

## **“Near the Fire”** **Daniel 3:13-28**

In one of those documents that didn't make it into the Bible – the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas – there is a passage where Jesus is addressing His disciples regarding the commitment it takes to follow Him,

and as one of the lessons our Lord lifts up, Jesus says,

“He who is near to me is near the fire, and he who is far from me is far from the kingdom.”<sup>1</sup>

That apocryphal saying races into my mind when I read this material from the book of Daniel, because it seems that we are now arriving at a moment when there is no more middle ground, and we the people, we the people of God, in the face of magisterial mandates and imperial power,

are being called to make significant, and sometimes risky, choices

that could very well put us near the fire or far from the kingdom of God.

And in this decisive moment when the choices we make

will very well determine the consequences we endure,

this passage from Daniel serves as a source of inspiration . . .

for here were Daniel's friends – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego –

who had seen Nebuchadnezzar's narcissistic novelty, the golden statue . . .

and they were aware of the potentate's pronouncement –

that when you heard the administration's drum and bugle corps of horns and harps, pipes and lyres, breaking out in the national anthem,

then *all* people from *all* nations speaking *all* languages were commanded to bow down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up (3:7).

It was the law.

The state liturgy had been instituted.

The public policy had been adopted.

The king's command had been clear . . .

and in order to enforce that edict,

in order to identify any dissidents,

in order to ensure that any disobedience or disloyalty would be severely punished,

an immense and effective surveillance system had been activated.

And sure enough, it worked.

The party of Nebuchadnezzar's loyalists –

the Chaldeans, the espionage experts who were committed to the king's “Babylon First” agenda –

sought to root out any significant internal pushback to his policies and impulses . . .

and they had spied on the Jewish camp,

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<sup>1</sup> Gospel of Thomas, Logion 82

and it didn't take long before they delivered the intelligence report to Nebuchadnezzar –

“There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

And they are not paying any attention to your executive orders,  
and they are not respecting you, O King, as the ‘one true leader.’<sup>2</sup>

They do not serve your gods . . . and they do not worship, admire,  
and adore the golden statue that you have set up” (3:12).

Obviously that news did not sit well with the self-centered sovereign,

because people in power expect blind obedience;

they expect total loyalty and allegiance;

they expect unquestioned compliance . . .

and because Daniel's faithful friends refused to kneel before the idolatrous statue,

Nebuchadnezzar became furious and demanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego appear before the king and account for their treasonous behavior.

As they stood before Nebuchadnezzar, the king issued an ultimatum –

“Now if you are ready when you hear the entire musical ensemble to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good.

But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire,  
and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?” (3:13, 15)

And I have to wonder – OK, guys, why not do it?

I mean, it seems innocuous enough.

Just go through the motions . . .

join the parade . . .

and then go home

and wash all that idolatrous debris from your bodies

and then bury your heads in the sand and pretend that nothing happened.

Really?

Is that what we want to encourage in our churches? . . .

to have people of faith hiding our particular identity? . . .

to pretend to be something that we're not? . . .

to compromise our convictions so that we can live a life uninterrupted by the empire?

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<sup>2</sup> On September 17, 2022, at a political rally in Youngstown, Ohio, former Trump supporter Marjorie Taylor Greene helped warm up the crowd and declared Donald Trump as the “one true leader” of the GOP. She said, “The future under Republicans . . . loyally follows the one true leader of the Republican Party and you know who that is. He's the one we elected in 2016 and the one we re-elected in 2020, who won the election.” See the article about the rally at <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/shootings-stabbings-rapes-carjackings-trump-rally-1234595211/>

Well, at that menacing moment,

those faithful servants were not at all confused about who *their* true leader was,  
and so with great faith they answered the king:

“Sir, we really don’t need to present a defense to you in this matter,  
because we’re not going to change our minds.

If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire  
and out of your hand, O king, then let God deliver us.

But if God chooses not to deliver us, you can be still assured that we will not  
serve your gods, and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set  
up” (3:16–18).

What faith!

They said, “If we are delivered . . .  
or if we are not delivered . . .

Either way, we will not worship your stinking statue.

We will not serve your domineering dictates.

We will not compromise our identity for your power-hungry plans.

We will maintain our position of defiance.”

“No!” they said.

“We will not endorse your wars or condone your killing.

We will not dance in your golden ballroom.

We will not bow before your banner that hangs ominously above the Department of Justice.”

“No!” they said.

“We will not marginalize people of color.

We will not support your voter suppression schemes.

We will not endorse your disregard of the Constitution.

“No!” they said. “We will not bow down before you.”

And because “He who is near to me is near the fire,”

they would literally confront the fire,

since King Nebuchadnezzar, like our own current wannabe king, did not want negotiation;

he only wanted capitulation,

and his authoritarian temperament could not tolerate their civil disobedience.

In fact, Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage that his face became distorted (and he probably  
developed a huge rash on the side of his neck),

and he ordered the furnace to be seven times hotter than normal (3:19),

and the fire was so intense that the flames even consumed the strong ICE agents who  
escorted the devoted dissidents to the furnace.

But amazingly the fire did not have any effect on the unintimidated trio,

because there was One who was with them in the flames,

and their faithful fellowship proved to be so miraculous  
that the hair of their heads was not singed,  
their tunics were not harmed,  
and not even the smell of fire came from them (3:27).

As the prophet Isaiah said,

“When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you” (Isaiah 43:2).

And even Nebuchadnezzar, slow learner that he was, got the point and broke out yet again in doxology –

“Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, for they disobeyed the king’s command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God” (3:28).

