



Friday night Julie and I saw the movie *Selma*. It's the story of Martin Luther King's leadership in the civil rights movement to remove voting barriers set up in the south to keep African Americans from exercising their newly given right to vote. The movie touched us and reminded us of the sacrifice, the commitment, and the danger these men and women faced as they sought to stand up for truth and justice in an unholy place by confronting maybe the biggest issue social in their time—racial injustice and discrimination. Martin Luther King was not perfect, far from it, but he recognized the wrong being committed and by confronting these injustices with nonviolent protests, he showed integrity and courage. It was a burden and a calling Martin felt deep in his heart. It was, "as a Christian how could I not fight against this injustice?" You could see how he was tempted toward a softer life. You could see the hard effect this calling had on his family. But he was called. He was called to be a holy person in an unholy place.

Martin Luther King was assassinated April 4, 1968 on a hotel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee. That same night Senator Bobby Kennedy was scheduled to make a campaign speech in Indianapolis. Without notes, without preparation and from the back of a flatbed truck Bobby announced Dr. King's death. What he said in the next five minutes was considered to be one of the greatest speeches ever delivered.

"I have some very sad news for all of you and for all of our fellow citizens and people who love peace all over the world. And that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee today. Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and have justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that effort. In this difficult day in this difficult time in the United States it is right to ask what kind of a nation we are and what kind of a direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black, considering the evidence that white people were responsible, you can be filled with bitterness, hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move that direction as a country with greater polarization, blacks and whites filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort as Martin Luther King did to understand, comprehend and make an effort to replace that violent stain of racial bloodshed across our land with an effort to understand, show compassion and love."

Then he quotes the Greek poet Aeschylus, "Even in our sleep, pain which we cannot begat falls drop by drop upon the heart until in our own despair and against our will comes wisdom through the awful grace of God. What we need in the United States is not division, is not hatred, is not violence or lawlessness. What we need in the United States is love, wisdom, and compassion toward one another, a feeling

of justice for those who still suffer in our country whether they be black or white."

Then we see an insight into what Bobby was feeling about his life and his future as he sought to show integrity and courage in an unholy place. We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times. We had difficult times in the past, and we will have difficult times in the future. It is not the end of violence or lawlessness or disorder, but the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, improve the quality of life, and they want justice for all human beings.

Then he quoted a Greek philosopher who said what only Jesus Christ can bring about, "To tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world." Let us dedicate ourselves to that and say a prayer for our country and for our people. Sixty-three days later after giving a campaign speech in the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, Bobby Kennedy took a shortcut through the kitchen to leave the hotel. His security warned him that that direction was not secured, but he took it anyway and he was shot to death by an assassin who felt betrayed by Bobby's support for Israel to defend herself in the 6-day war.

Last week we learned that Jerusalem was about to fall. God's people were sad, suffering and dying. During that time, there was a historical event that took place. It was called the exile. Nebuchadnezzar was the king of the Babylonian Empire and he was waging a successful war against the Kingdom of Judah. He was successful because God removed his blessing from all of Israel because of their sin and rebellion and unbelief. As part of his battle plan, King Nebuchadnezzar had hundreds of thousands of Israelites exiled from their promised land and dispersed among the entire Middle East. This exile was an attempt to destroy any belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and to replace the law of God with the law of the pagan Babylonians.

Many Israelites, including our guys we will meet today, were exiled into a foreign and unholy place. Their names were Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and they found themselves exiled into the capital city of Babylon, the center of Babylonian empire. How could these boys remain holy in an unholy place? If we think about it all of us likely feel at times that we are in a foreign and unholy place. In fact the Bible reminds us that we are indeed in an unholy place and we are pilgrims; that our home is not here; our home is in heaven. It shouldn't feel like home here. But I am not called to hide out and watch from a distance. I'm called to honor God, to engage the culture, to be courageous, wise, and compassionate and make a stand to be a holy people in an unholy place. May God help each of us to understand what

that means, what that looks like in our lower story as we look at his upper story from the Book of Daniel, chapter 1.

“Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king’s service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility – young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians” (verses 3-4).

Daniel and his friends fit the description. They were probably between 13-15 years old, no physical or mental handicap, they were to be good looking, and they were to be smart and quick learners and capable to serve in the king’s palace.

So these Jewish boys were immersed in the Babylonian culture... philosophy, language, Babylonian theology, astrology, science and medicine. They were to be trained for three years so that they would eventually reject their God and their worship and embrace the false gods of Babylonia and slide right into the nation’s lifestyle and culture. Around the palace, Daniel wasn’t known as Daniel, but Belteshazzar, named after a pagan deity. To get these boys to buy into the culture they even changed their names.

They really had the good life when you compare their accommodations with others who were suffering outside the palace. In fact it goes on to say that the king served them the richest of food and wine. So no big deal right? Well, yes it was. For a follower of God the Law of Moses forbids eating meat that was sacrificed to idols. It was likely that the meat they were served was used in idol worship, so if they had eaten it they would have compromised their convictions in that unholy place.

“But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way” (v. 8).

He had a diet of water and vegetables, and in the original language that includes grains, and God blessed Daniel and his teenage friends.

I broke out these chapters into three big stages of life. There is something for every age that we can learn from Daniel. To those who are here today and are young, Daniel was your age when he did this. Here is the warning he gives you: Beware of the fatty diet of the culture. Develop an appetite for integrity and courage. How? Eat right. Eat the food that nourishes. It’s interesting, the Bible compares the Word of God to milk and meat. The Word of God is food for the soul. I want you to imagine a coffee pot full of day-old coffee. It’s dark, it’s bitter, it’s not good to drink. Now take that pot and place it under the faucet in your kitchen sink and turn on the fresh water. What happens? Gradually the water in the pot gets lighter and lighter. You could throw in some more old coffee and it would darken a bit, but there is this constant cleansing, flushing of the dark contents of the pot going on. It’s the same with the soul. We make a steady diet on God’s word instead of our culture’s word and we change. The Bible says that God’s word is living. It has the power to transform, to flush out the dark. God’s word is alive and penetrates the heart, conforms us to God and not to the culture.

How else? Hang with other Christians who have the same goals. What are those goals? To eat right spiritually and to stand up for integrity and with courage. I would venture to say that most of us admired Dr. King, but if we had the option, if we were there, would we follow him? Even if it meant having the courage to follow him to jail? I think his following would have drop off dramatically if it meant danger to follow. Most people admire Jesus, but when Jesus said, “Follow me,” his popularity dropped off big time. Jesus never said “Admire me.” He said “Follow me.” That takes courage. We can do this together. Hang with other Christian friends who understand this challenge of integrity and courage. And God blesses it. Look at how he blessed young Daniel and his friends.

“In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom” (v. 20).

It goes on to say that they graduated at the top of their class and their knowledge even surpassed the knowledge of the Babylonian wise men.

In chapter 2 we can read that the king was troubled by his dreams and that his wise men couldn’t interpret the dreams so they brought Daniel in and he interpreted them. The latter half of Daniel’s life is filled with prophecies about how God will end this world and establish his kingdom in its fullness. God blessed Daniel with an ability to interpret dreams.

So a few years passed and Daniel and his friends are what we might call middle-aged. In chapter 3 we see three of Daniel’s friends have an amazing encounter with God as they stood up with integrity and courage in an unholy place. This was a life or death test. At this time Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had important positions in Babylon. The king had appointed them to oversee his affairs in the province.

By this time it was at least 586 BC and Jerusalem had now fallen and Nebuchadnezzar decided he wanted to build an image that could be seen from miles around. It was likely built for the purpose of discrediting the God of Israel and it would be used to unify his empire and place himself in complete authority. It was gold plated, probably designed and built to show that the Babylonian empire would last forever. It was 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. When this image or idol was completed, it was dedicated.

