

Sermon
1 September 2013
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Daniel 3:1-30

How do you walk through fire? Without burning? In other words: How do you do the impossible?

How do you get up and face the world on your own, after your partner died? How do you tell your young family that you have been diagnosed with cancer? How do you put one foot in front of the other when you feel as if every last bit of life has been drained out of you?

Impossible? Like walking through a fire without getting burned?

Well – as crazy as this may sound – walking through a fire without getting burned is *not* as impossible as it sounds!

Just ask Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They've been there. They made it through the fire, without getting consumed...

What happened there?

God promised his people that he would give them their own land to live in, on condition that they worship Him alone, and get rid of all the idols. God kept his end of the promise. He gave them the land. But the Israelites could just not stay faithful to God alone. Time after time after time they forgot their promise... God warned them that he was going to take the land away from them, but they didn't take him seriously. And then, eventually, He did just that. He allowed the Babylonians to take his people into exile.

Daniel and his 3 friends were among those who were taken into captivity. Because they were young, healthy and well educated, they didn't become slaves, like most other people did, but were put on the service of king Nebuchadnezzar. And before long they impressed the king so much that he put them in charge of administrating the whole province.

But then something awful happened. The king decided to make a huge golden image and ordered everyone to worship this image. This kind of thing was common practice among the gentile nations of the time.

If anybody did not obey this new law, they would be thrown into a blazing furnace straight away – because that would mean that they neither respected the king, nor any of the gods of the land.

But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were not going to give in to this command, because they were true to God alone. Together with

their fellow-Israelites they already learnt their lesson the hard way; they were not going to be untrue to God ever again. Even if that meant walking through fire. Literally.

They told the king: “...*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 save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand...But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.*”

They believed, whole heartedly, that God *could* rescue them. But even if He decided *not* to, they would still rather be true God than give in to the kings' request. Because giving in to his request would mean being unfaithful to God.

What would you have done if you were in their shoes? Honestly? Stay true to God and maybe face death, or save your own life, even if that means deceiving God? That's a hard one...

Or maybe it's not that hard, because *we* know how the story ends. But those 3 men didn't. And still they didn't budge. They stayed true to what they believed in.

Their faith and their integrity were bigger than their fear of death.

Why didn't God just let them get away with it? Why did He allow them to be caught out? I mean, they were being true to *Him* after all?

Why? Why? Why? Such a human question to ask. We always want to understand everything!

Why did God allow them to go through this? Well, we'll never know for certain, but we only have to keep on reading to see what an amazing outcome this story has.

They *knew* that God could save them. But they didn't put any pressure on him. They asked Him to please get them through this unharmed if it was His will, but if *not*, they would accept it.

And although the king liked the 3 men, his ego was hurt badly by their attitude, so badly, that he ordered the fire to be made 7 times warmer than it was (in Old Testament terms – as warm as it could get). The fire was so warm that it killed the soldiers who had to throw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fire.

And what happened then? Those 3 men, together with God's angel, walked through those flames as if it was the most natural thing to do.

They walked through fire. Without getting burned. And you thought that *that* was impossible!!

Ever since this king captured the Israelites he had to hear how good their God is. But now he saw it with his own eyes. He saw the *impossible* happening. He saw a miracle play off right in front of his eyes.

And that not only changed him, but it also changed history. Because, he declared, that from that moment onwards, nobody was ever to worship another God, other than the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ever again. And as you know – whatever that king said, happened.

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So – why did this happen? Why was this story written down in the Bible?

To teach us 2 things, namely:

- That faith is only faith when your words go over in deeds,
- And that it is worthwhile to believe, even though is not always easy.

From the very beginning God had a plan with those 3 men's lives. By means of what happened to them, not only God's own people, but even the gentiles, realized that there is only one true God.

God used them. It couldn't have been easy, but they never allowed their circumstances to make them doubt in the love of God.

I think we can learn a lot from Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Because I don't think our faith is always completely without conditions, like theirs were. We often *expect* God to bless us *because* we believe in Him.

Because what is our very first reaction when something bad happens to us? We ask: Why?! Why is God allowing this? *Where* is God? What did *I* do to deserve this? And before long we feel so sorry for ourselves, that *nothing* can put things back into perspective...

Especially if it feels as if things are not going to get better soon, if the one thing after the other goes wrong. Then we very easily start to doubt in the existence of God...

But do you know what? God exists – whether you want to know it or not! The sad thing about people who focus their eyes on themselves the whole time, is that it becomes harder and harder for them to see God's hand in their lives, they don't open themselves up in order for God to fulfil his purpose with them...

God wants to use you. Now. In your specific circumstances. But you have to allow him to do that.

You have to live what you believe – in spite of what is happening to you or what the people around you expect you to do. And you shouldn't do that *in order for* God to bless you, but plainly because it is such a huge privilege to belong to God.

So next time, when you feel as if you are surrounded by flames, proverbial flames that are closing in on you very quickly, and no matter how hard you try to put the fire out, it just gets *bigger* and bigger, think about 3 men who literally went through fire for their faith.

I've been there. In a proverbial fire. When armed robbers broke into our house in South Africa and I had to run *into* the room they were in the rescue my baby boy. All the time screaming at the top of my voice, with not even the faintest idea of what to do next and where to go...

I thought that *that* fire was going to consume me and my family. But somehow, it didn't. On the long run, it actually had a positive outcome – it made me end up here!

And just like that I am sure that all of you have lots of stories to tell too. Stories of fires, fires burning all around you, fires almost consuming you, but although it felt like the end of your world just then, somehow you managed to survive it – because you are still here this morning.

When things get too much for you – think about 3 men, who made it. Think about 1 man who had to get nails driven through his hands, for your salvation.

And then decide if your cross *really* is too heavy to bear...

Who knows, maybe the way in which you carry your burdens could lead other people to God, because we all know that deeds speak louder than words.

Let's celebrate God's love for us around the communion table this morning, and then go home today with the sure knowledge in our hearts that God *can* save us if our circumstances turn into scorching flames around us, but even if He doesn't, we'll still accept it, because *sometimes* fire can be good. It's only in the warmest of fires, where gold can be formed...

Amen