

Sermon for Sunday, June 1, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"KEEPING YOUR COOL WHEN THE HEAT IS ON"

Daniel 3:13-25

Text: "But I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods." Daniel 3:25

In those days of ancient times Babylon was a mighty empire. Nebuchadnezzar was king and his armies ranged far and wide knocking over little dynasties, upsetting the thrones of minor kings, stamping under foot the dreams of myriads of people as they marched from victory to victory. One of those little nations to fall before the mighty Babylon was a kingdom called Judah. Its peoples were known as Jews. The leaders of that fallen nation were taken back to Babylon. "Take away their leadership," reasoned Nebuchadnezzar, "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 best merchants, and the religious leaders--languished in Babylon while the rank and file Jews stayed helplessly at home. In far away Babylon it was only natural that the Jewish leaders would begin to rise to some positions of minor importance. After all, they were leaders. Three such Jewish men were named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

About this time the king of Babylon made himself a new god. After all, a man as important as he was deserved a new and better and bigger God. So he had a new god made--90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. Most of us do that, don't we? The more successful we are, the bigger our gods must be. We demand a bigger home, a better car, finer schools for the kids, better country clubs, or whatever. Do you find yourself doing that? I suspect most of us do. Nebuchadnezzar decided his new god needed a coming out party, so he invited everybody who was anybody. He got himself a giant-sized Benny Goodman band and at the right moment, as the band played, the new god would be unveiled and everybody would fall down and worship. Everything went off right on schedule. The band played, the new god was unveiled, and everybody fell down. Well, almost everybody. Three spoil-sports named Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stayed on their feet.

Well, what would you do if someone poured orange juice in the champagne punch? King Nebuchadnezzar didn't react very well. The Bible speaks of his rage and fury as he commanded the three men to be brought before him and the king gave them two alternatives. First, the band will play once more and they will be given a second chance to fall down and worship the idol. Second, failing that, they will be taken to the local crematory where the king will make an ash of them.

Could we call this the challenge to conform? That is a challenge we all face, isn't it? For example, on the college campus our students are faced with an incredible pressure to conform to the so-called new morality. In the world of business where certain standards are considered to be normal practice the Christian frequently finds himself under pressure to conform. Even in the social realm many of us feel that the practices of our particular social set are often meaningless or even harmful. Yet, the pressure to conform becomes intense. Too often we hear our friends say, "but everybody is doing it"--whatever "it" may be, and there is pressure to conform.

But the pressure to conform gives people of God a chance to convince! Now Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had their chance to make a witness to the king and all the people. And 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. Would that have changed the king's mind--or the mind of anyone else? Well, you know it would not.

Isn't that true in our day? We live in a time of great theological confusion, or moral confusion, and even confusion about the 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 greater arguments, but greater action. Men today are sick and tired of words, words, words. What we all long for is a great life, a great example, great actions. Our three Jewish friends in effect said to the king, "We will not argue with you about our faith. Instead, we will demonstrate our faith to you by the way we live." Isn't that what the world needs? It is what I need. I yearn for a great example, a great life, that inspires me to follow it and emulate it. That's what your friends look for in your life. They don't care so much what you say, they want to see how you live. They yearn for an example that inspires them and gives them hope if they follow you. What about your example? If any one followed your life, would it make any difference in them?

So the challenge to conform led to the chance to convince. But notice thirdly that the chance to convince wasn't cheap. It cost! It demanded the courage to commitment. The king said to our three heroes, "but if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace..." Had you been in their shoes, what would you have done? I have an uneasy feeling that I would have been on my knees pretty fast. But Shadrach, Meshach, 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 comes 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 amazing? 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.

Is that true for you? Do you see much courage of commitment in America today? Today anybody who dares to be patriotic is considered cornball. To be ardent in anything is considered square. Even if you are an ardent Christian you are tagged a fanatic. Recently when thousands of ardent Christians who love America held a great rally in Washington to pray for our nation the liberal Christians ridiculed them and the secular press made fun of them. 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. Last night I came home from the meeting of the General Assembly of our denomination which is meeting this week in Myrtle Beach, S.C. (I'll be going back this afternoon) But last night I heard the retiring moderator of our denomination speak of the sad plight of our world. He spoke of the need for justice of the need for a new economic order, for a better distribution of the goods of the world. But never once did he speak of the need of the world for Jesus Christ. Never once did he say that the task of the Church was to evangelize and share Jesus with lost men. Oh, how we need the courage of commitment today! Not only in the world and in America, but how we need men and women who are committed to the Bible as the word of God, who are committed to Jesus as the way of salvation, who are committed to living lives dedicated to Jesus. The only witness the world will believe today is a life that is willing to lay itself upon the altar of its faith in Jesus.

Let me point out to you something about the commitment of these three men. They believed God was able to deliver them, but their commitment wasn't based on God doing that. No. In effect they said, "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 willing to confront that last awful extremity of the fiery furnace for in their own hearts they knew it would be far better to be carried heaven-ward on the fiery chariot of martyrdom than to deny God.

Does that attitude remind you of anything? Does it remind you of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane agonizing in prayer, "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--willing to follow God no matter what the price. Do you remember the story of how Martin Luther stood before the rulers of the world--alone, surely scared and frightened--yet even though God might not deliver him, he would not break ranks, he would not compromise an inch. He cried out, "Here I stand. I can do no other." So, Shadrach, Meshach, 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."

You know, sometimes we get the idea that if we love God and try to do his will that everything is going to work out the way we want it. But that just isn't true, is it? I know some of you here this morning who love God, who have tried to live in his will, and yet you are suffering right now. Well, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego got thrown into the furnace just the same. You may be feeling the heat of some personal furnace this morning. Life may not be working out very well for you either. But notice what happened to our three heroes. The Bible says that as the king peered into the furnace to see what happened, he makes an amazing discovery! Not only are the three men unharmed by the flames, but there is a fourth figure in the fire with them whose appearance is like a son of the gods. So, we not only have the challenge to conform, the chance to convince, the courage of commitment, but we also have the companion who comes.

Isn't that what you need--a companion who comes to walk with you when life is doing its worst? I know that is what I need. Listen, when you have the courage of commitment to God, no matter what life brings, in the midst of the worst God comes to stand beside you.

Recently I saw a little article entitled, "Footprints in the Sand" that goes like this: "One night I had a dream--I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord and across the sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand. One belonged to me and the other to the Lord. When the last scene of my life flashed before us, I looked back at the footprints in the sand. I noticed that many times along the path of my life, there was only one set of footprints. I also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in my life. This really bothered me and I questioned the Lord about it. "Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why in times when I needed you most, you should leave me." The Lord replied, "My Child, I love you and I would never, never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

Yes, when the heat is on, we can keep our cool. Why? Because in the midst of the worst that life can do to us, if we are committed to Jesus, he comes to us to carry us.

Back in December of 1943 we were at war with Japan. On the little island of Panay, in the Philippines, eleven missionaries were captured by the Japanese and eventually all of them were put to death. One of those men who was called upon to walk into the fiery furnace of death because of his commitment to Jesus was a man named Francis H. Rose. One of the last things he did before his death was to write a little poem. I would like to share that poem with you. Francis Rose wrote,

All human progress up to God
Has stained the stairs of time with blood;
For every grain for Christendom
Is brought 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 men and women who are committed to Jesus--who rise up to follow him even though it be to some lonely Calvary--some fiery furnace. And when we rise up to follow him, we discover that in the midst of the flames there comes a companion to stand beside us. Will you follow him?