

Rev. A. Reilly Page
Sunday, July 13, 2025
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Text: Daniel 3:8-18

“But If Not”

There are four origin stories in our country. Your ancestors were either Indigenous, Enslaved, Immigrants, or Refugees. You may check all that apply. In each of these origin stories, we have individual narratives of incredible bravery, striving, and the suborn refusal to be eliminated. We have tales of whole people groups persevering, organizing, forming new homes in hostile places. We have endured through the squalor of slums and the harsh wilderness. We are the people our ancestors dreamed about.

More than just the 250ish year history of America, our history stretches back and back. Astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson spoke in an interview about how there have been about 100 billion people throughout history. If one considers how many people could exist, how the genetics could be combined for a human, that number is astronomical. It is mathematically more likely that a possible human will not exist, than it is that you are here right now. Your existence is a statistical miracle.

The Psalmist says to God, “You knit me together in my mother’s womb”. I like thinking about God as a knitter. I knit, but my wife is a knitter. I like thinking about God getting excited about new fibers to work with, new patterns to create and new stitches to learn. The joy and intention that my wife lavishes over a project to then just give it away. I like thinking of God setting their creations free in the world, proud of the beauty they knit into existence with strands of genetic code and Divine love.

We are here this morning through a combination of grit, hope, and miracle. We have a collective history of endurance. The determination of our ancestors is in our marrow. We have a whole library of stories of hope satisfied because of God’s faithfulness to all that they created. The longings and strivings of our spiritual ancestors is in our bones. We love these stories. We love these stories so much that we sing about them. We study them and glean from them, trusting that ancient library has new wisdom for us.

The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendigo is a particular favorite. It is, like many of the most popular biblical stories, cinematic. You can see it right? The evil king has taken into captivity the best and brightest men of the underdog country. They quietly refuse to assimilate into the king’s court while also making themselves indispensable. The conflict in this movie arises when the king erects a giant golden statue of his god. The command goes out for all to bow and worship, to appease this god. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendigo refuse. They serve only Yahweh God. The three Hebrew men are dragged before the evil king. “Bow down, or I will cast you into the fiery furnace!” he growls at them. The tension builds and the music swells. Shadrach, in a total hero move, eyes gleaming with defiance and voice steeled in certainty responds to the king, “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 God 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.”

It's so good! We love this story. The defiance of the underdog, the downtrodden, the broken, the no-way-out. This is Rocky Balboa, this is Erin Brockovich, this is the 2001 classic

movie *A Knight's Tale*, and pretty much Disney's bread and butter. Time and time again in pop culture we see fortune favor the bold. Throughout scripture, we read about God's protection to those devoted to keeping the faith and trusting God's word. This is Moses parting the Red Sea. This is the walls of Jericho crumbling. This is the widow's jar of flour and the jug of oil not going empty until the end of famine.

We love this story because it is clear who we root for. There are bad guys. They are the ones who trick, scheme, cheat, and seem to be undefeated and without consequence. There are the good guys, the pure of heart, the innocent, the long shot striving for peace and justice. In the biblical narrative and in the American narrative; God is always on the side of the good guys. Which is why we Christians have so strongly imprinted on characters like Moses, Joshua, and Elijah. Surely, we are the good guys in the story unfolding. God is on our side. Everything thing we do, every law we pass, every population we fear, every tree we cut down is ordained and blessed by God. Because we are the good guys.

Of course, it's more complicated than that, right? The victorious get to write the narrative so they assign God's endorsement to their actions of genocide, colonialization, human trafficking, and environmental degradation. As history unfolds and we reflect, we understand that the heart of God has broken time and time again for this world so carefully knit together. Our histories are studded with scrappy survivors, yes. And we carry with us the legacy of imperial greed that carved out a nation in a new world where one already existed, built on the backs of humans held in bondage. It's not a simple story. And as Dr. Maya Angelou calls us, we know better and then we do better.

In this current chapter of American history, I keep thinking about how our past can inform our present and future. As a transgender non-binary person, I know that my people have always existed. We are not some new, tender population untested in this hard world. We stand on the backs of those who the Nazis didn't kill, those who the policy couldn't catch, those who gave their lives so that in death we might be seen as human. This legacy is in me. You have legacies of tenacity in you too. The perseverance of our ancestors informs our capacity to endure in the present. We've been here before. We've survived this and worst.

In addition to the legacy of tenacity, I keep thinking about this "but if not" declaration by the Hebrew men before Nebuchadnezzar. They refuse to swerve from their convictions as men of faith. They refuse to conform to this foreign empire. They will not accept this new normal of Chaldean rule, wanting them to assimilate. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendigo are uninterested in seeing both sides. They know there are consequences for their faithfulness to God. They know they will be uncomfortable, outcast, criminalized, and eventually called before the authority to pay for their convictions. To receive punishment for refusing to kneel before the false gods set before them. For failing to break under threat. These men are steadfast in their belief that God will deliver them from death. And they will go to death rather than waver. They will go to death never having bowed to the king, his false gods, or his lies of greatness.

The world is a mess right now. That's about the strongest language I can use at church, but you get the idea. The world is a mess. Maybe like me you are trying to balance the desire to stay informed with the desire to stay out of a pit of despair. Maybe like me you don't know how much more injustice, corruption, pettiness, and greed you can take. How much more your heart can break until it's nothing but splinters. Maybe you too are worried about your immigrant neighbors, your friends with cancer, queer kids enduring under this rhetoric, and how those on a financial tightrope will soon find themselves falling. I am so angry. I am so afraid. I feel so powerless. I am hanging on to faith by my fingernails. I reach deep for the hope in a God who

promises faithfulness, who promises a good work started will be brought to completion, a God who loves the widow and orphan and outcast. I have to believe that God will carry us through. Jesus loves us, this I know, for the Bible tells us so. The stories within me, within us, keep me believing that there is a way forward into more justice and more peace.

But if not. But if not, like the Hebrew men, I will refuse to accept the false idols laid out before me. It's so powerful, this little phrase. "But if not" is to hold your spiritual center while also working to bring the world into alignment with the heart of God. "But if not" is putting pressure on the arc of the moral universe to bend it toward justice. "But if not" means planting seeds that you will not see become trees. "But if not" is telling the truth of authoritarianism, cruelty, blasphemy when everyone else is calling it beautiful. As the Apostle Paul said to the church in Corinth, "We are hard-pressed on every side. Pressed but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed."

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendigo were thrown into the fiery furnace. And, as the story goes, the king's men were confused by the fourth figure in the furnace with them, an angel of God protecting them from the flames. They still faced the fire. It was hot and terrifying. They took into the fire the tenacity of their ancestors and God met them there. God is with us in the fire, in the flood, in the fight for our communities. Our ancestors taught us how to endure. God will bring us through to a new way, but if not, let us continue to refuse to bow down. Let us be the scrappy ancestors the next generation will look to. We exist by grit, hope, and miracle.

Let us continue in faithfulness.

Amen