christian is to be tagged a fanatic. But what a confused America needs today are brave men and women who are consumed with a faith and who will not compromise that faith one inch. A great Christian, Dr. H. P. Hughes, was once challenged by a so-called "free thinker" named Charles Bradlaugh to a debate. Dr. Hughes suggested that instead of a debate that each man produce one hundred men who would testify how their lives had been redeemed by their faith. Of course, the atheist could not produce even one man whose life had been redeemed and transformed by what he believed. The only testimony that a disbelieving and cynical world will believe is the testimony of a life that is willing to lay itself upon the altar of its faith. If you and I are going to claim the faith of Jesus Christ in our day, if we are going to profess him as the Lord of life and the saviour of our souls, then we must have the courage of commitment, we must live a life that will not compromise one inch. The time has now come when Christians must ask themselves once more if they are willing to make any sacrifice, any effort, any privation necessary to witness to the world that Jesus is Saviour.

Let me mention something very important about commitment. Our three friends believed God was able to deliver them, but their commitment was not based on God doing that. No, they said in effect, "Even if God doesn't deliver us we still will not serve your gods or worship the golden image you have made." Surely they didn't want to die. Who of us ever really does? Yet, they were cheerfully willing to confront that last awful extremity of the fiery furnace for in their own hearts they knew that it would be far better to be carried heavenward on the fiery chariot of martyrdom than to deny God.

We are reminded of Jesus agonizing in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemany - "Father if it be thy will, let this cup pass from me...nevertheless...." Yes, nevertheless...How desperately the world today needs brave men and women, brave young people, who are willing to follow God. And no matter what the consequence or the price they must pay, they will stand fast in the breach. Yes, nevertheless....We are reminded of that great Reformer Martin Luther who stood before the rulers of the world - alone, surely somewhat frightened, yet even tho God might not deliver him, he would not break ranks, he would not give an inch. He cried out, "Here I stand. I can do no other." So Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego stood before the mightiest ruler of that day and they had the courage of commitment, they would not give an inch. "Here we stand," they said, "we can do no other."

So, because they had the courage of commitment, they were cast into the fiery furnace. They had been challenged to conform and that gave them a chance to convince the world, but it had demanded the courage of commitment. Now notice what happens! As the king peers into the dying flames he suddenly rises hastily. Something has gone wrong! He not only sees the three men unharmed in the flames, but there is with them a forth figure whose appearance is like a son of the gods. Here we are introduced to the companion who comes.

There is a profound spiritual truth here. When a man has the courage of commitment irrespective of the consequence to himself, the very Spirit of God comes to keep him company, he is the companion who comes. Someone has put it this way, "the reality of the unseen Companion is never doubted by those who go his way, but he is never found until the decision has been made to endure whatever sacrifice God demands."

This is the greatest secret you will ever discover in all of your life. Jesus promised to send to us the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, the very presence of our Lord himself, our unseen Companion. That Companion comes when we make our decision for Christ, when we have the courage of commitment.

Does your faith mean much to you? Is it a vital faith, a living faith? Do you get anything out of your religion or do you wonder what it is all about, if it has any meaning at all? I want to make you an unequivocal promise this morning. I dare to make it because it is a promise of Jesus. That promise is this: if you will commit your life without reservation to Jesus, his Spirit will come to keep you company. Jesus put it this way: "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

You can claim that real promise. You can know the real presence of God in your life and in your heart. God is for real. In December of 1943 America was caught up in the ravages of war and across far-flung battle fields men were giving their lives. On the little island of Panay, in the Philippines, eleven missionaries were captured by the Japanese and all were put to death. One of these men

who laid down his life for Jesus was named Francis H. Rose. This little poem is one of the last things he ever wrote:

All human progress up to God
Has stained the stairs of time with blood;
For every gain for Christendom
Is bought by someone's martyrdom.

Ten thousand saints come thronging home,
From lion's den and catacomb.
The fire and sword and beasts defied;
For Christ their King, they gladly died.

With eye of faith we see today
That cross-led column wind its way
Up life's repeated Calvary -
We rise, O Christ, to follow thee!

Yes, the courage of commitment - and when we rise up to follow Christ, even though it be to a Calvary - we will be able to keep our cool when the heat is on because in the very midst of the flames there comes a Companion to stand beside us. I dare you to follow him!