

## “The Heat is On”

Daniel 3: 13-30

(Three friends have their faith tested as the heat is turned up.)

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I planned to lift up this scripture passage a few months ago for this Sunday because it is such a fascinating and powerful narrative of hope. The title, “The Heat is On” mildly refers to the completion of our stewardship campaign. I was concerned about continuing with this passage because the three Jews in this Biblical story, Shadrach, Meshak, and Abednago, withstand a lot of heat in a fiery furnace, and that seemed all-too-relevant for us in Southern California with all the forest fires blazing. Then, I thought, “Yes, *because* of fire, heat, this can be a relevant story today.”

*My purpose today, on this day by which most of us have brought in our Estimates of Giving for 2009, on this Sunday that is approaching Thanksgiving, on this day which is filled with so much uncertainty for so many people around the world, (my purpose) is to foster grateful **encouragement and hope that even when we are in challenging times, we are not alone.*** That is exactly what the prophet Daniel was doing as he combines the humor of a folktale with a faith-filled mystery story.

The story: Nebuchadnezzar is furious with the Jews who are in his land as exiles but who will not bow down to his statue made of gold (which is said to have been 10 times taller than it was wide, so was, needless-to-say, very tall.) Neither would the Jews worship the king’s gods. By refusing, the young Jewish men were both stating their faith in their God and also refusing to accept the authority of this secular leader the King. Their refusal to bow to another God was an act of bold civil disobedience.

Nebuchadnezzar orders his officials to bind the three young Jewish men, then to throw them into the blazing hot fire, with their clothes still on. When this happens the King feels the heat. His plans fall apart. The officials *themselves* are killed by the flames that stretch out beyond the furnace doors, as they place the three men into the furnace. However, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are not hurt at all. The three lose their bindings, that is, their handcuffs, but their tunics are not even singed! These three even start dancing!

When the king peers into the furnace he enters into a hysterical rage. The story changes gears quickly. Nebuchadnezzar accepts his defeat, releases these three, and with surprising humility honors the faith of these Jews. However, he remains an all-or-nothing kind of ruler, so he now decrees that *everyone* in the land must worship this God of the Jews—or he will turn up the heat on them.

This is a prophetic book; *its purpose is to encourage and to offer hope to people who are enduring difficult times. Daniel wanted the hearers to believe their God would be there for them.* Certainly, Jews and Christians who have heard this mystical faith-filled story have been grateful—as we are this season of Stewardship and Thanksgiving—for a God that is with us, even when “the heat is on.” No, *especially* when the heat is on. Whether we are going to court, taking a test, wondering about money, taking a stand, or praying for peace, when the challenge is great, so too must be our faith.

I would worry if any of us were to take this brilliant and inspiring prophetic writing so literally that we would test our God by taking risky behavior, trusting that God would make flames not hot or freezers not cold. The point of the story is that God will be *with us* in every situation, no matter what.

This story encourages us to have hope. We'll make it through heated-up times, perhaps even with a more well-tested faith.

On our recent hike in the nearby mountains with Bill Solberg, I learned a lot about pine cones. I knew, of course that there were different kinds, but I had not put together in my mind that they were on trees that thrived at different altitudes, in varying contexts. The pinecone discussions jogged a memory of something I had learned about Sequoia trees.

Giant Sequoia trees have grown high up on the western slopes of our Sierra Nevada Mountains for probably 10,000 years. They are “undoubtedly the *oldest* living thing on the planet.”<sup>1</sup> The actual living trees that we can see today are 1000 to 2000 years old (even maybe 3000 years old). That's old, about as old as this biblical story in the book of Daniel! The trees are also *enormous*, larger than the tall golden statue King Nebuchadnezzar wanted the Jews to bow down to.

I want to talk about the pinecones of these Sequoia trees. In a tour-guide book about the trees, I read this line, “It is quite common to hear tourists marvel at the ridiculously small size of the cone borne by so gigantic a tree.”<sup>1</sup> The pinecones are just two to three inches long. All of us know the parable Jesus told of the mustard seed, how Jesus pointed out the absurdly small size of the seed in comparison with the large mustard bush. If Jesus had stood amongst Sequoia trees, he surely would have offered us a modified version of that parable. If you have the faith of a Sequoia seed . . .

