

Steve Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Daniel 3
January 17, 2021

Withstanding the Furnace of Truth

A trial by fire and a trial by water – these two stand before us, confronting, challenging, instructing, and inspiring.

First, the trial by fire. In the book of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are compelled to render allegiance to something they know to be untrue. That untruth is symbolized as a golden idol, which is the public representation of a whole way of life, a form of being. A charismatic king, Nebuchadnezzar, stands behind the command to bow to the idol, and in the story, we sense that the point of the exercise has little to do with the statue per se. The point is the king himself, and the project he represents – his territorial ambitions, his command of the law, his power to dispense material advantage. And so when the people bend the knee to the statue, they're bending to the king, as well as to themselves. Imagine them with me: some are no doubt enthusiastic as they bow. Some see material and political advantages for themselves. Some are angling for positions as they bend the knee. Others are less enthusiastic, but it's not so hard to bow, and they go along to get along. Still others are at war with themselves, sensing the conflict between their own values and those they're asked to recognize. They know it will be a stain upon their reputations if they yield. But they also don't think they have a choice, not really. And so they too prepare themselves to submit.

Only three people in all the land, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego choose otherwise. They know that to bow is to compromise their integrity in ways they could never recover. They know that to bow would be a blemish upon their consciences, one that would infect their souls for the remainder of their days. They know that to bow, to publicly yield to the vanity of the king, would shred an essential part of their humanity, a part of themselves they could not live without. To bow before the idol would be to forget what they know to be true, what they know to be right in the world. It would be to forget their God. It would be to forget themselves. And so they refuse, and for that refusal, they face the fire.

The furnace into which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are thrown is one of the existential scenes of the Bible. It's like Eden, like the wilderness, like the Promised Land, like the New Jerusalem – not a place on a map, but a description of an essential piece of the human experience. There are times in every human life when we're asked to stand in the furnace. There are times that we're each of us asked to withstand its heat, lest we lose our dignity, our integrity, our very souls. The furnace is where some young people stand, as they choose not popularity but self-knowledge and self-respect. The furnace is where members of the business community are sometimes asked to stand, as they choose between easy profits and hard ethical questions about how those profits are made. The furnace is where churches are, at times, asked to stand, as they take unpopular positions that risk offending or alienating some on its membership rolls. The furnace is where legislators are now being asked to stand, as a public accounting for the events of January 6th is demanded, including an accounting of the deceptions and lies that fueled those events.

But really, the furnace is where each of us is asked to stand at various times throughout our lives, as we make principled decisions for truth over falsehood, for integrity over

expediency, for character over compromise, even if those decisions cause enormous pain. The furnace is the place in which the self is forged, in which dignity is preserved, in which honor is upheld, even as angry mobs and petulant rulers alike stoke the flames. Importantly, I think the furnace is that secret room within each of our hearts, in which we're asked to render an account of ourselves, in which we're summoned to speak the truth of our lives. Many people, most perhaps, choose not to go there, for it is too hot, and it is painfully lonely. A few, however, know that it's possible not only to withstand the heat, but to live and move within it. They know, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that even in the midst of the furnace, they are not alone, that there is a fourth, that God accompanies them through the flames, preserving and protecting them.

Questions arise: What is it that gives some people the courage to stand in the furnace, while others accede to the pressure of the king? What is it that draws the crowd toward Nebuchadnezzar, making him an object of fascination for so many? What is it that makes so many people rush headlong to accommodate themselves to him, while just a few see through his blandishments and deceptions? More broadly, what is it that allows entire populations, or portions of it, to withstand the furnace, while other segments fail to exercise their critical faculties whatsoever? What is it, finally, that makes authoritarian power work, and what is it that builds the capacity to stand against it, even within the furnace?

Hang on to those questions for the time being. The Book of Daniel doesn't fully address those questions. It merely hints at their existence, while confirming that it is possible to withstand the fury of the king, to withstand the furnace of the truth. To gain insight into the predicament of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and to gain insight into our own predicament of late, we'll need a modern source to play against the backdrop of ancient Babylon. For that, I would have us leave ancient Babylon for now, and head out to sea. There, somewhere on the Pacific, I would place us on the deck of the Pequod, with Ishmael and Queequeg, with Starbuck, Stubb and Flask, as they're tossed about the sea in Melville's novel, *Moby-Dick*. And I would have us turn a careful eye toward Captain Ahab, the grim and terrible spiritual center of Melville's book. It's Ahab that shall provide a window into the questions we chase. It's Ahab that reveals the tricks and sleights of hand of those like Nebuchadnezzar, charismatic leaders who lure a public into an ill-fated and ill-conceived project. If Nebuchadnezzar initiates our trial by fire, it's Ahab who initiates our trial by water, on the blank expanse of the ocean.

