**Courageous Faith: Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego**

**Daniel 3:1-30**

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Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

In the Jewish tradition, these beautiful words are called the Shema.  They come from Deuteronomy, chapter 6, and are considered by some to be the most essential prayer in Judaism.  They are words that have carried Jews through centuries of migration, oppression, and exile - providing assurance and direction for their lives.

It’s an interesting thing about the word Shema because, like a lot of Hebrew words, it has multiple layers of meaning.  First of all, it means to hear or listen.  So, the name of this prayer comes from its first word.  Hear, O Israel.  Yet, the same word can also have the meaning of focusing your attention on someone or something.  For example, in the Psalms, Shema is often used as a way to call out to God for help.  Finally, Shema also includes an element of response, of acting on what you have heard.  Ancient Hebrew doesn’t actually have a word that means obey.  Listening and doing, hearing and responding, are inextricably intertwined in the one word: Shema.

If you continue reading in Deuteronomy, you’ll see that the Shema is followed with these instructions: Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

So, for thousands of years, Jews have said these words at the beginning and the end of everyday to remind them who God is and what it means to love God.  The Shema is like a compass guiding their journey day to day, bringing their allegiance always back to God. Through all the challenges the people of Israel have faced, these words have given them courage, the courage of conviction.

This is the last in our sermon series called “Courageous Faith”.  If you have heard others in the series, I hope you’ve found inspiration in the stories of Bible characters and how they drew on their courage in order to do what God called them to do.  From Abraham to the persistent widow, we have looked at stories in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament to find examples of the kinds of courage we might need right now.  We’re living in a challenging time, and we need all the courage we can get!

The last biblical figure we’re going to explore isn’t actually just one person - it’s three - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who, though threatened with being thrown into a fiery furnace, offer us a beautiful example of the courage born of conviction.

Now, even if you were already familiar with this story, this may come as a surprise to you.  You see, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego weren’t really their names.  Their given names were Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.  They were good Jewish boys growing up in Judah when the king of Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar, attacked Jerusalem and took control of their country.  The king told his highest official to go and choose some young men from among the Israelite royal and ruling families to train in the Babylonian language and culture.  After three years, these young men would then serve the king. You’ve probably guessed that Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were among those chosen, and the first thing that the king’s official did was to change their names from Jewish names to Babylonian - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

While the king’s plan was that these young men would essentially become Babylonian, they had no intention of complying. As you heard, the conflict came to a head when Nebuchadnezzar built a huge gold statue and required everyone - “peoples, nations, and languages” - to bow down and worship it.  If they did not, they would be thrown into a furnace of flaming fire.  But, remember, every morning and every evening for their whole lives, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had said these words: Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. They had prayed the Shema, and these were the words that guided their lives, and so they said no, they would not bow down and worship the king’s golden statue.

To his credit, Nebuchadnezzar did give them a second chance, but they again refused, saying they trusted that if God could rescue them, it would happen. But, no matter what, they weren’t going to worship an idol.  Furious, the king ordered them to be thrown in the furnace of flaming fire, doomed to an instant death.  Yet, when Nebuchadnezzar looked down into the furnace, he saw they were very much alive, along with a fourth man.  They came out of the furnace untouched by the flames, and the king recognized that, indeed, their God was the Most High God.  “May the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be praised!” he cries.  “He sent his messenger to rescue his servants who trusted him.  They ignored the king’s order, sacrificing their bodies, because they wouldn’t serve or worship any gods but their God.”

We all experience times in our lives when we need the strength to get through something morally or spiritually challenging.  Maybe it is simply getting through each day in the midst of a pandemic and a time of great unrest in our country.  Maybe it is the temptation of an affair or another drink.  Maybe it is deciding whether to blow the whistle on something we know is wrong or speak out against an injustice.  What we learn from Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is that these are times when what gives us courage is to know what we believe and not be swayed from it.  That is the courage of conviction.