But it's not the *size* of the pinecone that inspires me. What gives me encouragement and hope is what happens when “The Heat is On.” That is, when there is a forest fire. Fires are horrible—humans, homes, habitats—especially fires in the wrong place at the wrong time. But fires in forests are actually necessary for the forest. These big trees have trunks of “exceedingly thickened bark” and “practically no resin,”<sup>1</sup> so they survive, as did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did, when they are in the midst of furnace blazes.

Heat rises, as we know, and as the heat rises, it reaches the small pinecones. When that happens, a natural miracle occurs. Then, and only then, the pinecones open, and the seeds drop. In fact, these pinecones cannot release their seeds UNLESS “The heat is on.” Some pinecones last 80 years without ever opening, because there has been no forest fire surrounding them.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, sometimes a pinecone may fall, and a squirrel might munch it open.

Fire can be devastating, yet fire is necessary at the right place at the right time. There must be heat to perpetuate the species of these oldest living beings on our planet. Clearly, the Sequoia trees are not like bunny rabbits or gerbils! They are not prolific. However, in “open spaces in the forest, seedlings appear in great numbers.”<sup>1</sup> Once these seeds drop, they need heat *again* in order to take root. If they happen to land in the shade of a dense forest, they need yet another fire to help clear the area and to allow the seeds to germinate.

Life is complex. There are plenty of competing struggles throughout our lives and the lives of all of our sister and brother living beings. Nature includes fire, resistance to

heat, tiny seeds, shade, fragility and longevity—all mixed together. The lives of us human beings includes meaningful jobs, job losses, joys with friends, lonely times, longevity and fragility—all mixed together. In this mix, we humans live and find meaning—even faith.

Today, as 3000 years ago, we humans have different ideas about God, different “religions,” and even different ideas within the same “faith.” Our ideas mature, just as trees do, inch by inch.

Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar differed in their ideas about God. We don’t know much about Nebuchadnezzar’s faith. We know about Daniel’s—because Daniel and his friends are *our* ancestors of faith. Those young Jewish men took a stand for a God that would not leave their side, even if they were in great difficulties.

I recalled that a minister in our conference spent a good deal of time in both Glacier Park and Yellowstone after the huge forest fires there several years ago. I called him out of the blue to discuss what I’m sure he was not expecting. I asked him about the whole pinecone process. He laughed, listened, then insisted that I pay attention to him and hear the biggest lesson he took from his experience working in those national parks. “Carolyn,” he said, “*What is born after a huge fire, as at Yellowstone, is not what was there before, only smaller. It is a new forest. There are all sorts of transformations. Some plants grow that had never been there before. Not everything that was there survives. It is new, transformed.*”

Whew! He sort of made me repeat his big lesson, to be sure that I got it right.

We know that Nebuchadnezzar changed his faith—he declared Yahweh, the Jewish God, to be *his* God. My strong guess is that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s time in the furnace altered their faith, too.

Today, we all share the communal heat of economic times to some degree. Some of us have some heat in our relationships, or we have health issues. Every one of us does not have fiery times; some of us manage to escape personal heat for most of our lives. Amen! However, the majority of us find ourselves occasionally in difficult times when it feels like “The Heat is On.”

Our faith in God quite naturally matures over time; we do not have to have fiery furnaces like the one in Daniel’s story or forest fires as do the pinecones in order to grow. Yet, *if we do* face tribulations, living through those does often alter our faith. *For most of us, what survives is not identical with what our faith had been. Some things in our faith are entirely new. While many aspects of our earlier faith continue, some do not survive. We—and our faith—are transformed.*

What Daniel, the quirky creative prophet, offers us *is encouragement and hope that even when we are in challenging times, we are never alone.* We can be thankful for the steady encouragement and hope of those many people who have walked—even danced—before us. We can today *walk on* with hope in our hearts...and, like those three fellows with funny names, we, too, will never walk alone.

[Solo & harp follows: “You’ll Never Walk Alone.”]

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/handbook\\_of\\_yosemite\\_national\\_park/sequoia.html](http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/handbook_of_yosemite_national_park/sequoia.html)

(11/1/2006, p. 3)

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 5

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 4

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Mark Wiley explained this phenomenon to me.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.yosemite> . . . op. cit., p. 6