Here is what I would have us observe. Late in the novel, Ahab initiates a curious sequence of events, which wind up sealing the fate of the Pequod and her crew.¹ The events in question effect a kind of seizure of the ship itself, which can be understood as the ship of state. Those events also effect a kind of seizure of the conscience of every member of the crew. Henceforth, they will be engaged in a quest of Ahab's own private devising, a suicidal mission to revenge himself not only upon the whale that dismembered him, but upon all in the world that stands in the way of his own monomaniacal drive. Taken together, each of Ahab's actions provide a reliable map for how paranoid and unstable leaders like Nebuchadnezzar or any other two-bit demagogue assert themselves onto a public. Ahab's actions suggest how such figures become expert manipulators of people, how they bend events to their own wishes, and how they hold an iron grip upon the hearts and minds of all those around them. Join me on the deck of the Pequod, then, and watch what Ahab accomplishes.

¹ Ahab's tactics were charted by Nathaniel Philbrick in his wonderful *Why Read Moby Dick* (New York: Viking, 2011), in the brief chapter "Pulling Dictatorship Out of a Hat." See pages 99-100.

He begins with a quasi-religious ritual, an upside-down sacred rite that provides his vision with a sense of mystic transcendence or awe. It's a trick borrowed from Nebuchadnezzar's playbook. Ahab approaches the ship's blacksmith, and entreats him to forge upon his anvil a newly fashioned harpoon for the killing of an elusive whale. Just as the harpoon is nearing completion, Ahab entreats three members of the crew to baptize the iron with their own blood, whereupon Ahab consecrates the harpoon with words spoken in Latin. "Ego non baptize te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli," he cries.² To translate: "I do not baptize thee in the name of the Father, but in the name of the Devil."

It is a twisted sacrament that Ahab accomplishes, a reminder that demagogues often cloak their activity in the garb of religion. I've quoted Mussolini's Fascist Manifesto to you previously, where he says that the movement he seeks to create will be, first and foremost, grounded in religion. "Life as conceived by the fascist is serious, austere, and religious," Mussolini says. "All its manifestations are poised in a world sustained by moral forces and subject to spiritual responsibilities."³ No wonder then that the fascist conception of life so closely mirrors the life of the church. No wonder that in the fascist conception of life, Bibles are held aloft for photo ops, crosses are carried toward the scene of insurrection, and political rallies take on the character of religious revivals. None of that is incidental. To become expert at manipulating human lives, to bend events to your own will, you must learn the first lesson of Ahab and of Nebuchadnezzar alike: consecrate your activities in the sacramental. Cloak all your movements in the language of religion, in the language of law, in the language of morality.

Now watch what Ahab does next. It's a departure from Nebuchadnezzar, proving Ahab's modernity. Several days after his diabolical sacrament, he emerges on the ship's deck at noon, and using a quadrant, he establishes the precise latitude upon which the Pequod is placed. Ahab is accompanied on the deck by Fedallah, his chief enabler, who kneels in what seems to be prayer while Ahab takes his measurements – enablers are never far from the likes of Ahab, or Nebuchadnezzar. But then Ahab grows impatient with the device, and he tramples it underfoot. "Science! Curse thee, thou vain toy," he says. "I trample on thee, thou paltry thing that feebly pointest on high; thus I split and destroy thee."⁴ With that, the ship and her crew become untethered from reality itself, subject only to the whims and declarations of the captain and his enablers.

Like mastering sacramental rites, smashing the instruments of science, fact, and truth are further ingredients for manipulating souls. Grinding the quadrant underfoot happens in all kinds of ways. Deny that climate science is real, for example, or just plant tiny seeds of doubt about its reliability. Contradict the best research on slowing the spread of a virus – say that masks and social distancing don't really work, despite what most scientists say. Find one voice in a thousand who touts the efficacy of quack cures, and elevate that voice. Sow mistrust toward experts and authorities in various fields – call them elites; cultivate an online ecosystem where alternative facts and conspiracy theories can circulate unhindered; repeat an untrue or fabricated story often enough that people assume that even if it's not all true, there must be something to it; court adherents who already believe in an alternative science, like biblical creationism. Each of

² Melville, Herman, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Random House, 1930), pg. 701. A recommendation: if you read the novel, seek out an edition with Rockwell Kent's amazing woodcut illustrations. Better yet: seek out prints of those very woodcuts, and use them to decorate your walls, as Faulkner once did.