No matter how you look at it, the next few weeks are going to be difficult in our country.  The tension around the election has been building for months, and there is no way that we will come out of this without a deep emotional impact on some segments of our population, if not all of us.  We may feel as though we’re perched above the fiery furnace.

And so for the last of these sermons on courageous faith, I want to remind you that we have the same resource to feed our courage that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had.  We have a faith tradition that has taught for thousands of years that we will gain courage and confidence, hope and strength when we align ourselves with God. When we love God with all our heart, soul, and might.  God’s values will guide our decisions and God’s compassion will comfort our anxiety when we put our commitment to God first.

Yet, with so much happening around us, with so much anxiety and tension, fear and anger, misinformation and frightening facts, how do we hold onto that courage?  How do we stay aligned with God and trust that God will see us through?  The courage of conviction can seem hard to find when the winds of chaos are blowing.

But, much like Jews pray the Shema every morning and every night, we can find ways to stay rooted in what we believe.  This may sound simplistic, but it’s actually very powerful.  When you feel overwhelmed, afraid or unsure, write down what you believe. Put them in black and white.  Make a list of beliefs that are core to who you are and what you believe about life and community.  For me, they might include “I believe that God is always at work for good in the world” or “I believe love is stronger than hate.”  Write them down and put them where you will see them like Jews place the Shema in each doorway of their homes. Then, consider where those beliefs come from.  Why do you believe what you believe?  Chances are good that many of your core beliefs are also core to our faith as Christ-followers.

If you’re unsure how to express your beliefs, consider taking a look again at your baptismal vows.  “Do you renounce the evil forces of wickedness?”  “Will you resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”  Or, you might look at the United Methodist Social Creed or an affirmation of faith.  The point is to put your beliefs into words.  When you name your beliefs and you understand where they came from, you find solid ground to stand on. You know who you are and whose you are.  You gain conviction.

But, remember Shema.  Listening and doing, hearing and responding.  You know your beliefs; how will you act on them?  As the next few weeks pass, and the election heats up, and you begin to feel overwhelmed or paralyzed or despairing, what will you do?

Again, I think our membership vows present a good guide.  We promise when we become church members to support the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.  These are acts of faith, rooted in our love for God that can guide our lives in the best of times and the worst.  Pray about the election.  Pray for our country.  Pray for courage and calm.  Show up at the voting booth or at a march.  Give your money and your time to the church and other organizations that support your beliefs.  Choose every day to live your life according to what you believe and what Jesus taught.

Yes, this is a challenging time, but the core values of our faith have carried Christ-followers through worse.  And so, as I draw this sermon series on courage to a close, I invite you to join me in a litany of the United Methodist social creed - a reminder to each of us, much like the Shema, of who we are and what God calls us to do.

#### A Companion Litany to Our Social Creed

God in the Spirit revealed in Jesus Christ,

calls us by grace

**to be renewed in the image of our Creator,**

**that we may be one**

**in divine love for the world.**

Today is the day

God cares for the integrity of creation,

wills the healing and wholeness of all life,

weeps at the plunder of earth’s goodness.

***And so shall we****.*

Today is the day

God embraces all hues of humanity,

delights in diversity and difference,

favors solidarity transforming strangers into friends.

***And so shall we.***

Today is the day

God cries with the masses of starving people,

despises growing disparity between rich and poor,

demands justice for workers in the marketplace.

***And so shall we.***

Today is the day

God deplores violence in our homes and streets,

rebukes the world’s warring madness,

humbles the powerful and lifts up the lowly.

***And so shall we.***

Today is the day

God calls for nations and peoples to live in peace,

celebrates where justice and mercy embrace,

exults when the wolf grazes with the lamb.

***And so shall we.***

***Today is the day***

***God brings good news to the poor,***

***proclaims release to the captives,***

***gives sight to the blind, and***

***sets the oppressed free.***

***And so shall we.***

May it be so.  Amen.

Benediction

May the God of all that is good walk with you through this week.  May God’s kingdom values - love, peace, and justice - guide your days and comfort your nights.  May you know who you are and whose you are today and always.  Amen.