

Daniel 3 is deeply subversive and utterly provocative. Particularly in an age like ours that has turned our politics into a theater for religious zealotry. It is a story that will provoke everyone to consider the role that we have allowed politics to shape everything about us. Here are a few important terms to clarify before we jump into the text.

Nationalism vs. Patriotism

I want to ensure the distinction in terms between nationalism and patriotism. Patriotism is the healthy support and pride in our country. It is the posture of being proud to be an American and recognizing the gift that it is to live in this country. That being said, this message is not about patriotism. So as we move forward, know that I am not talking about healthy patriotism.

What we are talking about this morning is the idea of nationalism. What I mean by nationalism is when religion and politics are mixed and blurred beyond recognition. It is the swapping of the Kingdom of God for your particular political party affiliation. It is the blurry line of elevating or viewing your favorite preferred political candidate as a Messiah-like figure. It is when the way or ethic of Jesus is exchanged for the vitriol, anger, and hatred for those who you oppose. Nationalism is when the state and state power become an idol. This is exactly what we see happen in our story today, and I believe it is what we see increasingly in our own country, across the aisle and political spectrum.

There is nothing in this sermon that is intended to be a partisan political statement. While I have my own thoughts and opinions, my theology on the issue of politics is pretty anabaptist in its tradition. I am largely apolitical, believing that the church is the distinct alternative community that's only political work is to offer an altogether different community embodying a way of living that constitutes a politic unto itself.

The Claims of the State

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it."
Daniel 3:1-3

The scene opens with the construction of a large, oddly shaped statue. The dimensions listed are something close to 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide, which is dramatically narrow for a statue of such height. What the image actually is, remains a mystery to the reader. It is likely that it

is Nebuchadnezzar's attempt to reify Babylon as an enduring empire. Therefore, the image constructed is representative of the empire's glory and the empire's power and might. It is an idol to the values, might, and power of the state of Babylon.

The Hebrew word used here for image is the word *tselem*, and it is the same word that is used in Genesis 1:27 when God created us in his image. The word here in chapter 3 is used seven times. The author is connecting Nebuchadnezzar's image with God's creative work in Genesis. Nebuchadnezzar clearly views himself as a god-like figure that is expectant of worship and reverence owed to a god. And here, the story of creation is given a Babylonian twist. What results is the height of arrogance and pride because the created (Nebuchadnezzar) is trying to assume the position of God by creating his own "image" and believing it is worthy of worship. Nebuchadnezzar is attempting to subvert the divine order of creation, placing himself in the position of God.

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 the gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshipped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. vv. 4-7

The plan of Nebuchadnezzar is to produce an imperial political unity by mixing the sacred and the ideological. The goal was to harness and leverage religious zeal for his own purposes. It's unfortunate the Bible isn't relevant to speaking into our modern situation!

It is a national worship service, with the object of the worship being Nebuchadnezzar and Babylonian power. The worship is mandated, so much so that the threat of violence and death to all those who do not acquiesce lingers in the background. The demand was for allegiance, for the worship of state power, and anyone who was anyone was there to urge participation. And if that wasn't enough, the flames of the furnace that awaited dissenters lingered in the background.

History would demonstrate the propensity for the human institution of the state to turn toward idolatry. The tendency flows from insecurity and the desire for god-like status. This tendency is all the more acute in a secular society when religion cannot be the bond that holds together a society. It is forced, in the absence of a larger narrative, to turn politics into religion. This raises all sorts of questions for followers of

Jesus. What is the limitation of the Israelites participation in an idolatrous country? When does their allegiance to God conflict with their allegiance to the state?

The Cost of Monotheism

At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "May the king live forever! Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up." vv. 8-12

The scene narrows its focus now into the conflict that arises when the three Israelites decide not to participate in the worship of the gold image. It is worth noting that the conflict between Nebuchadnezzar and the three friends was uninvited by them. The sense you get when you carefully read the text is that they were not trying to cause a scene but simply quietly refrained from participating in the gods of the age. They were not seeking martyrdom; they were not seeking out opportunities to parade their religious affiliation before the people. It would seem they were simply conscientious government workers, trying to serve the empire without worshipping it. In this way, they put the empire in its proper place, treating it with respect but refusing its claims of divine power and authority. But the astrologers and on-lookers went out of their way to bring them before Nebuchadnezzar, seemingly because they knew the worship of the golden image was going to conflict with the views of the Jews.

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" vv. 13-15

Notice the final question that Nebuchadnezzar poses to the three. "Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" Nebuchadnezzar is power-drunk. He is equating himself with that of the gods, but not just similar to the gods, but rather above the gods. His claim is that even gods couldn't rescue you from his hand because of his power and might that he is exercising.

Clearly, this is a man consumed with his own power and imperial role. He equates himself with God, and he holds their fate in his hand. I would imagine the temptation to just compromise a little was palpable. It wasn't that Nebuchadnezzar was even calling for them to deny Yahweh; it was the requirement to recognize the state as a god. The

cost of monotheism is high in a plural society. It can and probably will be costly at times, both personally and socially. The temptation for the three Israelites and for us today is to hold our beliefs in our hearts and quietly give in to the pressure to conform or give a nod to the gods of our day.