³ Mussolini, Benito, "The Doctrine of Fascism," 1932. <https://sjsu.edu/faculty/wooda/2B-HUM/Readings/The-Doctrine-of-Fascism.pdf>

⁴ Ibid, pg. 717.

those is a way of grinding the quadrant underfoot, smashing the instruments, cursing science, and reality itself, as a vain toy. If you wish to learn the secrets of Ahab's charismatic power, you must master the art of trampling quadrants.

But there's another trick that Ahab deploys, and it's the most powerful one of all. After a frightful storm in which Ahab rages on the deck of the Pequod, further frightening his crew, it is discovered that the ship's compass no longer points toward true north, for it had been blasted by lightning. And so the captain makes a great show of resetting the compass needle himself. After it is accomplished, only Ahab could say if it accurately points north. But the effect is all. The crew slinks away in mute submission.⁵ Ahab becomes the lord of the four directions.

And so to the tactics of mastering sacramental rites and smashing the instruments of science, add one further tool: scrambling the moral compass, such that it's no longer possible to steer by a fixed star. Insist that right is actually left, that up is actually down, that east is actually west, that north is really south. Reset the inner compass of all those who listen to you, and encourage them to distrust social norms around things like telling the truth, or treating others with decency and respect. Use rumor and innuendo to stir up suspicions about people who worship, or speak, or look a little different. Encourage violence with a wink and a nod, even as you claim to disavow violence. If ever you are called to render an account of your behavior, turn the tables, and insist that it's your detractors who are misguided. Free a lot of people to give voice to what they've secretly wished to say all along, if only they had been allowed to. Reset the compass. Make allowable what was once unthinkable. Make it so that the needle points out an entirely different true north, one of your own making. And then be assured that most people don't themselves have a strong internal compass, so that they'll be pliable before the cardinal points that you've established for them, pliable before the idol you wish them to worship. Insist, with Ahab, with Nebuchadnezzar, that the newly reset compass, the idol, points people in exactly the direction they most deeply wish to move.

There it is: Ahab's ingenious sleight of hand. That's how his dark magic unfolds. In ancient Babylon, on the high seas, and yes, in places like America, the effect is the same: mute submission from many, and enthusiastic devotion from a few. The crew of the Pequod is ground to dust in Ahab's will, and so they float on to their watery demise. The crowds of Babylonians obediently bow before the king's golden idol. They're scorched. They're crushed. They're slapped around by a raging demagogue.

Which is why the witness of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is so stunning, so powerful, so very miraculous. They are the rightful counterpoint to the dark magic of Ahab and Nebuchadnezzar both. They are the counterexamples, the witness to the defense, insisting that things can still be otherwise. They are the foils to Ahab's tricks. They are the hitch in Nebuchadnezzar's plot. They are the persistent reminder that it remains possible to see through the deceptions, to fight through the lies, to stand for the truth. They are the reminder that it is possible, even in Babylon, even aboard the Pequod, even in America, to maintain one's humanity, one's character, one's soul, even in the heat of the furnace.

I cite both stories, the trial by fire and the trial by water, as means of reminding each of you, each of us, and all of America really, that it's possible to see through such deceptions. I cite them because I wish to argue that religion can be used for good as well as for ill. I wish to steal religion back from the fascists and neo-fascists, reminding us all that theirs is a distortion of religion. I would have us deploy a critical religion, one that unmasks idolatries, even as it calls upon God for help in withstanding the heat of the furnace. I cite these stories as a way of

⁵ Ibid, pgs. 739-743.

reclaiming science, reclaiming facts, and reclaiming the real, for once you see through the ruse, you can find your way back to norms grounded in research and consensus. And I cite these stories as a means of checking our own internal compasses. Do they point us in the direction we ought to go, or are they Ahab's cardinal points?

But above all, I cite such stories to help us recall that when we see through the deceptions, when we determine to speak the truth, that it's possible walk within the fire stoked by the Nebuchadnezzars of the world. I cite such stories to help us recall that it's possible to withstand the furnace of the truth, and even to thrive within it. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego seem entirely comfortable within the flames, a sign that they've kept their cool. And not only that: When Nebuchadnezzar himself gazed into the fire, a place he himself would never withstand, he was able to discern there four figures, not three. He correctly sensed that a living God was present in the fire with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. So it is that I recount such stories to you now: in order to insist that what was true for those three brave souls is also true for you, for me, for us all. Whenever we're called upon to withstand the fiery furnace, it is God who comes to stand there with us.

It is as the old hymn states: "When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace all sufficient, shall be thy supply." It concludes with these words, spoken from the furnace itself: "That soul that all hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no never, no never forsake."