

“Blessing While Bleeding”
by Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage
Sunday, June 7, 2020

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Last Sunday night, I attended a webinar put on by the UCC. At the end of it, the pastor asked the panel of speakers which spiritual texts are guiding them right now. The Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III recommended Daniel 3, specifically verses 16-18. I was deeply moved by his explanation for why and so I share it and some of my own thoughts about it with you today.

The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is about three men who were just trying to live their lives as faithfully as they could. But their backstory is also important. The reason that they were in Babylon at all was because the Babylonians took over Jerusalem many years before and took all of the spiritual, cultural, intellectual, and political leaders back with them. They did this because their experience taught them that the spiritual and intellectual leaders were dangerous to their authority, so it was better to remove them. So, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were already captive, marginalized, and regarded as potential threats when they refused to follow Nebuchadnezzar’s law.

This is important because it helps explain why Nebuchadnezzar’s reaction was so drastic. When leaders regard a group of people as a potential threat, they tend to overreact even to minor refusals to follow their rules. It’s also important because it helps us understand Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s words:

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.

The three men seem to start with a statement of trust in their God, believing that God will deliver them from the fire. But that’s not exactly what they say, is it? As the Rev. Dr. Moss pointed out, what they say is “if”—If our God is able to deliver us. They are not certain that God will deliver them. The Jewish people have learned something terrifying: Sometimes, God does not deliver us. They know this because of their history, because they’ve seen their city and holy places attacked and destroyed, their people subdued and captured, and many of them murdered. They have lived many years seeing that their God does not always step in and directly save them.

But, nevertheless, as Rev. Dr. Moss states, *nevertheless* they still insist on serving their God. They say, “if not...”—if God doesn’t deliver us, we still won’t serve you or your power! Having seen the worst of the worst, having lived years in captivity and having seen their people die, these men are still faithful. When I think deeply about this, I wonder how this can be. How do they not question? How do they not demand justice from their God? How do they not lose their faith?

Rev. Dr. Moss answered this question, saying, “This is a faith that isn’t rooted in materialism. I win, even if I physically lose, because I don’t give up my heart and I don’t give up my spirituality to your power.”

“I win, even if I physically lose, because I don’t give up my heart and I don’t give up my spirituality to your power.” These words overwhelmed and humbled me. They also were a blessing to me. These words represent a faith and a courage to be admired and emulated.

I sometimes wonder about the end of that Bible story. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego went into the fire—a symbol, perhaps, for standing up against an empire that sought to destroy them as a people. And I wonder if the reason they survived it was *because* they were willing to face it and to keep living out their faith, no matter the consequences. That kind of courage and faithfulness is like an angel and can help us walk into and survive all sorts of dangers.

Their words and actions help me understand why so many people are willing to march and demonstrate right now, even though they risk tear gassing, imprisonment, and coronavirus. Like the captive Israelites, they have witnessed too many years of unlawful imprisonments, unfair treatment, and the murder of black and brown people. Like the captive Israelites, they have seen that God does not step in and rescue every faithful individual from whatever threatens them. And so, they march because they know that they win, even if they physically lose, because they are living out their faith, standing up for the justice that their faith has taught them.

This sermon is not a call for you all to go out and march. I, myself, have not, as I am still not physically able to do so. Instead, it is meant to offer a blessing. One of the other things Rev. Dr. Moss said last Sunday was that, although our hearts and maybe even our bodies, are bleeding right now, we need to be a blessing to others. Like Jesus in our scripture reading for today, whose heart was bleeding because he knew that he was about to be betrayed; he knew that he was about to be imprisoned and crucified. Like Jesus, we can still be a blessing to one another and to our world.

And the way we can be a blessing is to live out our faith, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. When faced with moments when it seems like God is not answering our prayers, we can say, “I still believe and I will live out my faith.” When we start to feel paralyzed with overwhelming grief or fear, we can say, “I still believe, and I will live out my faith.” When faced with a country in turmoil, a world wracked with disease, and the enormity of systems of violence and oppression, we can say, “I still believe, and I will live out my faith.” And in those moments, we can repeat the words of the Rev. Dr. Moss: “I win, even if I physically lose, because I don’t give up my heart and I don’t give up my spirituality to the powers” of evil and despair. Thanks be to God. Amen.