



MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

www.mzluth.org

February 2, 2014

4th Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon Text: [Daniel 3:13-27](#)

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: [Daniel 3:13-27](#)

Psalm of the Day: [Psalm 37](#)

Second Lesson: [1 Corinthians 1:26-31](#)

Gospel Lesson: [Matthew 5:1-12](#)

The Savior's Sermon: Trust in The Lord's Strength

In Christ Jesus, dear fellow redeemed:

Through the season of Epiphany, we've been using the theme *Paranormal Activity* to look at how Jesus used his power in paranormal ways (ways that go beyond what science can explain) to show that he was the promised Savior. In today's reading that we are going to talk about, our First Lesson, there are plenty of paranormal things going on. But there are things that illustrate the point that is made in our Gospel today that we should trust in the Lord's strength, not in what we can see.

In reality, when you look at the start of the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior's Sermon, it just seems backward, doesn't it? Blessed are you when you are persecuted? Blessed literally means "happy." Do any of you feel happy when someone is picking on you or attacking you because you are doing what is right before God? I don't. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. We are taught from little on in our society that you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps and you can work and get ahead. In our society, you can do anything. So we talk about getting ahead in life. Usually that isn't a synonym for being meek, is it? It usually means you just step on whoever you have to step on because you have to get ahead and do what you have to do. That's the exact opposite of what Jesus is saying.

Now we start these new weeks of looking at the Savior's Sermon, what he is preaching to us, what he is teaching those who already believe in him is the exact opposite of the norm. It's things that society wouldn't say are true. So in a sense we are still looking at stuff that is really paranormal, beyond the norm, can't be explained by science.

Because he's telling us to do things that are so contrary to what we know and what we experience in life and in society, I think our Lord in Scripture has given us all kinds of examples of what trusting in the Lord enables us to do. That's what our First Lesson is really about today.

It's the familiar story of the three men in the fiery furnace. I'm sure most of you have heard it before and know it. It's one of the one's we learn from little on. In reality, since we've been using the Supplemental Readings, this is the first time it's in one of the Readings in church. Otherwise it hasn't been in any of the Readings.

The story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego show us what happens, what God can do through us, when we trust in the Lord and what he has said to us instead of what our eyes see, what our mind tells us, or what the society around us tells us to do.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were the names that were given to three Hebrew men who were deported from Hebron. They were taken out. They were some of the first exiles that were taken into Babylon. They, along with Daniel (who was also given a Babylonian name but we usually refer to him by his Jewish name, Daniel), were some of the first guys that were taken away. They took away the ones that were kind of the cream of the crop... the leaders, the intellectuals, the officials that were in society there. The first batch they took off were these. Later on they destroyed the temple and things and took just about everybody off to Babylon. But at this time, it was just some of the leaders.

They were then brought over to be in training to be servants of the king. At this time, that was King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had separated themselves as they went through their training. One of the ways that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had separated themselves is that they demonstrated themselves to be very gifted. That was obvious to the people that were teaching them. But they were also problematic for them. They wanted these guys to do well and to learn and to serve, so they were feeding them feasts. They were taking good care of them. However, they weren't giving them food that was clean for a Jew to eat. God had given the Jews all those regulations about clean and unclean food, and they were giving them food that they refused to eat. Then the people that were taking care of them got upset and said, "Hey! If you get sick, that puts me in trouble, so you better just start eating this stuff!" They said, "No. We aren't going to do something that our God has told us we shouldn't do. Just trust us in this. Give us the food that we tell you that is alright for us to eat, and our God will provide for us. Our God will take care of us." So they finally caved in and did it, and these guys were the cream of the crop. They rose to the top of the heap, and they were blessed. God took very good care of them and kept them very healthy and blessed them in their training they were undergoing.

In Chapter 2, right before what I read to you, Daniel had interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream that no one else could interpret. It turned out it made Nebuchadnezzar look really good in this dream about this statue. So Nebuchadnezzar really likes Daniel. Kings have egos too, so he really liked this. He put Daniel in one of his inner core, and he said, "What do you want me to do for you?" Daniel said, "Elevate Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to higher positions here in the province of Babylon." And that's what he did.

