

The stories in the book of Daniel are set in the time of the Persian Empire, when the Babylonian Exile was over but Judea was still under the rule of an alien government. However, the book of Daniel was actually written in the second century BCE, under the Hellenistic Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus Epiphanes was a brutal tyrant who believed in making pre-emptive strikes against subjects who didn't show the right attitude. He had continued Alexander the Great's efforts to instill Greek culture in all the cities of the empire, which meant the Greek mode of education, building gymnasia in every city, and installing statues of Zeus in every house of worship, including the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Some Jews were willing to go along with these reforms, feeling that it didn't hurt to go through the motions of reverence to Zeus as long as you could still observe the regular Jewish rites; Antiochus appointed one of these more cosmopolitan and forward-looking Jews to be the chief priest. But others objected strenuously to the violation of the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me," rebelled, and then were crushed by Antiochus' troops. He desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar. He made it illegal to observe the Sabbath, to circumcise one's son, or to possess a Torah scroll, and the penalties for unlawful behavior were severe. So in this very constricted and terrifying environment, somebody wrote a series of short stories about Jewish young men managing to remain faithful despite the hostility of their pagan ruler. The pagan ruler was Nebuchadnezzar of Persia, not Antiochus Epiphanes the Seleucid, but those who were so inclined could detect certain parallels.

The story is satirical. Nebuchadnezzar is portrayed as ridiculous. The

narrator shows him summoning every kind of government functionary you can imagine, ordering the playing of every kind of musical instrument ever invented, and ordering everybody to worship this monstrous golden statue on pain of death. He's a caricature of every Ancient Near Eastern potentate, fixated on spectacle and so thin-skinned as to be unable to tolerate the mildest dissent. He is a model of foolish excess. This is not an environment in which the pure of heart can flourish, and sure enough, "certain Chaldeans" rat out the good Jewish boys Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for refraining from worshiping the ludicrous golden statue. Nebuchadnezzar, confronting them, can't help but recite his whole splendid plan all over again, with the list of musical instruments and the James Bond villain death that they will face if they persist. But they reply, "If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pointed out that what the heroes were doing was civil disobedience. He said he was glad to find himself in such company, when the law was out of harmony with the moral arc of the universe. But he also pointed out that they knew they might not get out alive. "As they did what they did, they made it very clear that they knew that God had the power to spare them; they said that to the king: 'Now we know that the God that we worship is able to deliver us.' . . . **but!** if he doesn't deliver us, we still are not gonna bow.' 'But if not" -- do you get that? That these men were saying that 'Our faith is so deep and that we've found something so dear and so precious that nothing can turn us away from it. Our God is

able to deliver us, but if not...' This simply means, my friends, that the ultimate test of one's faith is his ability to say 'But if not.'"

<https://notoriousbiggins.blogspot.com/2010/01/but-if-not-sermon-by-martin-luther-king.html>

King says that there's an "if" faith and a "though" faith. "If" faith is when you say, "If I have a happy life and nobody I love gets hurt and I never have to do anything hard and fail, then I'll believe in you, God." "Though" faith is when you "discover some principle, . . . have some great faith that grips you so much that you will never give it up. Somehow you go on and say 'I know that the God that I worship is able to deliver me, but if not, I'm going on anyhow, I'm going to stand up for it anyway.'" You don't choose what to do in order to attain heaven or avoid hell; you don't choose what to do in order to avoid criticism or have an easy life. You choose what to do because it's worth whatever price you might pay. That's the "though" faith. God has all power, but even if God doesn't save me from this danger, I will stand up.

Martyrdom today is in sort of an odd place. Dr. King most certainly was a martyr, a faithful witness to God who was killed for that witness. But it is uncomfortable to see conservative American Christians positioning themselves as martyrs in the so-called "war on Christmas" or fights for "religious freedom" that amount to the refusal to bake wedding cakes for same-sex couples and cover health care expenses for women. They solicit the reputation of martyrs, but without regard to context: all the power is on their side. So I was glad to see the Boston Declaration, issued on Nov. 20 by Christian theologians in the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. In 1934 Karl Barth, Martin Niemöller and pastors

of the Confessing Church released a Barmen Declaration, calling out the German Church's complicity with Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime. Inspired by the Barmen Declaration, the Boston Declaration contends that following Jesus today means fighting poverty, economic exploitation, racism, sexism, and all forms of oppression from the deepest wells of our faith.

"Today, too many Christians are placing politics over the foundational teachings of Jesus. They make excuses for racial hatred and sexual abuse, and some have even said that it would be better to vote for a pedophile than a Democrat," said the Rev. Dr. Pamela R. Lightsey, Boston University School of Theology. "This is the opposite of Jesus' teaching of love and mercy."

"Many Evangelical Christians have embraced the politics of exclusion and hatred, such that the Good News of Jesus has become cover for a social and economic order that can only be understood as bad news for many. Responding to Jesus' courageous call to love 'the least of these,' we pray for the conversion of the converted," said the Rev. Dr. Peter Goodwin Heltzel, New York Theological Seminary.

<http://religionnews.com/2017/11/20/a-diverse-group-of-christian-theologians-release-a-boston-declaration-at-the-old-south-church-to-challenge-the-corruption-of-christians-in-the-united-states/>

I hate to call out conservative Christians because I know so many are people of good will whose allegiances are complicated. But I also hate and have hated to see the names of God and Jesus used to promulgate empire, injustice, division. I was thrilled when I read the news about the Boston Declaration, possibly because I have an inflated view of the reputations of the AAR and the SBL, but also because it comes at a time when the political use of Christianity has become literally blasphemous. It

feels like being told that it won't hurt anything if we put up a statue of Zeus in our temple, or if we bow down to some ludicrous gold monster statue as long as inwardly we remain devout.

Advent is, among other things, one long reminder that resistance is always possible. In Advent we endure the shortening days, longer darkness, creeping cold. At the darkest time of year, a baby is born to poor travelers and welcomed by animals and common laborers. And this display of truly poor planning, truly rotten strategy for overcoming the enslaving evils of the world, turns out to be the beginning of one long demonstration by God that abundant life always wins. Starting with Mary's song about overturning the mighty from their thrones, continuing with the wise men's thwarting of Herod's jealous plan, and on into Epiphany with the baptism of Jesus by that troublemaker John the Baptist, ordinary people stand up for what's right.

Dr. King pointed out that in the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, though they are thrown into the burning fiery furnace, they are not alone in there. I will end with his eloquent words: Somebody looked in there and said "We put three in here, but now we see four." Don't ever think you're by yourself. Go on to jail if necessary but you'll never go alone. Take a stand for that which is right, and the world may misunderstand you and criticize you, but you never go alone, for somewhere I read that "One with God is a majority," and God has a way of transforming a minority *into* a majority. Walk with him this morning and believe in him and do what is right and he'll be with you even until the consummation of the ages. Yes, I've seen the lightning flash, I've heard the thunder roll, I've felt sin's

breakers dashing trying to conquer my soul but I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on, he promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone; no, never alone, no, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. Where you going this morning, my friends, tell the world that you're going with truth. You're going with justice, you're going with goodness, and you will have an eternal companionship. And the world will look at you and they won't understand you, for your fiery furnace will be around you, but you'll go on anyhow. But if not, I will not bow, and God grant that we will never bow before the gods of evil.

Let us pray:

God of fiery flames, even the most raging fire could not destroy your servants when they called upon you in faith. Give us faith to withstand anything that rages to deter us from following you. Amen.