

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Our reading last Sunday from Jeremiah was written to the Judeans who were in exile. They'd asked how they were to live in a place surrounded by people they both feared and hated.

Jeremiah's response was to build a life and seek the welfare – the shalom – of the place where they lived, and the people they lived among. Because by seeking the shalom of others, they would find it for themselves.

The story we read this morning in Daniel overlaps that time period – it's set against the backdrop of the Babylonian exile during the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar, the king that demolished Jerusalem and the Temple. But this story was most likely written down a few hundred years later during a period of Greek colonialization.

The exile had ended, and the people had returned to Judah and rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem, and life there had resumed.

So, this story isn't so much about a historical account of the exile, but rather the vulnerability of people living under a religiously oppressive regime. And it represents the choices faced by people who must either support that regime or face certain death.

But these choices were more like a steady pressure to fit in, go with the flow, and be like their neighbors. In other words, to survive by being a little less Jewish. But steady pressure doesn't make for good storytelling. So, the writers of Daniel spiced it up a bit.

In Daniel chapter 1, we learn that the names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were given to them during the exile – changing the names they had received at birth. This is important because names not only signify a person's identity and heritage, but in this particular case they also represent their religious beliefs.

Their original names – Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah – all contained references to the God of Israel – Yahweh. Hananiah means "God is gracious," Mishael means "Who is like God?" and Azariah means "God keeps him."

Their new names referenced the Babylonian gods. Changing their names was a deliberate attempt to compel them to change their religion – their core identity. To bow down and worship the golden statue the king had made, and submit to his authority instead of to the God of Israel.

It's a serious matter, but the way the story is told is total parody and satire of the king. It's absurd. The gold statue is described as being 9ft wide and 90ft tall; there's no way it would stand upright. The furnace is heated seven times hotter than it normally would be. In this story, the king is a buffoon, a fool. But even fools can be dangerous.

The king holds complete power over the people in the empire. He wants to be flattered, and he's willing to endanger people in order to accomplish that. And the people on the margins, like the exiles, are the ones who are most at risk of the king's power turning against them.

We know that satire is a powerful form of social critique. People who think of themselves as being high and mighty can stand just about anything except being laughed at. And when the people who are their subjects use that humor, they have power.

In today's world, it's the late-night TV show hosts – think about Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Kimmel. It's also political cartoons and things like that. Satire helps us see what power looks like and what it doesn't.

But for all of the humor in this story, we have to pay attention to the king's command to be unfaithful to the God of Israel. Commanding everyone to bow down to the golden statue had consequences. And I want to point out that Nebuchadnezzar didn't notice Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego didn't bow down. They were ratted out by other officials.

But when the king confronted them, the response of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is spot on. They didn't show him any respect – they didn't use his title; they called him by his name.

They professed their trust in God, whether God was able to save them or not. Nebuchadnezzar didn't like that very much, but his rage quickly changed to astonishment when he noticed a fourth person in the furnace with them.

We're not told who it was, but it was most likely an angel – a messenger of God. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego weren't in there alone.

And when they were saved, the king realized the absurdity of his actions. That whatever power he thought the idol might have doesn't compare to that of a God who can preserve lives in a literal furnace.

The original audience of this story would naturally have identified with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And there are people in the world today who also identify with them because their religion and cultural identity are under attack.

But many of us, especially in the US, must also consider how we respond when we're asked to compromise our faith. Like how do we respond when the leader of our country makes claims that negate our most fundamental principles? The Bible is clear. But real life is often more complex.

Do we ignore, or overlook, those claims just so we can get by? Or do we bear witness to God? To Jesus?

The threat against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was clear. Their lives were on the line. But the threats, the challenges, we face to our faith today are much more subtle. Most of the time, it's things like our elected leaders giving nicknames to their opponents – or calling them names like “stupid” or “piggy” – as a way to dehumanize them. Or speaking negatively about an entire group of people because of the actions of one person.

These practices usually don't directly affect our lives – so they're easy to ignore. But when we ignore them, we perpetuate them. And it's uncomfortable to be reminded of that.

Part of this story in Daniel is about being willing to put your life on the line for your faith. But the bigger part – especially for us in the US – is on how we bear witness to God against the values, the practices, and the claims that pressure us to compromise our faith.

The pressure to just let things be as they are, and not be concerned about the people who are on the margins or negatively impacted by them otherwise. That pressure is often stronger than we realize.

But bearing witness to God in the face of that pressure is what we as Christians do, especially during Advent.

Advent is often described as a time of waiting. But it isn't waiting in the sense of just sitting passively. Advent waiting is a posture of hope – it anticipates, it leans forward, actively makes preparations, and trusts what is to come.

It's a season that allows us to intentionally consider how we bear witness to God in our daily lives. That our witness shapes how we live. And that although bearing witness to God isn't always the easy path, it is the meaningful one – and it's the one God is drawing us forward on.

During the very first Advent – not the first time it was celebrated in the church, but the four weeks leading up to Christ's actual birth – Mary and Joseph were probably the

only people actively preparing for the birth of the Messiah. Others had been waiting for him, praying that he would arrive in their lifetime.

But according to Luke's gospel, in those weeks almost everyone was on their way to Bethlehem for the census. Mary was just another pregnant girl in the crowd, and Joseph was just another nervous father-to-be. Everyone else was waiting in hope. Trying to bear witness to God under the demands of the Roman Empire. Trusting that God would keep the promise to send the Messiah.

As Christians, we pray that God's reign will come as fully on earth as it is in heaven. But, in the meantime, we are caught between competing reigns: the Messiah has come, and we're waiting for his return. Every day, we choose to bear witness to God against the values, the practices, and the claims that pressure us to compromise our faith.

Like the story of the fiery furnace, the season of Advent makes that choice clear. It helps us consider how our witness to God shapes our daily lives and the path it puts us on. Recognizing that it isn't always the easy path – but it is the one God is drawing us forward on. And that it's a path of hope.

Thanks be to God. Amen.