“Then the herald loudly proclaimed, ‘Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace” (3:4-6).

Our men who were eating right spiritually and hanging together with integrity and courage did just what a follower of God should do. They refused to bow to the graven image. Some astrologers who were probably passed up for a promotion because of these men went to the king to tell him that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, “pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of god you have set up.”

The king was furious and he sent for the men. It's interesting, it's this moment when somebody realizes that death is inescapable and they had one thing they could do to get out of it. All they had to do was follow the Babylonian king instead of God. All they had to do was bend their knee and they would escape unimaginable pain and death.

"Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, 'King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand'"(3:16-17).

Here we see the epitome of integrity and courage. These men who had been grounded in their faith, tested as young men, made mature and complete, were able to follow God past a jail cell and into a fiery furnace.

"But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (3:18).

To the middle-aged, remember who loves you! You have a history with God. Remember from last week? It was from Lamentations and it was all about God's great love, God's compassions that never fail, and how great is God's faithfulness. For these three men, they had to be thinking. "God, we have been faithful, we have loved you, we have stood up with integrity and courage. Is this how it will end? Is this your love here?"

A big middle-aged lesson for me is this: I cannot judge God's love by every single action and circumstance that happens around me. And for some of us here today this might make more sense, I cannot judge God's love by his **inactions** around me. God, if you really loved me you would have stopped this or done that. Doing that only leads to despair when actions or lack of action doesn't make sense to me.

In the middle of trying to stand up with integrity and courage, in the middle of trying to be a follower of God instead of an admirer of God, there is only one irrefutable, undeniable piece of evidence of God's love. It's the cross of Jesus Christ. In the darkest days—when maybe you are calling out to him and he doesn't respond, you beg him for an answer that doesn't come—it's the cross that proves you can know God's love in spite of what you are feeling at the moment. To trust in God's actions you first have to be certain of his love. Romans 5:8 says, **"God demonstrated his own love for us in this, while we were still sinners Christ died for us."** Jesus Christ did the great suffering. He was the sufferer so that we wouldn't have to suffer. When we are certain of God's love we endure incredible circumstances through faith. And because they were certain of God's love these three men were empowered to refuse to bow down in compromise or in crises.

"Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace.... Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, 'Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?' 'They replied, 'Certainly, Your Majesty.' He said, 'Look! I see four men walking

around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods'" (3:19–20, 24).

It says they were still in their work robes, trousers and turbans. The fire was so hot that it killed the soldiers who threw them into it. I wonder what they were saying to each other? Was the 4th man telling them how proud God was of them for showing such integrity and courage as they followed God? I wonder if he was telling them that this act of courage will be remembered for thousands of years throughout history. Or that men and women over the centuries who are facing suffering and persecution, or trial or even death, would be strengthened by hearing their story?

And what were these men saying to the 4th man? Were they pouring out their adoration and worship? The adoration and worship they had not laid out to the graven image? This furnace, this standing up in the furnace, had turned out to be the greatest thing they had ever experienced. The furnace turned out to be the place where they met God. God meets us in the furnace too. One commentator wrote, "God promises to meet us in the furnace, not deliver us from the furnace." As Jesus met them in the furnace, he meets us in our furnace too. Hold on to what you learned as a young person, and have faith that God will deliver you in the furnace for his glory.

"Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon" (3:30).

Julie and I were able to get away to the Napa Valley over Thanksgiving. We did a tour of one of the wineries. We had a great time and learned a lot. We didn't know anything. One of the things we learned was that there are certain times when the fruit is the sweetest and when it is the least sweet. Harvest is in the early fall. The nights are cooler but the days still get very hot. We learned that the harvesters, in order to get the sweetest fruit, wait until the absolute hottest part of the day and then they harvest the grapes. Lesson? The sweetest fruit comes when the plant is stressed by heat. And you know for us, we middle-aged Christians with a little life under our belts, this loving God meets us often in the furnace. Those times when we are called to show courage and integrity. May this story give us strength in the heat of battle.

