

Before, During and After the Flames

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Mt. Zion AME

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By Rev. Emily Joye McGaughy
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Daniel 3:8-28

Let me begin by saying that I like your pastor. I like Rev. Smith for several reasons, not the least of which is our shared appreciation for the only decent pizza in town at Arcadia Brewing Co. I also like that he's a Detroit Lions fan and griped just as much as I did last fall when our Sunday afternoon sacred conversations on forgiveness conflicted with one too many kick-offs. I also like Mishca, the soon-to-be Rev. Mishca Smith. I like Mishca because she likes being in the outdoors, she likes decent radio stations (of which we have none in battle creek) and let me be honest: any woman living in a household with three males demands my utmost respect. I like them both.

But what's perhaps more important is that I respect them both and consider them both role models in the work of ministry and in the love of Christ. As a cancer survivor, as an advocate and empowerer of children in her work with Freedom Schools, and as a good steward and healer of women's lives in her work at Gracious Homes, Mishca by her lived example challenges me to live at the intersection of grace, wisdom and social engagement. As a powerful minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, one who isn't afraid in personal choice, prophecy, prayer or preached word to proclaim the message of deliverance, and to live that deliverance by challenging oppression and incarnating justice, Rev. Micheal challenges me to speak and live truth unafraid.

Both of you have welcomed me into your lives, supported my ministry, had my back around battle creek, and taught me (a newly ordained youngster from the whacky west coast) how to behave like a big kid in a small town. You have enlivened the work of ministry for me and I count you both colleagues of the highest caliber. I cannot tell you in words how humbled and honored I am by the invitation to stand in this pulpit.

I also want to bring greetings from my church down the

street, First Congregational Church of Battle Creek. Senior Pastor Thomas Ott and Associate Pastor Thomas Ryberg, along with all our members at FCC send grace and peace to you here at Mt. Zion. We pray for continued bonds of love to form between our two congregations in the spirit of ecumenical unity, in the spirit of Christ Jesus who said in no uncertain terms said “wherever two or three gather together in my name, there I will be in the midst.”

Finally, I want to thank God for the opportunity to worship with you here today and thank you for the willingness to have me among you. And I want to acknowledge God as the creator and sustainer of the world, head of Christ’s church, and the one who has entire sovereignty over my life. In that spirit of gratitude and respect, I would like to say our traditional pre-sermon obedience prayer. Let us pray...

(Prayer)

A quick word about the sequencing of this sermon. As you heard a moment ago, this is a long story with LOTS of moving parts. So I want us to take the fiery furnace as the climactic moment in the narrative and pull 3 lessons from “before, during, and after the flames.”

Before the Flames: Lesson #1

- Don’t be afraid to be an outsider insider

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were given names, names given to three “outsider insiders” by the empire of their day. Mishael, Azariah and Hannaniah are their real names, their Hebrew names. They were not Babylonians. They were diasporic Jews, exiled Jews. All three of them. Living in captivity, strangers living in a strange land.

They were young men with spiritual insight and marketable skills. Even though they were Jews, even though they were brought to Babylon from Jerusalem against their will, even though they spoke a different language and worshipped a different God, they were taken into the imperial palace by Nebuchadnezzar and appointed to his royal court. Empires hate foreigners, hate the enemy until those foreigners or

enemies become useful to the empire in some way. So while Nebuchadnezzar would colonize their land, destroy their temple, and strip them of their families, he had no problem employing them to serve his house, to carry out his business and to build his economy. Nebuchadnezzar made Mishael, Azariah and Hannaniah outsider insiders. And that was dumb on Nebuchadnezzar's part because their outsider insider status caused his power to be seen for the sham it was.

I don't know about the rest of you but I'm engaged in conversations all the time about insiders and outsiders. And these conversations are often frustrating to me because it seems like people think it's only when you're on the outside of something corrupt that you can impact that corruption. We don't want to get our lives messy, our hands dirty, our souls mixed up in the church or the public schools or the political system because it's all so corrupt, tainted, and without integrity. We don't want to interact with people who are different than us because we might be exposed to something we can't control. We don't want to work for "the man" because we'll lose who we are. But Mishael, Azariah and Hannaniah prove otherwise. Because of their proximity to the king they were noticed, they were heard, and ultimately they were able to expose the sins of a corrupt king and the blasphemy of idol worship. Because of their closeness to the corruption, the God of Israel's name became known in all the region. They were able to do this because they were on the inside. When you're on the inside, you know the system concretely so you're more able to subvert it and resist it. Resisting corruption from the inside always has more impact than trying to destroy corruption from the outside.

This feels like a fundamental question of faith. If we get our lives messy, our hands dirty and our souls mixed in with the chaos of life, do we trust that God will preserve us on the inside or not? Do we trust God who said "be not afraid." Do we trust God who said "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." Do we trust God who said "be in the world not of the world." The God who commanded us: "If you love me, feed my lambs." The commandment is the commandment. There is no feeding the lambs without

mess, without dirt, without chaos. Do we have faith that God will preserve us if we get on the inside or not?