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. 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." vv. 16-18

Their faith in God is unwavering! Their trust and embrace of God in the chaos is an inspiration. "He will deliver, but even if he doesn't..." we will not bow to you; you are not God. This is the most polite rebellion. Notice the manner they address Nebuchadnezzar. They address him by his title, "King Nebuchadnezzar...Your Majesty," etc. They don't demean. They don't dehumanize. They don't succumb to means less than the way of God. It is a quiet refrain from what Nebuchadnezzar is calling them to do. It is simple non-participation in the delusions of a megalomaniac. They also don't even enter into debate and try to convince him of his own delusion. They simply call out that they do not believe that he is God, no matter how much power, strength, and spectacle he offers them.

They see through the charade and resist participating in the spectacle. "We don't believe you are God, and we are not going to worship your image like you are a god. And if that is going to cost us our lives, that is fine...Do you worst, but our God will deliver us. Or he may not deliver us, but regardless of what happens there, you are not God. And we will not act like you are to save our lives."

For a megalomaniac like Nebuchadnezzar, he wants to exert his power and do so through control. His fundamental aim is to control these three who are opposing him and force them to worship. His goal is to either have them bend the knee or have them killed. Either way, he gets to control them. The three are polite, peaceful, and at the same time full of conviction and trust. The issue for the boys is not whether or not Yahweh will deliver them but a simple refusal to participate in the charade of Nebuchadnezzar's public spectacle of power.

The Confusing of Sovereignties

Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude towards 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. vv. 19-20

Nebuchadnezzar has had enough with their civil disobedience; he recognizes their refusal and the way it is laying his power bare and he is done. The scene is described in a bombastic way. "The strongest soldiers" the

fire is "heated seven times hotter than usual." The scene is described in a manner that mirrors the rage inside Nebuchadnezzar.

So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. vv. 21-23

Nebuchadnezzar's fury and delusion of his own power result in a flip-pant disregard for life. The soldiers are killed, and the three Israelites are sacrificed. When the powers that be are challenged, life becomes expendable. Isn't this exactly what happened to Jesus? He challenged the powers of Rome and religion, and the authorities had him executed.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisors, "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." vv. 24-25

Much to Nebuchadnezzar's dismay, he looks in and sees the three Israelites unharmed walking around; not only that, but there is a fourth person, which he describes as one looking like a "son of the gods." Now imagine being a pagan king, that is a way of saying, there appears to be a divine being in the fire with them!

Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisors crowded around them. They say that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. vv. 26-27

Remember what they had said so profoundly and confidently earlier, God can deliver us, but even if he doesn't, you are not God. Did God deliver them from the furnace? Yes and no. Yes, in that they were not harmed, the fire did not result in their death. But no in that they still had to go into the furnace. So in one sense, they were delivered, and in another sense, they were not delivered. But God was with them in the flames.

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way." Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon. vv. 28-30

Now, is this text simply an ancient story or something that can speak into our own story? The question this text addresses we should find ourselves asking as well. When does the state become idolized in our own lives?

Thoughts on the Struggle of Nationalism

Babylon is a sort of archetype about the places in which Christians find themselves living. And so, the questions that are being addressed here in Daniel 3 are the very questions that all followers of Jesus must ask. In exile, we refrain from any other allegiance but to God alone. Because this isn't just an ancient thing that happened once and never faced again. What are God's people to do when they find themselves in similar situations?

I believe nationalism is a growing problem/blind spot in the American church. Whether you find yourself on the left or the right politically, this issue of nationalism is strikingly prevalent. The temptation is to sit here and listen to the nationalism of Daniel's day and our day and believe that we haven't made an idol of our national identity. The problems of nationalism and politicization permeate all sides of the aisle, whether right or left. Christ alone should be our focus

While each side of the aisle has its own temptations, I do believe the right, dating back to the construction of the "moral majority" in the 70s and 80s, and the manner that it tied the evangelical movement to the conservative right has a great blind spot toward nationalism. It can perpetuate the wrong belief that America is God's chosen country or the "New Israel," and that is just not the case.

The left is not without its own propensity toward nationalism, albeit a less religious version. The left's nationalism looks more like the buying of the secular myth that a utopian future can be made through political progress. So it cultivates a religious zeal in its political dialogue and activism. But this is a vision of the Kingdom of God without the King (Jesus) and can elevate politicians to a messiah-like level.

Both have an idolatrous relationship to the state that places its fundamental hope in the state. And what is most disheartening is the manner that Christians have allowed that dialogue to dictate their own methods of engagement in the world and culture around them. Both carry the potential to idolize the ability of the state to transform and seek domination through power and give in to the sin of nationalism.

The method and means employed by both the right and the left are an embrace of secular myths in the power of the state that are incommensurable to the way of Jesus; thus, they are shortsighted and problematic. Because of this, the follower of Jesus must resist putting hope in them.

