

# WHERE GOD IS FOUND - THE FIERY FURNACE

## Eastertide

Daniel 3:1-30

A Sermon Preached by Two Members of the Congregation  
Introduced by Catherine Foote  
University Congregational Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington 98125  
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Scripture:

### **Daniel 3:1-30**<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Golden Image*

King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue whose height was sixty cubits and whose width was six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent for the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to assemble and come to the dedication of the statue. When (everyone was) standing before the statue, the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire." Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

At this time certain Chaldeans came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! You have made a decree .... [Yet] [t]here are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These pay no heed to you, O king. They do not serve your gods and they do not worship the golden statue that you have set up."

Then Nebuchadnezzar in a furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought in... . Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? ... But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?"

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, "O 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 and out of your hand, O king, let God 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 Fiery Furnace*

Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace heated up seven times more that was customary, and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire.

So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But the three men ... fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, "Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?" They answered the king, "True, O king." He replied, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and fourth has the appearance of a god." Nebuchadnezzar then

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<sup>1</sup> Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. 1989.

approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men; the hair of their heads was not singed, their tunics were not harmed, and not even the smell of fire came from them. Nebuchadnezzar said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent an angel and delivered these servants who trusted in God. They disobeyed the king’s command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own .... Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.”



Catherine Foote

Ah, the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, of a golden statue and a fiery furnace, people told to bow down or else, and the heroes who refused to limit their lives in this way. It’s a story I heard as a child. It’s one people remember from the Bible. One of the ones they can almost always tell parts of. We sing it, oppressed people tell it to one another over and over again. We are drawn in.



Prayer:

God,  
 May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts  
 find their place to you to be held and transformed,  
 to change us and the world,  
 for you are our rock and our Redeemer.  
 — Amen.



Ah, doesn’t the story just catch you? You get drawn in! You know, could it really have happened this way? What an amazing story. But I think the reason this story resonates, feels authentic, even makes us laugh like the author probably intended it to do, is not because we think it *might* have happened, but because we recognize that it *does* happen over and over again, 2500 years ago and even today. This story, whatever might be its history, is also more than history. It is, in the best sense of Joseph Campbell’s word, a myth. And the way Joseph Campbell defines *myth* is that he says it is the penultimate truth human beings can know: “penultimate” because the ultimate truth is beyond words. We know it in our experience. We recognize it when we hear it, even when it is more than we can say.

Mythology, Joseph Campbell says, that ... that way of telling stories to one another, is a way to connect us with mystery, is a way to explain our world Myths might be used to validate or reinforce a certain social order. But most importantly, myths tell us how to live our human lifetime under any circumstance. Something bigger is happening here, the story reminds us. Something bigger is happening in you. Watch for it. Listen for it. Trust it.

Member 1

Good morning. It is a blessing to be with you for me this morning and briefly share how I found, an continue to find, God in the fires that engulfed and will continue to engulf my life.

Please join me in the Serenity Prayer.

God, Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen

Life is hard. I believe the primary reason that we are here is to love and support each other. One of the most significant fires of my life thus far has been the fire of addiction, resulting in living periods of my life in shame and self-loathing – fueled by fear that if you really knew me, my truth, you wouldn't like me, you'd reject me, you'd abandon me.

On February 14, 1985, I entered the fire of alcohol and other drug recovery. On February 2, of this year, I bade farewell to Harborview Medical Center after serving 27 years as an Addictions Therapist and Social Worker in various jobs throughout the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health. Here is some of what I've learned both personally and professionally about not only surviving the fires of our lives but thriving in their aftermath. I apply these life lessons – these tools – to most aspects of my life today.

On December 5, 2004, Mary Jo Leddy, Director of Romero House for Refugees in Toronto, preached from this pulpit about Radical Gratitude, which was the title of her most current book at the time. My primary take away from her powerful sermon was that in order to live a full and meaningful life grounded in gratitude, our challenge is to find the gift in everything that happens in our lives, *everything* that happens.

Years ago a client in one of the hundreds of groups I facilitated over my career shared that how we viewed our addiction – either as a blessing or a curse – would determine the quality of our recovery – our life. How true, indeed, of every fire that comes into our lives. Is it a blessing or a curse? If I accept it, the blessing – the gift, will come in God's time. If I reject or deny it, I remain in the curse. It's all about perception.