Remember how we talked about blessed are the meek? The opposite of that is stepping on people, and that's what the leaders in Babylon started doing. They didn't like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego being elevated, these "Johnny-come-latelies" to Babylon. They didn't like them, so they wanted to get them in trouble. They knew the way to do it would be to have them do something against their God. So when

Nebuchadnezzar makes this big, tall, golden statue and says, “When I blow the horn, zither and lyre and all that stuff, everyone bow down and worship me.” They knew that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego wouldn’t do it because they loved their Lord, and they were going to serve their Lord. So the music played. People bowed down, except Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Then the less than meek people went running to the king and said, “Look at them! Look at them! Look at them! They aren’t bowing down! They’re not bowing down! What are you going to do? What are you going to do? What are you going to do?” They bring them to the king and the king asks them, “Is it true? You didn’t do this?” They told him it was true. They were still in the king’s favor, so he really gives them a second chance, which kings of Babylon did not necessarily want to do. He said, “Okay. We are going to play the music again and this time you will bow down and everything will be very good. But if not, then there isn’t any god that is going to save you from me. It’s not going to happen. I’ll show you what your God is. He’s nothing. You need to worry about me. Don’t worry about your God.” That’s basically what Nebuchadnezzar was saying, right? They answer him and say, “We can’t do it. We don’t have to defend ourselves against you. We have to worry more about what God thinks about us than what you think about us, king.”

Notice what they said. “Our God is able to deliver us from your fire. If he wants to, he’ll deliver us. But even if he doesn’t deliver us, he’ll take care of us.” Do you think Nebuchadnezzar thought they were nuts right about then? Even if he doesn’t deliver you, he’ll take care of you? That’s crazy talk, isn’t it? But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego aren’t looking just at this world. They aren’t just looking to keeping their flesh attached to their bones and all their vital organs functioning. They are looking to the glory of heaven. They had to have the faith of Job, didn’t they?

[Job 19:26-27](#)

And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;
I myself will see him
with my own eyes—I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me!

They had to have a belief in the resurrection to eternal life because they said, “Even if he doesn’t, we’ll be okay. So go ahead, play your music, but we’re not going to bow down.”

Kings don’t like backtalk. You kids out there think mom and dad don’t like backtalk? Kings like it even less. The king flies into a rage. Get out the naphtha or whatever that stuff was called in the pits. Throw it into the fire. Let’s make it hotter than it normally is. Seven times hotter than normal they stoke this furnace up. It’s probably some big stone contraption. The top would be open so the heat would rise out. The sides would probably be open so the air would come in so that the fire could burn.

Then the king has the strongest men in his army (although I think the weakest ones could have done this too) tie them up. They tied them up as tight as they could. Then we get this long list of their wardrobe in here. Do you wonder what that's all about? "So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace." I think the Holy Spirit had Daniel write that because he wants us to remember their robes, turbans and trousers weren't made of asbestos. This is pretty flammable stuff they were wearing, these flowing robes that they would have been wearing. So they bind them up in these robes. They take them up and throw them in. The furnace is so hot that the strongest guys in his army now become the deadest guys in his army because the fire kills them. You have to wonder if Nebuchadnezzar was going "Whoops" or is he just so mad that he doesn't care?

They get thrown into the fire and Nebuchadnezzar evidently wanted to see his power in action because it seems like he is peering in to see the flesh sizzle off their bones or something, which seems really warped to me, but it seems like that is what he wanted to see. He wanted to see this reminder that he is king of Babylon and everyone who crosses him is going to be in trouble.

Then he looks intently in there and he sees these three guys walking around with no more ropes around their arms, and there's a fourth guy in there! He looks like he's not human, something divine, an angel, something. Put yourself in Nebuchadnezzar's shoes right then and there. Do you think you'd be a little scared? Do you think you'd be frightened that you're seeing something that's really paranormal, goes against what science can explain? There's four guys walking around in a furnace. That's weird enough, but you only threw in three. I have to believe Nebuchadnezzar was a little bit shaking in his boots wondering what in the world was going on.

He tells them to come out. "Servants of the Most High God, come out!" Then everyone crowds around and they see that their eyebrows aren't singed. Their clothes don't smell like smoke. You've sat by bonfires. You know what it smells like the next day when you pick up those clothes. These guys weren't near the bonfire. They were in it. This is God acting to deliver his people who had trusted in him.

I don't know if any of you remember the show *In Search Of*. I remember watching when I was a young kid. Leonard Nimoy hosted *In Search Of Noah's Ark*, *In Search of Bigfoot*, *In Search Of* all these different things. One of them was *In Search Of Nebuchadnezzar's Furnace*. I remember these experts sitting there straight faced when I was a little kid. I couldn't see how they could say this without starting to giggle. They said, "Well, with the construction of these furnaces, there would have been cool spots in them where someone could have survived if they were thrown..." Oh, get off it!

Sometimes we as human beings don't want to admit that there's something bigger than us. We don't want to admit that there is a God in heaven who can deliver people from fire because that means we are answerable to him. A lot of people don't want to be answerable to the Divine, do they? I don't think they fell into a cool spot. It's obvious that's not what happened when you read what it says. If you believe that the Bible is

the inspired Word of God, you have to believe this is what God did. Our God who is big does big things. But more than that, what we learn is that not only is our God powerful, but we learn that we can trust in him to take care of us.