Lesson from Before the flame: don't be afraid to be an outsider insider.

During the flame: Lesson #2

· Doing the right thing doesn't mean you won't get thrown into the fire. Just make sure you've got friends around that'll go into the fire with you.

Hear these words from Isaiah 43

“Thus says the Lord,
He who created you, O Jacob,
He who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
When you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
And the flame shall not consume you.”

When you walk through fire you shall not be burned. Notice it doesn't say “if you walk through fire.” Notice it doesn't say “when you walk around the fire.” It says “when you walk through fire, you shall not be burned.”

Anyone else tired of running into Christian people who seem to use their faith as a way of walking around everything? As if, this life of faithfulness to Christ was something you could put on and take off like an article of clothing. When times are good, hollering God's name and extolling the virtues of righteousness. When times are hard, remaining silent and disengaged from community. How easy it could have been for Mishael, Azariah and Hannaniah to retreat, to deny their loyalty to YHWH, to preserve the skin on their bones by just bowing down to that golden statue. No one likes to get burned. That's a fact. But life gets hot sometimes. The life of faith does not guarantee freedom from the flames. In fact, it says quite clearly: through the fire. The life of faith is about entering into that heat, not to

become a martyr but to stand in what's right and to proclaim the sovereignty of our God no matter the cost.

We stand in what's right and proclaim the sovereignty of our God no matter the cost. That's the call. But let me say this: there are two things in this story that I believe enabled the three to stand firm in those flames. First of all, God stood with them. And second, not one of them was alone. It is the presence of God and the presence of faithful companions that enables us to stand no matter how hot it gets. When you've got friends who will walk through the fire with you because their faith is as strong as yours, it helps you stand. This is why church community, week after week, month after month, year after year, is so important. This is where we develop relationships with one another. This is where we witness each other's faith. And those things matter because at one point or another we are all going into the fire. When that day comes, those relationships we've built and that witness of faith we've done in here, will help us stand when it gets hot out there.

It never ceases to blow my mind how relationships in the church mobilize in fiery times, in times of crisis. As a pastor, I get to see how brothers and sisters in Christ show up for each other, in sickness, in trial, in family melt-downs, when someone loses a job, when a home gets foreclosed, when a child dies. We need people who will walk through, not around, these hard times with us, not if we go through these hard times, but when we go through these hard times.

To recap: During the Flame, Lesson #2: Doing the right thing doesn't mean you won't get thrown into the fire. Just make sure you've got friends around that'll go into the fire with you.

Now...the homestretch.

After the Flame: Lesson #3

· What saves the faithful will transform what's evil God shows up in this story. God gets in the fire with his people. God preserves through the fire. God shows up. God saves the faithful. That's what God does. So this should be

no surprise to us. What strikes me odd in this story is what happens when Mishael, Azariah and Hannaniah emerge from the fire. Nebuchadnezzar has a change of heart immediately. He witnesses the living God and instantly recognizes and proclaims the truth of who God really is. This is the only part of the story that I find hard to believe. Some, particularly those in the scientific community, would find the whole humans not being burned by a raging hot fire thing unbelievable. Some, particularly those in the atheist community, would find the whole appearance of an angel thing hard to believe. Me? I find it hard to believe that someone in political power had a change of heart that actually turned into a change of behavior. But that's just me...

When we look back over human history: it is a rare day when a ruler or a group of people who have been inflicting evil actually change on a dime. For instance, we know that God has shown up again and again with people in the fires of struggle for equality and justice, in the civil rights movement, in the women's liberation movement, in the labor movements, in the post-colonial movements throughout the world, and on and on. God has shown up in those movements, and though truth has been on the side of justice and seen as such, again and again, we have never witnessed our rulers or our society turn on a dime. We are still dealing with racism, still dealing with sexism and homophobia, still dealing with worker exploitation and the unjust occupation of certain countries. Still dealing with those searing, burning realities as individuals, as communities, as a society, and as a global community.

So while Nebuchadnezzar may have been capable of instant transformation, that doesn't seem to be something we can realistically expect in our days and times. But let us not lose sight of the spiritual fact of this story: when God shows up to save the faithful, evil will be transformed. We may not have the same quick window for transformation, but make no mistake, evil cannot be seen for anything other than what it is when God's truth appears. The hottest fire lit by hell has no sovereignty over God nor over God's faithful. The powers of destruction are rendered weak in the presence of God almighty.

So, faithful gathered, even if it takes time, take heart: After the flame, lesson #3: what saves the faithful will transform what's evil.

Before the flames: Don't be afraid to be outsider insiders
During the flames: Doing the right thing doesn't mean you won't get thrown into the fire. Just make sure you've got friends around that'll go into the fire with you.
After the flames: what saves the faithful will transform what's evil.

- Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
- I have called you by name, you are mine.
- When you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

Glory be to God. Amen.