I believe the core of addiction is shame and self-hatred – the alcohol, the drugs, the sex, the food, the gambling, the work, the shopping, the video games. Those are just symptoms. They are not the primary problem. Fear is the fuel of addiction, which generates the need to control. After countless promises to self and others to stop the drinking, the drugs, or other compulsive behaviors, others trust in the addict is eroded as well as the addicts' trust in themselves. The more broken promises, the more fear, the deeper the addiction, the more need to control, the deeper the shame. It's a vicious cycle of destruction.

The reality is we are all powerless over most things in our lives except our attitude about our life, our current situation. The first step of all 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous is that we are powerless over whatever we're addicted to or whoever we're trying to control. It's all about surrender, letting go – admitting our powerlessness – acceptance of what is – life on life's terms – it is what it is. I am who I am. Recovery began when I accepted in my heart – in my *heart* – that I could no longer control my intake of alcohol and other drugs – that I was powerless over them. The addiction is in my head; my recovery is in my heart.

I use the analogy of the River of Life. In active addiction I was swimming upstream – against the current – in the River of Life trying to control everything, which was exhausting. My recovery is all

about letting go in the River of Life and going with the flow and trusting wherever the River takes me is where I'm supposed to be and I'll be fine.

It's the leap of faith. The paradox of recovery is that by admitting I had no power over my addiction, I actually gained power. When I attended my first 12—step meeting, a Gay Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in San Diego on Saint Valentine's Day 1985, I was being consumed in the fires of fear and addiction and drowning in shame. Initially I attended three AA meetings a day – before work, at lunch and in the evening. I said little – I listened as best I could. I was a mess, to say the least.

The healing – the miracle of recovery – had begun one day at a time. I believe healthy 12-step meetings and other healthy support groups are so transformative for many people because, as we come together in our fear, our anger, our shame, our self-hatred, or brokenness, we are no longer alone in our suffering. The instillation of hope – that dim flame of love of God – starts to grow brighter within us as we gradually move out of the shame and into the sunlight of love and self-acceptance by sharing our truth with those that we trust. Our truth is our gift. Our truth is in our heart. The answer is in our heart. Listen to your heart. The truth does indeed set us free.

I've heard addiction referred to as intimacy disorder – it's all about isolation. Recovery is all about community – being a part of learning to love myself and others in healthy ways. We heal through each other.

God – love – is revealed to me through you. Our suffering brings us together and through this suffering comes compassion which connects me to you and transports one to love – to God – God is love.

In 12-step recovery we talk about a spiritual awakening. In active addiction my world grew smaller and smaller – darker and darker – I felt spiritually dead inside – a place I never to go to again. In recovery my spirit – my heart – has awakened once again to love – to God – to myself – to life – to you. *That* is my spiritual awakening. I believe that as long as I have loving and supportive people walking with me I will continue to survive and ultimately thrive in the fires of my life.

I'd like to leave you with the most transformative reading I've encountered in my recovery. I utilize this pearl of wisdom often in many aspect of my life. It is from the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous and it's titled "On Acceptance."

An acceptance is the answer to all my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation – some fact of my life – unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing, or situation as being *exactly* the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens in God's world by mistake. Until I could accept my addiction, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes.

Member 2

Good morning! Now this is *not* a story I share every day. And as [the previous speaker] said, you share these truths with trusted communities. So, thank you for being such a trusted community. And may I ask you to hold this story, as a trusted community does, in grace and confidentiality. Thank you.

There is a school of thought that we all begin lives with desires that are healthy and appropriate. And that for most of us at some point in our life those desires get out of balance. And that was my experience. I was the kid who wanted to love and be loved. I wanted to do what my parents asked and make them happy. And those are appropriate, healthy desires. And as my family went through greater and greater waves of challenges, those healthy desires for me got out of balance. I was so focused on listening for what every single person in the room needed and wanted and making sure that you each were getting what you needed, I had no idea of what I needed or wanted, let alone asking for it. Heh! Are you kidding me?! Of course, I had hopes and desires, but because I could not speak them, they came out sideways in behaviors that were sometimes difficult and hurtful for others or myself.

Now, part of growing up is that you get skills and tools to deal with those things that are out of balance. And, oh, there were wonderful mentors and friends who helped me find those balances. But in other parts of my life, I did not regain my balance. And certain behaviors became more and more obsessive, until, as an adult I was likely to do things like work 60- or 70-hour weeks with regularity. And they were *not* happy 60- or 70-hour weeks. Or, um, when a dear one fell off the edge of life, in that way that you do not know if their life will ever come back together, spending hour after hour on the phone trying to fix it! Fix it! Fix it! Because if *they* are not okay and the *family* is not okay, then *I cannot be okay*. And there was no ability to accept that some things I could not control.

