

DISCOVERING GOD: BANKING ON GOD'S HEART
DANIEL 3: selections
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We are in week three of a sermon series on discovering God. Two weeks ago discovering God by banking on God's track record; last week discovering God by banking on God's rules and today discovering God by banking on God's heart.

Rather than a magic wand that would turn us into unswerving believers what I'm saying in these sermons is that by picking up clues to God's presence in the life of his people over the biblical narrative we can approach our lives with leads as to where to find God in our struggle and journey.

We're talking today about knowing God's heart. Throughout history the heart is considered more than a mere pump. Ancients and great artists considered the heart the seat of conscience, character, strength and wholeness. If you know someone's heart you know that person.

The story from Daniel this morning begins with the truth that each of us, no matter what our station in life, has to serve somebody.

A friend recently handed me the Bob Dylan CD from which those lines on the front of your bulletin were taken.

You may be an ambassador to England or France, you may like to gamble, you might like to dance, you may be the heavyweight champion of the world, you may be a socialite with a long string of pearls, but you're gonna have to serve somebody.

When I was a student at Yale Divinity School I loved to walk by the statue of Nathan Hale in front of Connecticut Hall on the old campus.

It portrays a twenty year old Hale chest out, eyes focused and confident, hands and feet bound. Around the base of the life size statue are his famous last words to his British executioner before being hung from an apple-tree in Rutger's orchard Oyster Bay, Long Island. "I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

Standing in front of the building where Hale attended classes made the intervening years of history evaporate for me. His words came alive. Nathan Hale gave his heart to the American Revolution, a cause to serve bigger than himself that called out the best in him.

Hale's youth and character evoke Daniel's three friends: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who gave their heart to and served the God of Israel in a foreign land.

If you are a refugee living in a foreign land one of the most difficult things to do is to remain true to your religious faith. The story today zeros in on this dilemma with Nebuchadnezzar's demand to worship his golden statue.

The story offers to God's people living in Babylonian exile, to whom it was written, a parable to understand and apply the most solemn of God's commandments: neither to make nor worship any gods before me.

Today's tale, like the account of Daniel in the lions' den, is a narrative mirror. It has all the historical markers his listeners would recognize living in exile under a ruthless king. Yet, it reflects not only who they are but who they have it in them to become.

When Nebuchadnezzar makes a golden statue and demands that all the subjects of his kingdom worship it under the pain of a fiery death the Jewish people – every person of faith who reads this story – has a problem. Do we risk our lives for our faith or do we give up our faith to save our lives?

So if the story opens with the truth that each of us no matter our station in life must decide whom we will serve, the story continues by telling us that sooner or later we will be called to stand up for that which we serve.

As for the three young men they say to Nebuchadnezzar, 'we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire, out of your hand, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue you have set up.'

These are words from the heart like Nathan Hale's to the British platoon that captured and executed him. And in this ancient tale we can hear the story teller encouraging those beleaguered Jewish exiles, encouraging you and me in the defining moments of our lives – "Take heart, stand up to the forces of death and darkness. You can do it!"

Did the test results come back with bad news? Has the relationship entered some new uncharted, uncertain territory? Is the church at some crossroads where the leaders can play it safe or take a stand for who God is calling the congregation to become? Then make your case with the same clarity and confidence as those three young men did to the tyrant king.

As in any good story, the drama builds for these three men. Having not capitulated to this Saddam-like ruler what will be their fate? Do they realize to whom they are talking?

The king's response is predictable. He gets so mad, some versions of this story say, I love this, that his face was distorted. "Throw them into the fire," he demands "but first make the fire seven times hotter."

And here all those inner voices rise up to 'counsel' us. "See, I told you! Too late now. You're gonna wish you didn't do that!" And if you're like me and it's the test results or the relationship or the leadership question sometimes you fast forward to some unavoidable day of doom – that sends the message "what good is your faith to you now?"

This is the beauty of Daniel 3 – something of a child's story with an adult message. Now we get to sit back and watch the forces of goodness prevail.

Nebuchadnezzar cannot believe his eyes. "Were there not three men we threw into the fire? But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt. The fourth has the appearance of a god."

If our story begins by telling us that each of us has to give our hearts to serve some cause in life, and if life inevitably creates the circumstances where we have to take

a stand for that which we serve, then the story shifts yet again to tell us that it is in the furnaces of life that God comes to us.

Remember we threw away that magic wand. We rejected the golden statue, the fashionable bauble, the position of status or power that promised to meet all our needs. Rather, we embraced the convictions of our hearts, our conscience, our deep trust in a cause and God bigger than ourselves.

This is not a complicated message. But it is not a harmless cartoon either. It is a deadly serious parable that offers life-saving truth to you and me today, just as it did to the Jewish people living in persecution and exile.

What happens to those who give their hearts to God, who take their stand in life's defining moments for their trust in God's sovereignty and wisdom, who surrender themselves into God's service, what happens is they emerge from life's furnaces unscathed.

And this is the transforming power of God. I will never forget a man who died of cancer years ago in a church I served. It was a long, painful illness. He had two devoted teenage children and a wonderfully positive and strong wife.

But as the disease progressed and Dan weakened you could see the flames of the disease all about him, tongues of fire at his bedside as his body deteriorated.

Yet, for those who visited him in those final weeks and days his spirit and personality were completely unbound – like those three young men in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. He moved about his illness as if it had no affect on him. He was resilient, funny, serious, thoughtful, and loving.

It is hard to explain such moments in life which is why parables and poems – and music and anthems on this choir dedication Sunday – say it best.

But there was a discernable presence in Dan's hospital room. When the tragedy and sadness of it should have caused people to fall apart no one did. There were tears and the sorrow and tenderness of goodbyes. But most of all there was strength. Someone said, Dan died a very sick man but he was completely whole.

In fact, you can't explain it. The cancer raged but Jesus, like the fourth figure in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, was there ministering, caring, shielding. Having given his heart to God, God gave his heart to Dan, his family and friends. God's heart filled that room with strength and peace.

What finally happens in the story is what happens in life. Old Nebuchadnezzar falls down to worship the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The one true God.

Transformed. Ruthless dictator bows down to God. Certainly the wider circle of people in Dan's life were touched. Some transformed. Having encountered God's heart they longed to find how they too might dwell with God more completely.

God's heart is like that. It opens again and again to include us as we give our hearts to him in the defining moments of life.

Bob Dylan said you can serve God or you can serve the devil – which I take to mean anything that deflects us from being who we are called to be.

But once you've experienced God's heart holding you together in some illness or relationship or leadership decision, it doesn't matter how hot the flames are. There's no choice but to give yourself to God and serve only him. Amen.