

SERMON “This May be the Last Time” Daniel 3: 1-30

Tomorrow is the day our nation has set aside to honor Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr for his work in extending civil rights to black Americans. Martin Luther King was an American Baptist pastor so it is especially fitting that we American Baptists remember him. One of the things I remember about the civil rights years is the songs they sang. “This may be the last time” that we just heard is one of those great civil rights songs. It has a different tone than the more victorious songs like *We Shall Overcome*, *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around*” or *Lift Every Voice and Sing* that promised that the work and struggle would be worth it. “*This may be the last time*” has a more sober tone that recognizes the very real risk that people might actually be killed before the next meeting or the next march. It begged the question of whether if they **knew** this **would be** the last time, what then? Were they willing to die for what they believed? It’s a question for each of us today regardless of the color of our skin.

The third chapter of Daniel tells the story of three Jewish young men. They had been among those taken captive to Babylon when King Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Jerusalem between 597 and 587 BC. Nebuchadnezzar had chosen these three young men to be educated in Chaldean literature and culture. They lived a life much better than the other captives. He had even given them Chaldean names – we know their Chaldean names, don’t we? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

As powerful kings often did in those days, King Nebuchadnezzar ordered a 90-foot golden statue to be built in a prominent place where all could see it. At the sound of certain music, everyone in his kingdom was to bow down and worship the statue in honor of the King. Those who refused to bow down would be thrown into a blazing furnace.

This was a problem for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego because they still worshipped the God of the Jews alone, so when the music played, they did not bow down to the statue. They practiced what we now call civil disobedience. They refused to obey a law that their conscience and faith told them was unjust or wrong. They quietly went about continuing to pray to their God and refusing to bow down to the king’s statue.

I wonder if, after the law was announced, the three young men talked about what they were going to do. If they were caught not bowing down, they could die in the furnace. If they bowed down to protect themselves, they would be insulting their God. Was there a moment when it sunk in that “this may be the last time”

they had together? Were they willing to die for what they believed? Martin Luther King, when he preached on this story, said that the young men had made the decision, "We must be disobedient to **a** king in order to be obedient to **the** King." Pastor King had made that decision in his own life and it gave him the courage to work against laws that treated black people unfairly because he knew from God's word, that we are all created equal in God's eyes.

But every generation has its leakers of information. When King Nebuchadnezzar was told that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were quietly refusing to bow down, he was furious. After all, he had provided a special cultured life for these young men. And he demanded that they obey the law or be burned to death in the furnace because what god did they think was big enough to rescue them out of the hands of someone mighty like him, someone who could build a 90-foot golden statue? No god he knew about was that big! Nebuchadnezzar assumed his threat was enough to get anyone to cow tow.

Listen as I read again their answer to the King:

*"King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God **we serve** is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."*

Talk about courage! "Go ahead- throw us in the fire! You want to know what god is able to rescue us from **your fire**? The God we serve is able to deliver us out of your hand." They knew the power of their God. No matter how powerful the King was, their God was more powerful still. Makes me want to start humming, "We Shall Overcome." And if you wonder if they were playing a kids game of "My dad's bigger than your dad!" only it was "My God's bigger than your god." What they said next shows that isn't what's happening, and it is the crux of the story. Think of what it means to say, *"But even if our God does not rescue us..."*

You see, there two kinds of faith. "If" faith and "But even if not" faith. "If" faith is easier. It says, "if" life is smooth and things go well for me, "if" living by faith won't make my life harder or get me in trouble, "if" God answers my prayers quickly the way I asked them, "if" I can stay in my comfort zone and faith doesn't cost too much," then I'll believe in God. "If" faith often leads to "why" faith when trouble comes. "Why is God doing this to me?" "What did I do to deserve this?" "I'm a good person so why isn't God protecting me?" "If" faith has trouble

standing firm when our tough situation doesn't resolve and may even get worse, when it seems God's not listening to our prayers, or when the furnace gets turned up extra hot just for us.

Then there's the "but even if not" faith that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had. "Even if God does not rescue us..." they said to the king. Their faith in their God was so deep, they trusted so firmly in His faithfulness, that even if God did not rescue them from the fiery furnace, it didn't change anything; they still would not bow down. "But even if not" faith believes that even if things go wrong, even if what we prayed for doesn't come to pass, even if we die standing for what's right, "even if this is the last time," we will continue doing right because we know that the God we serve is more powerful than the heat of the fire or any problem we face. "But even if not" faith trusts God's heart. It's what Jesus showed in the garden the night he was betrayed, when he asked God in prayer, "Isn't there another way to accomplish what you sent me to do besides dying on a cross?" Dying wasn't his heart's desire. Yes, he wanted to accomplish the way for our salvation, but if there was a way ... Aren't we like that too? We want to follow Jesus, but sometimes the cost seems so great, we waver. But Jesus' prayer didn't end there. "But even if" you do not rescue me, Father, Your will be done, not mine." Praise God Jesus was willing to accept the ultimate cost, willing to give his life to fulfill His Father's heart and make the way for us to have new life. He knew what he was willing to die for- us.

Rev. Dr. William McClain, remembers the night he watched Martin Luther King live out this "but even if not" kind of faith. McClain had invited King to a speak at a community meeting in Anniston, Alabama. Racial tensions were high and the Ku Klux Klan had made threats to anyone attending this meeting. But Martin Luther King came and he rallied the people of Anniston to join the movement—to put their fears aside and build the future they wanted for their children.

After the meeting King needed to head north to Gadson, Alabama for a rally the next day. Another black pastor in the community was responsible for driving King, McClain, and two associates there. They were ten miles north of Anniston when their driver suddenly realized that, in his excitement, he had forgotten to fill his gas tank. They were almost on empty when they pulled up to the only gas station open at that hour.

McClain shouted, "Wait! We can't get gas here. The man who runs this station is the Grand Dragon of the Klan." These 4 black men were sitting in a car with no gas late at night, right in front of the Klan leader's gas station. After debating what to do for 10 minutes, Martin Luther King said, "Wait here."

He got out of the car, walked into the office of the gas station and began to talk to the Grand Dragon of the Klan. McClain knew that this man's family all lived behind that station. He was sure that this would not end well. It was one of those "this may be the last time" kind of nights.

The gas station office was lit up in the dark as they watched King and the Klan leader talk energetically. Then, to their surprise, King stepped out and motioned for them to pull the car up to the pump. The driver jumped out and filled the tank and then ran up and put the money for the gas on the counter.

Everyone in the car was stunned as they drove away. They all knew that it could easily have been the last night of their lives. "What did you say?" McClain asked King.

"Well," he said, "after he got done calling me all kinds of names and telling me to get out of his station, I told him that he could either sell us enough gas to get on down the road or I would be forced to go back to Anniston and do more mobilizing there. That was it. He wanted us out of his town."

Tomorrow we honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who calmly modeled the power of a "but even if not" faith- a faith that eventually cost him his life. Rev. King taught us that when the outcome is truly left in the Lord's hands with no holds barred, we don't have to use violent words or actions to stand for what's right; we don't have to attack people who attack us. We don't have to act in fear no matter how big the problem is that faces us. "But even if not" faith even gives us the ability to extend the same grace to others that we have received from God, to work together with people we may not like, or who truly intend us harm. With "but even if not" faith, we just have to stand and let God do His part. Whatever that is. Rescue or not. It's the kind of faith Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego modeled for us. The question for us today is, what kind of faith do we have- an "if" faith or a "but even if not" faith? Our answer makes all the difference in the way we live, and even in the way we die.