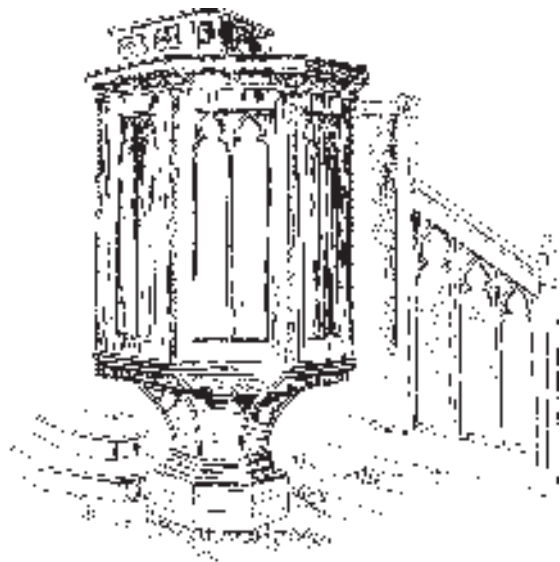


June 6, 2010

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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### **Risking the Fiery Furnace**

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Daniel 3 (selected verses)

In wartime we hear, “There are no atheists in foxholes.” A more accurate statement might be, whether in wartime or peacetime, “There are no atheists, period!” We all believe in something—in some god. Our scripture narrative is a case in point. The Daniel story is not about people who believe in God versus people who don’t believe in God. It is a story about people who believe in different gods.

I’d like to return to the end of the lesson for a moment. Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego are brought before the king and are given the ultimatum one last time: either they fall down and worship the golden image pronto, or it’s the burning, fiery furnace for all three. And then, convinced that he has the upper hand, Nebuchanezzar toys with them. He indulges in a theological question: “Who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?”

Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego, somehow prepared for the theological exchange, make three crisp points, each more important than its predecessor:

- We really don’t feel compelled to answer your question.
- Nevertheless we inform you, O King, that the God we serve *is able* to deliver us not only from the fiery furnace, but out of your hands as well.

• “But if not...” (even if our God does not deliver us from the fiery furnace or from your hands), “we will not serve *your* gods or worship the *golden image*, which you have set up.”

In changing circumstances, Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego opt for unchanging allegiance. End of lesson.

But, it really isn't fair to leave the story dangling. The pace quickens and the plot heats up, literally. The king orders the furnace heated to seven times its normal temperature. Leaving nothing to chance, he orders Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego to be bound, fully dressed and tossed into the furnace. In an ironic touch, the heat is now so intense that the men who throw them into the furnace are themselves consumed by the flames.

But, not a hair on the heads of Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego is even singed. They have a heavenly visitor, a fourth person, “like a son of the gods,” whom the king observes walking with them in the midst of the flames. Since in this case no roasting ensues, the amazed king orders the men to come out of the furnace. It is the first royal command they seem inclined to obey.

The king is persuaded by the exhibition; their God really has saved them. And so, hedging his theological bets, Nebuchadnezzar, while not affirming their God, issues a decree that anyone who says anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego shall be—not thrown into a fiery furnace, since that's no longer a fail-safe deterrent—but torn limb from limb.

The Hollywood ending strains our credulity, for we know that life has a habit of failing to measure up to such positive scenarios. But, the Hollywood ending is cited for a specific reason: when Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego make their forthright declaration, they have no assurance of a Hollywood ending. God gives no guarantees in advance. Their very phrase, “But if not...” is their way of saying, “We don't know whether we will survive or not. We are not affirming belief in God as a bargaining chip to save us from the fiery furnace. Whether we survive or not is not the issue. The issue is that we remain faithful to God.”

Over 2000 years later, you may recall, there was a 20th Century reenactment of our story. King Hitler made a huge gold swastika and asked the world to bow down. This time 6,000,000 Jews were sent to the furnace and God did not intervene.

I began today by saying that our biblical story from Daniel was about people who believe in different gods. If the truth be known, *most of us* are probably polytheists, people who believe in several gods—the God who we give our verbal allegiance here in church, and then the other values, projects, commitments, persons, on whom we are willing to lavish a lot of uncritical loyalty, and for whom we are able to deny almost everything else.

A list of gods we might mention as serious claimants for our allegiance could look like this:

- Making the team,
- Becoming No. 1 (in school, business, politics, world affairs, or stolen bases—anything but strikeouts),
- Getting the girl—or boy,

- Taking charge (of the corporation, the political party, the school board, the labor union, the condo association, the sorority),
- Accumulating as much money as possible,
- Stopping the Islamic fundamentalists.

I don't know, what am I missing? What's on your list?

If we asked our friends in the third world to tell us what gods they perceive us Americans worshipping, really worshipping, no matter what we *say* our ultimate loyalties are, the list might look something like this:

- Keeping the United States No. 1 at all costs,
- Maintaining absolute superiority over any other nation in guns, drones and nuclear weapons,
- Dominating the world economically,
- Deciding who should govern countries that might otherwise "threaten" us,
- In general having the right to a "good life" even at the expense of other people or nations.

We may not find such a list flattering to our egos, individual or national, but in our more candid moments we can sometimes admit that such are, indeed, operative "gods" for many within our culture.

And, at that point, for those who feel some uneasiness in worshipping such deities, the question is posed: When the power of such gods is so great in our land, how can we risk affirming the God of Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego—the God of Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac - the God of Jesus, Paul and Peter? Such an act of faith seems to be a very long shot: no assurances, no guarantees. The odds aren't particularly appealing. Such a God can save us from the power of the other gods, but then again, such a God might not.

A struggle with that dilemma will characterize the rest of our lives, if we are serious about it. Perhaps, all we can do here is to make a modest beginning.

We can begin by remembering that if faith in this God is risky, none of the other gods offer built-in guarantees either. The choice is never between a risk and a sure thing. It's always a choice between risks. There is never a sure thing anymore than there is ever a free lunch.

We can also remember that if belief in such a God entails risk, there's some consistency here, because the God we are talking about is a risk-taking God. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of Sarah, Leah, and Rachel, is always in the thick of things, siding with the poor, putting the divine name on the line for a bunch of slaves, and in Christian terms, getting incarnated in the most unlikely and risky way imaginable—in a first-century Jew who lived at a time when people in general didn't like Jews very much and people in power didn't like Jews at all. So if we get in trouble for affirming such a God, we can be sure that Trouble is God's middle name and that such a God will be alongside us in the midst of trouble, rather than off in a remote heaven practicing neutrality.

And if we can begin to make that most difficult switch of all—away from the gods of middle-class values and upward mobility and gilt-edged retirement plans—and if we can explore, even tentatively and gingerly, what it would be like to think with and act for those who are the victims, we might just uncover the most “unexpected news” of all: that God got there before we did.

Let us pray:

Help us to say yes to you—not only here, but in all we do—and help us to say no to the other gods of our life that would enslave us. Amen.