Now, by this point, I was no longer merely out of balance, I was prostrate. I was on the ground, worshipping that god that some call co-dependency. And ... every time that the ... the world had its harps and drums and all of its other instruments thunder out, I would draw close to those idols.

Oh, and along the way I realized that, man, if I took a glass of wine at night, ooh! That took the edge off. I could dance like a force of nature! I could unplug for a weekend or a week or a month or for months from those things that caused me so much anxiety.

Then I was prostrate before two idols: alcoholism and co-dependence.

Oh, and then there were more horns and drums and more things in the great choir that could thunder and trigger ... my fears and difficulties. And I would reach out again. And what other thing could fill that hole in my soul? What other god could *possibly* deliver me such *safety* and such *comfort*?

Now I realize, standing in this room, it is kind of weird I could not recognize and trust that there *was* another God who could deliver me. I had gone to church my whole life. I had had profound experiences. And yet it is something about the snarled thinking that happens with addiction, that ... that these obsessions of mine were ... were not God's to remove; it was my job. I needed more discipline. I needed to find a better book or a better counselor. And the thought of surrendering my addiction to *that thing*, to some fiery, unpredictable, distant God (because God was pretty distant by that point.) No! No, No, No! That was *not* going to work. That was *not* reliable enough. That was not something that I could reach out and get at the moment that I needed it. That was magical thinking.

That was like some bad Saturday Night Live skit, right? That ... that was not my story. That was the story of some *grizzled guy* that smokes too much. I don't know ... some ... some... That wasn't my story, was it? ... Yeah. It was. Hm! Yeah, by that point, it was my story. I was that embarrassing, drunken woman. I was that very sweet controlling woman.

And finally pain and desperation got strong enough that they yanked open the door to the furnace and said, "Would you please consider walking in here?" The furnace of recovery.

So I ... I asked for help. I had a friend who had spent many years in the flames of recovery. I called her up and I said, "I think I have a problem. Could you help?" So, with her at my side and my compulsions in my heart, we went to enter into the furnace. ... (*How do we do this? ... I can't let this go ...*)

Be thou my vision O God of my heart;  
Nought be all else to me save that thou art. <sup>2</sup>

And we walked into the furnace of a recovery room. And there were other people in the room walking around unbound, telling stories of how their addiction had been lifted from them.

So I decided to stay in the furnace, although it was not comfortable.  
I stayed in the furnace and was given the willingness  
to put the drink aside for one day and then another day.  
And, so I decided to stay in the furnace.  
And I was given tools and practices  
to focus my obsessed brain and to amend my behavior toward others.  
And I decided to stay in the furnace.  
And I was given this partnership with God,  
where the more I brought my obsessions into the fire of willingness,  
the more God's grace flamed around me with serenity and courage.  
And the more I could see that there were others there with me,  
helping me to hold onto these practices  
and keeping each other patient when it was taking God a long time to do  
God's work.

Heh. Some days we would turn to each other and say, "It's kind of hot in here, isn't it?" "Yes, it is. Let's stay in here longer. 'Cause, you know, going back out there is not going to solve the problem."

And I'm here to tell you that through a mystery that is beyond any logical understanding on my part, the desire to drink has been lifted from me, at least for this morning. ... And I'm still very human. I still do lots and lots of bone-headed things. Now I know I can bring them here, into this furnace. And I'll do what I do and God will do what God does. And when I do that, God can move through me more readily to others, and I'm not bonded to myself anymore. I'm bonded to all of you and all of this. O, thank God for this furnace of recovery. Through it I have learned that *Thy presence is my light*.

UCUCC: [M1, M2, CF]

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from [www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2016/6/24/2016](http://www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2016/6/24/2016)

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<sup>2</sup> Hymn "Be Thou My Vision" from ancient Irish text, c. 8<sup>th</sup> century; transl. by Mary E. Byrne, 1905. Versified by Eleanor H. Hull, 1912; Traditional Irish melody "Slane" arr. by David Evans for this text in 1927. (See Hymn 391 in Pilgrim Hymnal, The Pilgrim Press. 1980.)