Faith in the Furnace

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Daniel 3:8-18

February 1, 2015
Veggie Tales is an animated video series for children depicting various Bible stories. I recently watched an episode with my grandsons entitled, Rack, Shack and Benny. It’s an adaptation of the story I just read from the Old Testament book of Daniel.

In the Veggie Tales version, the Nezzer Chocolate Factory is owned and operated by Nebby K. Nezzer. He draws three star employees into his confidence, Rack, Shack and Benny, played by Bob the Tomato, Junior Asparagus and Larry the Cucumber. Mr. Nezzer is so pumped about selling two million bunnies that he aspires to build a big chocolate bunny for everyone to worship. When they ask what happens if they don’t bow down to the big bunny, Mr. Nezzer points to the furnace where all the bad bunnies go. When the day comes for Mr. Nezzer to unveil his bunny statue, everybody worships and sings the bunny song except for Rack, Shack and Benny. They have been taught to worship God alone. They are summarily thrown into the furnace. When Mr. Nezzer looks in to learn their fate, he sees four people walking around unscathed. He orders them out of the furnace and begs for their forgiveness. They close, as all Veggie Tales do, with a rousing song.

We find ourselves in chapter 18 of The Story entitled, Daniel in Exile. It’s now the 6th century BC. The people of Judah are living in exile in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar issues a decree that some representative exiles be indoctrinated to Babylonian language and culture. Four young Jewish men meet the criteria and are taken into a three-year apprenticeship program. They are given Babylonian names: Daniel is called Belteshazzar and his three friends are given the names Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego. After three years, the four young men graduate top of their class and are given responsible positions in the government.

In chapter two, King Nebuchadnezzar is plagued by bad dreams. He is haunted by an enormous statue of a man whose head is made of gold, whose chest is constructed of silver, whose midsection is made of bronze and his feet of iron and clay. Eventually, this statue is toppled to the ground. Many speculate that these four metals correspond to the successive empires of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome.

Nebuchadnezzar summons wise men to interpret the dream. His advisors are shocked that the king also expects them to tell him what he
dreamed. When they balk at this request, the king orders their execution. Fortunately, Daniel steps forward to recount the dream and interpret it. Nebuchadnezzar praises Daniel and his God for this credible explanation.

King Nebuchadnezzar, in chapter 3, undoubtedly influenced by the earlier dream, constructs a gargantuan statue 60 cubits high. It’s not clear whether the statue is of himself or his god, although it was fashionable in those days for kings to construct elaborate images of themselves. A cubit corresponds to the span from your elbow to the tips of your fingers. So, a span of 60 cubits would equate to 90 feet, the height of three telephone poles. This is one big statue!

The king enlists his royal orchestra to play for the statue’s unveiling. When the orchestra gives the musical cue, everyone, beginning with the court officials, listed in order of importance, gives homage and worships the image. It’s no coincidence that the word “worship” recurs ten times in our passage.

This is where Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego draw the line. They refuse to bow before the statue. The court wise men ought to have been grateful that Daniel saved their hides. Instead, they are jealous about the mercurial rise of these foreigners and report their insubordination to the king. Nebuchadnezzar flies into a rage and orders them to appear before his throne. He orders them to genuflect but they refuse.

They tell the king, in no uncertain terms, they are not obliged to offer a defense. Then they express to the king, “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, O king. 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” (Daniel 3:17-18).

The king’s temperature grows hotter than the fire and orders the furnace to be stoked seven times hotter than it already is. Then the three, dressed in their royal finery, are thrown into the white-hot fire.

When the king peers in, the three are walking around unbound and unsinged. The king is startled by the presence of a fourth man. He orders
them to come out and praises them and their God. Regrettably, it’s not a statement of faith from the king; only a nod to what has undeniably taken place.

The faith of these three young men is most impressive. They stand toe-to-toe with the mighty king of Babylon and don’t flinch. I’m struck by their courageous words in verses 17-18, that God is able to save them from the furnace and rescue them from the king. But even if God elects not to save us, we will not bow down to your silly image.

Jesus is arrested and brought before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. “Don’t you realize I have the power to free you or crucify you?” Pilate asks. Jesus doesn’t budge. “You have no power over me except it was given to me from above” (John 19:10-11).

Peter and the other apostles are thrown into jail for preaching the good news about their Messiah Jesus. When the religious officials order them to refrain from speaking any longer about Jesus, Peter puts them in their place, “We must obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29).

When Martin Luther appears before a church tribunal at the Diet of Worms, he is ordered to recant his writings (a Diet refers to a formal meeting back in the day, not a weight-loss program). Luther says to his detractors, who threaten him with excommunication and even death, “My cause shall be commended to the Lord, for he lives and reigns who preserved the three children in the furnace of the Babylonian king. If he is unwilling to preserve me, my life is a small thing compared to Christ. Expect anything of me except flight or recantation. I will not flee, much less recant. So, may the Lord strengthen me.”

When Martin Luther King, Jr., is jailed for leading a march against racial segregation, someone smuggles a local newspaper into his jail cell. Eight white clergymen release a statement in the paper questioning King’s motives and methods of peaceful protest. Martin writes a response in the margins of the newspaper which later becomes known as the “Letter from the Birmingham City Jail.” In it he writes, “There is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It is evidenced sublimely in the refusal of
Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the law of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake….”

What are we to make of this fourth man in the furnace with our three amigos? Some surmise him to be an angel. Others conjecture he is a pre-incarnate form of Jesus Christ. Whatever his identity, one thing is certain. This 4th person represents the presence of God in the trial of fire.

You may be going through a fiery trial at the moment. Someone close to you has hurt you. You’ve been asking God for direction in your life. You’re facing a difficult decision. Take heart, my friend. God is with us. We are never alone.

Elisabeth Elliot in her book, *Keep a Quiet Heart*, recounts a story told to her by Brenda Foltz of Princeton, Minnesota. Brenda was invited to go rock-climbing for the first time in her life. She is climbing a granite cliff with several seasoned climbers when a safety rope snaps back, hitting her square in the eye. A contact lens dislodges from her eye. At this critical point in the climb, everything becomes blurry. She prays for calm to find her lens and runs her hand along the face of the rock to find it, to no avail.

She is able, with the help of her fellow climbers, to reach the summit. A friend looks in her eye for the lens and even searches her clothes, but there is no trace of it.

As they make their way back down the cliff, they are met by new climbers beginning their ascent. One of them hollers out, “Hey, did anyone lose a contact lens?” Incredibly, a climber has located it. Here’s the kicker. He happens to see an ant carrying it slowly across the face of a rock.

Brenda told this story to her father, who is a cartoonist. He sketched a picture of an ant with the contact lens and included the caption, “Lord, I don’t know why you want me to carry this thing. I can’t eat it, and it’s awfully heavy. But if this is what you want me to do I’ll carry it for you.”

There have been times in life when I have received answers to prayers along the lines that Brenda received. More often, I don’t experience prayer this way. I identify with this ant. I don’t know why you want me to carry this heavy load, but I trust you.
Faith only in my earthly deliverance is not faith in God. Whether or not I’m physically delivered, I trust in God’s ultimate deliverance.

Let’s return one last time to these three young men. God is able to save us from the furnace and rescue us from the hand of our oppressors. But even if God elects not to deliver us in the manner we hope and pray for, we will trust Him.