We have talked to the youth, we have talked to the middle-aged. At another place on our vineyard tour, our guide talked about the oldest vines. They always kept some of the oldest vines around. He said of these old vines, "You have to take care of them, but they still manage to produce the sweetest fruit of the entire vineyard. It takes them a little longer than the younger vines to produce their fruit, but it is the best fruit in the vineyard." I think Daniel chapter 6 is for the old vines, the pillars of the vineyard.

To the Pillars: You're not done yet! In chapter 6 Daniel is an old man, probably 80 years old. He has outlived the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon's control was short-lived. Daniel had seen a lot in his life. The Persians were now in control just the way Daniel had prophesied back in chapter 2. In Babylon the man in charge was Darius, the assistant to the king who served Cyrus the Persian king.

The story of Daniel in the lion's den is probably familiar to most of us. However, many of us can't recall why Daniel was sentenced to be killed by lions. He was sentenced to death not because he had done something wrong, but because he had done right in God's sight. As Martin Luther King understood sometimes in our world people are punished for doing right and rewarded for sinning.

Just when you thought that it was the right time to retreat from the heat, and let some young buck show courage, God says, "I don't care if you are 80 years old, it's still time to follow." So chapter 6 tells us that Daniel got a promotion. He was over all the other administrators and government workers.

"Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent" (6:3-4).

Because they couldn't find fault they made a law making the practice of Daniel's faith illegal. They went to the king and had a decree drawn up that said, "If anyone prays to any other god or any human being during the next 30 days except to you, they shall be thrown into the lion's den." They lied to the king saying that all the officials had agreed with this decree, and Daniel was never asked.

"Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before" (6:10).

Daniel didn't just go and pray three times a day because the heat was turned up. He had been doing this every day and he continued to do it no matter the crises. Do you only meet God in emergencies? If so, may this text challenge you to consistently walk with God, regularly meeting with God in prayer.

The government guys wasted no time exposing Daniel's disobedience to the decree.

"Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: 'Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human being except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions' den?'" (6:11-12a).

The king's response tells us a lot about his respect for Daniel. It says the king was distressed when he heard this. Daniel was his old friend, and his trusted servant and he had to order his death.

"So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The King said to Daniel, 'May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!'" (6:16).

Then they rolled a stone over the top and the king put his own signet ring in a seal over the stone and the execution order was carried out. The king returned to his palace. No entertainment, no sleep, no appetite.

"At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, 'Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?' Daniel answered, 'May the king live forever! My God sent an angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty'" (6:19-22).

The king was overjoyed and lifted him out of the den and no wounds or even a scratch was found on him because he trusted in his God. A message to Pillars: God is not through with you yet! Tell of God's faithfulness to the next generation. Tell others your story from your rich Pillar's experience, that the next generation may see faithfulness with their own eyes in their own time. Tell the next generation when you were persecuted falsely, you trusted God for deliverance. Tell the next generation when you were treated unjustly, you waited for God to vindicate. Tell the next generation when you were treated unfairly, you didn't retaliate; you allowed God to retaliate. Tell the next generation that while you suffered undeservedly, God used you to make himself known to others.

Rosa Parks is one of the most famous names in civil rights history. In 1955, Parks refused to give her bus seat to a white man. She was arrested for her defiance. In her book, *Quiet Strength*, Parks writes: "When I sat down on the bus that day, I had no idea history was being made—I was only thinking of getting home. But I had made up my mind. After so many years of being a victim of the mistreatment my people suffered, not giving up my seat—and whatever I had to face afterwards—was not important. I did not feel any fear sitting there. I felt the Lord would give me the strength to endure whatever I had to face. It was time for someone to stand up—or in my case, sit down. So I refused to move. People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

"Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.... For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people" (2nd Peter 2:11-12, 15).

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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