

Faith Mennonite Church  
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Stories of God's People  
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## Holy Resistance Daniel 3

*Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego answered the king... "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 [God] deliver us. But if not, [let it be] 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.*  
Daniel 3:16-18, NRSV

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have just drawn a very clear line in the sand. They have identified exactly how far they will go to accommodate King Nebuchadnezzar's demands, and no farther. These men hold positions of respect and responsibility within the province. As Jewish exiles in Babylon, they are obviously used to meeting the king's expectations, being savvy political players, operating effectively both within their Jewish community and within the larger culture. They have probably made many accommodations in the past to get along successfully in Nebuchadnezzar's court.

But they have determined that they will *not* worship the king's golden statue. They will not, *cannot*, violate the first and second commandments—the commandments against idolatry—and still be faithful to their God.

The folktale of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was collected together with other stories and prophetic writings to create the book of Daniel during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. At the time the book was compiled, an especially vile Syrian king by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes was ruling over Judea. He plundered the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, set up a statue of Zeus, and slaughtered those who refused to give up their own religious practices and sacrifice to idols as he dictated. He acted, in other words, much like King Nebuchadnezzar in this morning's story.

In the face of this oppressive reality, the Jewish people had to figure out how to survive. How much should they accommodate? When and how might they resist? How much of their way of life could they give up and still be the people they knew themselves to be? How much could they conform before they lost their identity? Was that identity something to die for?

Some people tried to hang onto a bit of power by cooperating with Antiochus and his henchmen. Others just tried to stay alive, complying in public while keeping up their own religious practices in secret. Still others publicly refused to eat pork or sacrifice to idols, or bow down to statues of Zeus; they were killed. A number of others—the Maccabee family and their followers—took to the hills and began mounting a guerilla war to take back their homes and their way of life.

In the midst of all this confusion and fear, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were heroic models, Jews who survived and thrived even while remaining faithful to Jewish teaching and practice. The parody of King Nebuchadnezzar allowed folks in a desperate situation a covert way to laugh at Antiochus Epiphanes, the victories over the king offered them a little vicarious pleasure—and the stories helped people think about where *they* might need to draw *their* lines in the sand. In last week's story, the line in the sand had to do with food and dietary practices. This

week, the issue is *idolatry*.

Those of us gathered here this morning are not, by and large, at present, facing life-threatening religious persecution. We are citizens in a democracy (however flawed), not subjects of a king. But we may feel, in some ways, like strangers in a strange land. We reject the myth of redemptive violence that underscores most of our cultural storylines and is used to rationalize much of our foreign policy. We're tangled in systems of racial and economic injustice that we didn't choose but we aren't sure how to overcome. We're deeply concerned about what's happening to the earth because of our energy use, building practices, way of life. We grieve the ways that religion is used to oppress, divide, control, and destroy.

Even though we don't want to, we participate in and accommodate many, if not all, of these destructive systems. We're at least as enmeshed in them as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in the Babylonian court. Can we recognize the golden idols around us? How do we keep ourselves from bowing down before them? When and how do we resist? What behaviors *must* we resist, if we are to continue to see ourselves as followers of Jesus? Where do we need to draw *our* lines in the sand?

Two weeks ago, I attended a counter-demonstration at the state Capitol. The counter-demonstration had been organized by Outfront MN in response to a rally being held by the National Organization for Marriage. The National Organization for Marriage is actively, zealously organizing to make sure that marriage doesn't become legal for same-sex couples. It was clear, as I stood in mostly silent witness with other counter-protesters in a half circle around the rally, that these folks see themselves as engaged in an act of holy resistance. They believe themselves to be an oppressed minority—a faithful remnant. Their speakers, that day, claimed the abolitionist and civil rights movements as *their ancestors* in struggle, which I found...terribly painful to swallow. They used the Bible in ways that felt hateful to me and disrespectful to our heritage.

They have drawn their line in the sand. They believe they're on God's side.

I've drawn my line in the sand. I believe this struggle for human rights and dignity and love is God's struggle.

We stare across that line in the sand, and we each see the other bowing down to Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue.

It's not resistance in and of itself that is central to what this text has to teach us. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are brave in their resistance, but one can be brave for a bad or unworthy cause.

The important question this story raises is: what idols are we worshipping, and how do we stop? We know that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego made the right choice because of the way the story is written. God rescues them from the fiery furnace, showing everybody in the story and everyone hearing the story that these resisters got it right and Nebuchadnezzar was wrong. We don't get that kind of clear affirmation in real life. Our options are murky; the consequences of our choices are rarely obvious, and things hardly ever turn out the way we expected.

And so, we have to grope our way along, staying as close as we can to our best understandings of who God is and what God intends for creation. We have to keep asking ourselves, and one another, and God, "How do we put *our* efforts at holy resistance in the service

of life and love, justice and compassion?” And then we act, and we hope that our small, daily acts of resistance give us the practice and clarity we need to recognize the golden idols and to know when, and where, to draw the line.