So how do we respond to our temptation to nationalism? I want to glean two things from the story of the three Israelites resisting Nebuchadnezzar's call for idolatry.

Responding to our temptation to nationalism: The temptation for nationalism to infiltrate either the life of the Christian or the life of the church is strong. As we seek to remain faithful to the way of Jesus in a culture that is increasingly politicized, the temptation will be to drift into that same stream as the culture and filter everything, including our

faith, through the lens of nationalism. But we must resist as the idolatry of the state undercuts our witness as a distinct alternative *Ekklesia*.

Whether you find yourself on the right or left of the political spectrum, we have witnessed the rise of religious zealotry in our political dialogue that is elevating the temperature beyond what it should bear. This is a growing problem that is troubling for me as a pastor. I have witnessed the politicization of the church and the hijacking of the Kingdom of God to win votes for political purposes. In doing so, I've seen the way that has led the church into compromising its convictions

What we learn from Daniel about when we find ourselves in exile is that we must resist the pull toward nationalism and the idolatry of the state. Because to give in to the idolization/worship of a particular way of life or a particular nation-state is the way of compromising our allegiance to the one true God, Yahweh. I'm not sure you could read the story and see it any other way. The story advocates resistance. The question that I think is really important for us to settle on is how. How do we refrain from the pull toward idolatry?

What has been most stunning to me through the beginning of this series in Daniel is the posture the Israelites take in exile. Overwhelmingly their posture is one of peaceful quiet resistance. They don't rage; they don't gather, rally, march, etc. For now, their resistance has been one of a quiet refrain, a peaceful refusal from participation. Quiet, non-violent resistance actually exposes and strips the powerful of their control

They actually strip the power Nebuchadnezzar was trying to assert by their refusal to worship and their peaceful acceptance of whatever the consequence. When you resist with the willingness to accept death as a possible consequence, you've exposed the pursuit of control of the power. Because you cannot control what refuses to be coerced, they could have resisted with force, it may not have gone well, but they chose not to.

What has been most disheartening over the past few election cycles is watching Christians on every side of the political spectrum use language, quips, and phrases to speak dehumanizing words about those affiliated with the other party or about the political candidate they despise. I don't know how else to say it other than it is flat wrong. It is language that has no place coming from the mouth of a follower of Jesus about any human. Whether it was the election of George Bush Jr., Barack Obama, Donald Trump, or Joe Biden, the posture that I witnessed from within the church and of many Christians that engaged in the vitriol was disheartening. We are called to more, and when we resist the pull into the culture wars and dehumanizing language, we give witness to the value of life and the dignity we believe all carry as fellow image-bearers of God.

You become what you give your attention to, and for me, the quick slip into the mud-slinging and dehumanizing posture toward other

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image-bearers reminded me that we have been more disciplined by CNN, Fox News, and social media than we have by Jesus of Nazareth. Forgive us, Lord!

For Nebuchadnezzar, the assumption was that history belongs to the powerful. Nebuchadnezzar's god-like arrogance had created in him the assumption that he held the keys to the future, the world was his oyster, all that could be would flow from his throne. For the three Israelites, this was a bridge too far. They confront Nebuchadnezzar's delusions by refusing to participate in the idolatry of his politics. The Israelites were giving witness to the fact that it is Yahweh who controls history, and Nebuchadnezzar is a parody of this at best.

Ultimately it comes down to a matter of patience and trust. We are not the authors of history. The weight of history does not fall on our human ability to bring about change. This enables us to walk in trust that this is God's work, not ours, and in doing so, we must never compromise the way of Jesus for some alternative end. We know and believe that one day God will bring about the reconciliation of all things and that we are simply trying to faithfully walk in step with what God is doing. But we must never take it upon ourselves to assume the role of God. In our moment, we patiently trust God to be with us in the fire and rest secure that God is the author of history.

Our measure of success is faithfulness, not effectiveness. Where is your trust? Do we trust that God is bringing about the reconciliation of all things? It doesn't mean we are not engaged in our world—these guys had government jobs! But it means that we refuse to ever allow our allegiance and our hope to be placed in any temporal institution or human power. The world is God's and all that is within it; therefore, we can faithfully trust and give up our power grabs. Fundamentally we are not Democrats or Republicans; we are followers of the crucified and resurrected Jesus. Therefore, we take up the way of Jesus as our way.

I have a theory that part of the impulse for all of us to get caught up in these political, ideological debates is because it focuses our attention on "transforming America," instead of loving our literal neighbor—a clear directive from Jesus. It is easier and more comfortable to debate economic policy than it is to ensure the economic well-being of the one we share a property line with. It is easier to debate social policy with a television personality than doing the slow work of learning to love those who God has placed in our social sphere. Jesus said very little about power politics, but he said a lot about how we interact in our neighbors. What if, instead of trying to transform the world, we transformed ourselves and our neighbors through the slow work of discipleship to Jesus?

In our zeal for political idolatry and elevating of the state, we can too easily lose the simple call of Jesus to love our neighbors. Our allegiance is to Jesus the King and his Kingdom.

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