You and I do not have a promise from God that if the most powerful man in the world says I am going to throw you into the furnace that he is going to deliver us. But remember, they trusted God would take care of them even if they were burnt to a crisp. You and I do have a promise from God that no matter what happens to us, the God who loved us enough to take away the guilt of our sins... he did it through Jesus' life and death. He doesn't do it through anything you or I do. He does it all through himself... the God who loved us that much is going to be with us and take care of us when we face pressure to do things that everyone else is doing. We aren't threatened with our lives like these guys were, but we're often tempted to deny God or not trust in his strength because it will make us look bad in someone else's eye. Do you know what I'm talking about? It's more subtle. The devil has become much more subtle over the years. If I'm threatened with death, I'm going to flee to God. If I'm threatened with life where someone else looks at me in a weird way, quite often I run away from God. Do you know what I mean?

God has said certain things are right and wrong in his Word. He tells us certain things are sins. I need to know that because I'm a sinner and I need to know that I'm a sinner so that I look to God and not to myself. If I try to change God's Word to lessen the impact and say, "That was sin then, but it's not sin now," I'm not helping people because that won't lead them to God. That will lead them to themselves. If I don't recognize my sin, I'm not going to flee to God, right? I'll figure I can fix things on my own. But when God's Word says something is sin and then tells us the wages of sin is death and I should go to hell because of what I am, then I go "God, help me," and I see in Christ how he has delivered me and taken away the guilt of my sin. Because of that, I don't want to soft peddle God's Word. If God says certain things are sin, I have to say they are sin. That doesn't mean I get mad at people and yell at them or hate them or say it in a mean way. He says to do it with gentleness and respect. But you and I have to say sin is sin.

But think of how often we are tempted to soft peddle God's Law. Society changes and things that society itself used to think of as sin they say now are okay. There are all kinds of examples of it, whether it's homosexuality, same sex marriage, things like that, living together before marriage. There are all kinds of things like this that society accepts, even at times elevates, but God says they are sin. I'm not mad at anyone that does any of these. I want them to be right with God. But in order for them to be right with God, I need to show them what they are doing is separating them from God.

So we proclaim the Law, but think of how often we are tempted to just pull back from the Law and not say what God says because someone else will look at us as a religious nut or we're not in touch with the times or we're unloving or we're not tolerant or any of these kinds of things. That kind of pressure is what you and I cave into often, don't we?

We stay silent because we don't want to be viewed as out of touch or unloving or whatever buzz word will come along, because they come and go.

When you and I fail our God, we sin. When he gives us the opportunity to point out both his Law and his Gospel, how he condemns sin but how he condemned it in Christ so you and I are forgiven, so we're going to heaven... when we have those opportunities and we don't seize them, we sin against our God.

The only answer to that is not making excuses. We don't want to bury the guilt of our sin by mounding over it with excuses that everyone does it or things are different and all this stuff. We say, "Lord, I have failed you," and then in Christ, by being connected to Jesus through faith, we know that we stand forgiven. God washes away our sin and remembers them no more. When we understand that, then we want to do what is right before God. It's not that we have to, we want to do it. As God strengthens us in our faith, we get better at doing it. We get better at living for him and not caving into the pressure to trust in what our eyes can see or to trust in what other people think about us. We trust in the Lord and serve him.

But the only way that is going to happen, the only way it happened for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is the same way it is going to happen for us. We have to know God and know him really well. We have to keep exercising that muscle of our faith by growing in Word and Sacrament and then using it. Otherwise that muscle just shrivels up and goes away. We don't just give lip service to God here and then leave church and live our life in our way because it's my life. No, it's God's life. He bought us back, body and soul, when Jesus lived and died for us. He owns us. We belong to him. I want to serve him. You want to serve him. You and I don't do it perfectly.

Isn't that what we prayed in the Prayer of the Day earlier? Did you notice that? We often stumble and fall. We do what we are. We are sinners. We are going to sin. Don't think your sins are not that big of a deal and their sins are bad. Every sin condemns everyone. That's why the love of God is so important for you and for me. That's why the love of God that takes away our sins through Jesus is so important for you and me. And that's why it's so important for you and me to be close to it at all times, not just every now and then, but to grow in our grace and knowledge of God. The more we know our Savior, the more we'll live for him. That doesn't save you. That doesn't save me. But we do it because we are already saved.

What a privilege it is to know that we have a God who, if he chooses, can deliver us from something like a fiery furnace. But how much more wonderful is it to know that we have a God, if he chooses not to deliver us from it, who is going to take us to something better. It's going to take us to the glory of heaven. If I get to see God face to face like those three guys did in the angel of the Lord (who I think is the pre-incarnate Christ) walking with them, and then I have to go back and talk to King Nebuchadnezzar again, I think I'd be a little bummed out. I'd rather stay with the angel of the Lord. But our God leaves us here so we can serve him, doesn't he?

So get to know him better. Don't make excuses when you fail. And just rejoice that you are forgiven and serve him faithfully. Amen.