

We enter into the Season of Advent, reading several stories about resistance focused around the theme of God's Word of Life in the world, and whom we recognize in Jesus, born at Christmas (John 1). The theme of the first Sunday in Advent is hope, which we see in this story of idolatry, civil disobedience and resistance to the faith-negating personality cult and doublespeak of a dictator.

Nebuchadnezzar was the eldest son and successor of Nabopolassar, an Assyrian official who rebelled and established himself as king of Babylon in 620 BCE. Nebuchadnezzar is first mentioned in 607 BCE, during the destruction of Babylon's arch-enemy Assyria, at which point he was already crown prince. In 605 BCE, he and his ally Cyaxares, led an army against the Assyrians and Egyptians, who were then occupying Syria. Defeating them in the ensuing Battle of Carchemish, they brought Syria and Phoenicia under Babylonian control. His father, died in August 605 BCE, and so Nebuchadnezzar returned to Babylon to ascend the throne.

For the next few years his attention was devoted to subduing his eastern and northern borders, in particular around the rebellious nation of Egypt. In 594 his army was sent to put down an uprising there. The Judeans again become involved in the story at that point, as told in the books of Kings and Book of Jeremiah. The Babylonian Army defeats the Judean King Zedekiah, taking the capital, Jerusalem in 587 BCE. The response to his perceived sedition is the total destruction of the Temple and a second deportation of exiles Jews to far away Babylon.

The book of Daniel was written down much later than the stories it retells of of Daniel (and other exiles) in Babylon, under the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar. This narrative is what we call resistance literature and was most likely put in writing in during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in Palestine/Israel. He destroyed the Temple again in 164 BCE, and made all Jewish practices illegal, basically outlawing the first Commandment: to obey the Lord your God.

In this subsequent time of persecution, exile and resistance, the earlier stories of resistance (such as this one today) were written, disseminated and understood as a theological road map and spiritual inspiration for resistance and faithful Jewish living in an idolatrous culture and empire set against

SCRIPTURES FOR

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Daniel 3:1-30

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ **King Nebuchadnezzar** made a golden statue whose height was sixty cubits and whose width was six cubits; he **SET IT UP** on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. ² Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent for the **satraps**, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to assemble and come to the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had **SET UP**. ³ So the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, assembled for the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had **SET UP**. When they were standing before the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had **SET UP**, ⁴ the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, ⁵ that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has **SET UP**. ⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire." ⁷ Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had **SET UP**.

⁸ Accordingly, at this time certain **CHALDEANS** came forward and denounced the Jews. ⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! ¹⁰ You, O king, have made a decree, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, shall fall down and worship the golden statue, ¹¹ and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. ¹² There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These pay no heed to you, O king. They do not serve your gods and they do not worship the golden statue that you have **SET UP**."

¹³ Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious **RAGE** commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought in; so they brought those men before the king. ¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have **SET UP**? ¹⁵ Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall

King Nebuchadnezzar: described above as the mighty king, destroyer of Jerusalem, and worst of all enemies of Israel. In Daniel he's also presented as a bafloon, with a puffed-up over-inflated yet seriously sensitive ego and need to prove himself worthy of adoration. The book of Daniel uses humor and satire as a weapon of resistance to a dictator, as we see humor also used politically today.

KING NEBUCHADNEZZAR SET IT UP: the point that the king is responsible for this monument is repeated an amazing 9 times in this chapter, a satirical mocking of the king's idolatrous, self-promoting doublespeak about his greatness.

Satrap: this is the Persian word for provincial governors. This repeated list moves from the most powerful and important to the least in the governmental hierarchy. The King summons the entire government to witness the statue he has **SET UP** for his glory.

sixty cubits and whose width was six cubits; A cubit was the measure from a man's elbow to the tip of his middle finger. This statue then was a ridiculously huge 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. Does size matter that much to the king?

CHALDEANS: this is an ethnic term used for the Babylonians (Daniel 5:30; 9:1) or for the diviners (Daniel 2:4-10; 4:7; 5:7). Here perhaps both are meant. They are provoked not just by professional jealousy, but also by ethnic hatred, suggesting xenophobia as we also see in the story of Esther. In framing the Jews, they inspire the King's **RAGE**, which was last directed at them in Daniel 2:12. Thus they both attack the Jews and defend themselves.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: In Daniel 1, we learn that the names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had been changed from their birth names, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. This change in names is quite significant as names not only signify one's identity and heritage, but in the case of these particular names, also one's religious beliefs. So all three the original names of these Jewish men contain references to God such as "God is gracious" in the case of Hananiah, "Who is like God?" in the case of Mishael, and "God keeps him" in the case of Azariah.

immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?"

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. ¹⁷ If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. ¹⁸ But [even] if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have **SET UP**."

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace **heated up seven times more** than was customary, ²⁰ and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. ²¹ So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. ²² Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. ²³ But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, "Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?" They answered the king, "True, O king." ²⁵ He replied, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has *the appearance of a god*."

²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. ²⁷ And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men; the hair of their heads was not singed, their tunics were not harmed, and not even the smell of fire came from them. ²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way." ³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

"God is gracious" in the case of Hananiah, "Who is like God?" in the case of Mishael, and "God keeps him" in the case of Azariah.

These references to the God of Israel have now been substituted with references to the Babylonian gods, such as Nebo -- Abednego means "servant of Nego." The effort to change their names is an intentional purging of their culture and religion: it's the destruction of their Jewish identity.

heated up seven times more: this command is ridiculous. What difference would it make in killing condemned prisoners? It's all about puffing up the already over-inflated ego of the dictator who gives the order.

the appearance of a god: this expression refers to one that is a divine being, it's also used in Genesis 6:2; Job 1:6; 2:1 & Psalm 29:1. This being doesn't come into the fire, but rather is in the fire with the three heroes, the fire is not put out, but it does not consume or harm them.

kingdom : βασιλεία, Phonetic Spelling: [bas-il-i'-ah] meaning: kingship, sovereignty, authority, rule, kingdom, reign, empire, it can refer to that of God as well as that of humans, and can be geographical, political and spiritual.

In the famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., cites this story as an example of civil disobedience:

..."I hope you are able to see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience."...

²⁸ Then [the temple police who had come arrested Jesus in the garden] took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹ So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" ³⁰ They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." ³¹ Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." ³² (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵ Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My **kingdom** is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." ³⁷ Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." ³⁸ Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

- What shimmers for you in these passages?
- What word, phrase or image touches your life today?
- What do you find comical in the text?; personally challenging?
- How and What are the three heroes willing to sacrifice for their beliefs? Are they resisting or standing for something?
- What idolatries do you see in the text? How do they touch, confront us in your life?
- How does this story bring you hope in the season of Advent: the coming of Christ?