And so, as the wannabe kings and autocrats in our culture (slow learners that they are) watch from their cold towers,

setting fire all around us,

thinking that their feeble flames will break the people of God,

we who were marked with ashes on Ash Wednesday

courageously walk through the fire with our hands open,

passing hope like contraband from one faithful palm to another,

glowing so brightly with the word of God’s truth in our hearts

that it burns the masks from ICE agents

and incinerates the administration’s blueprints for building more  
detention centers and prison camps,

and melts the heartless and inhumane chains of repression until  
they fall like water.

Even though the empire keeps building furnaces for the purpose (they claim) of maintaining “order,”

and intensifying the flames through a judicial system designed to intimidate us,

the church of Jesus Christ is empowered with the faith to walk through fire with the One

whose unconditional love erases borders

and whose justice overpowers inequity and inequality

and whose mercy refuses to normalize any kind of cruelty.

“He who is near to me is near the fire” as one gospel writer recorded it . . .

and so we disciples do not fear the fire,

for the flames teach us how to walk together, shoulder to shoulder,

with our footsteps ringing like bells that no empire can silence

to confront an administration that thinks it owns the world.

Those tyrants (who foolishly believe that power belongs to the ones who strike the match)

keep building their furnaces,

failing to realize that our gospel was never meant to be domesticated,  
and, as a result, the community of the faithful boldly walks through the fire,  
marching in the rhythm of renewal toward a new reality that an immoral and  
mendacious administration wants to extinguish,  
and singing in the language of the prophets and the protesters,  
where the molten truth of God's word  
melts all of their false crowns  
and all of their brittle idols  
and all the cold machinery of domination.

“Those who are near to me are near the fire,” our Lord is purported to have said . . .

and so, at this dark time in our country's history,

we follow God's path through the flames,

for the fire we walk through bakes the bread that we share at the communion table that  
is large enough to welcome all people,

being led by the One who provided “a pillar of fire” to guide the people through the  
wilderness . . .

and even from the furnace we can boldly proclaim God's truth to people in power  
because we are infused by the Spirit of God who, on Pentecost, blessed God's  
people to speak with “tongues of fire.”

Indeed, no fire, no empire, no president, no architect of death,

has ever learned how to silence the voice of the church,

and so, with our voices glowing with those tongues of fire,

our community of faith becomes a choir that the regime cannot drown out,

a chorus of voices recognizing each other as “beloved,”

saying “Not in our name,” do we accept our government punching people when  
they're down,<sup>3</sup>

and so we denounce the merciless actions that turn children into statistics

and we grieve with mothers who are forced to bury unfulfilled futures,

and we ache as the gardens in other countries sadly become battlegrounds.

This administration wants us all to bow before their inferno of fear

but instead we bravely walk into the fire with our arms linked,

to place a torch beneath the banner of our own country's Nebuchadnezzar whose image now  
brazenly hangs above the Department of Justice,

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<sup>3</sup> Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth spoke unapologetically about causing “death and destruction from the sky all day long” in Iran at a press briefing Wednesday, saying,

“We're playing for keeps. Our warfighters have maximum authorities granted personally by the president and yours truly. Our rules of engagement are bold, precise, and designed to unleash American power, not shackle it,” Hegseth said, attempting to speak menacingly. “This was never meant to be a fair fight, and it is not a fair fight. We are punching them while they're down, which is exactly how it should be.” See the article by Hafiz Rashid, “Hegseth Brags About ‘Death and Destruction’ Raining Down in Iran,” *The New Republic*, March 4, 2026, at <https://newrepublic.com/post/207334/hegseth-playing-keeps-iran>

to shine the light of truth upon the deceit and dishonesty of the occupant of the White House who is already preparing the machinery to manipulate the midterm elections, and to ignite the paper mountain of unjust executive orders that harm our democracy,<sup>4</sup> our country, our environment,<sup>5</sup> and make our entire world less safe.<sup>6</sup>

Although they may throw us in the furnace,

we are inspired by a gospel that cannot be co-opted,

and we march with the faithfulness that refuses to kneel,

and we stare down the flames which already realize that they are outmatched by a people whose courage is inflammable,

demonstrating what resistance looks like when it is made of love . . .

and when the authorities in the administration ask who authorized this defiance, we can point, not to a fiery furnace, but to an empty tomb and say, “He did.”

Yes, my beloved friends, we are summoned to the work of faithful discipleship.

We are called to invest ourselves in the work of truth-telling.

We are commissioned to infuse the darkness in our country and community with the light of God’s justice.

But often we spend too much time thinking we don’t have the resources or the power to change the world.

But change-making does not belong to one group of people;

it belongs to all of us.

And we can begin by doing what we can with what we’ve got,

where we are and in our own way . . .

and especially in our communities of faith.

We don’t have to be heroes or martyrs or Biblical characters.

We don’t have to wear a uniform . . . or call ourselves activists . . . or get elected to participate.

We just have to be courageous enough to care

and to be faithful enough to stand near the fire . . .

because we never know – the fire we approach just could be a burning bush,

and we know how that event changed the world.

This homiletical offering was delivered by Tom Ulrich  
at First Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe, New Mexico,  
on Wednesday, March 11, 2026.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2026/02/26/trump-elections-executive-order-activists/>

<sup>5</sup> See Ella Nilsen, “Trump delivers a deadly blow to EPA’s ability to regulate climate pollution,” *CNN*, on February 12, 2026, at <https://www.cnn.com/2026/02/12/climate/trump-repeals-epa-endangerment-finding>. When Trump was asked about environmental concerns associated with the action, his message to Americans was, “don’t worry about it” (see <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2026/feb/14/trump-obama-climate-rule-takeaways>).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/how-trumps-unilateral-foreign-policy-has-eroded-american-power/>