

In This Issue

In this issue Adam Stout tips his hat to our new president with a look at how the opportunities for public prayer during the inauguration were handled by The Pastor Rick Warren and Rev. Joseph Lowery. Nate Van Denend also looks back to the election season by exploring an almost unnoticed development in the Northwest regarding physician-assisted suicide. To continue the conversation of how Christianity can, should and could relate to political power brokers, Sean Baker provides his reflections on the Christian Churches Together conference which met in Washington D.C. two weeks ago. We finish this issue with two sermons on Daniel 3 which look to a different time and an entirely different political system to gain lasting insights about the relationship between people of faith and people of power.

Briefly Noted

Calvin Seminary hosted a town hall meeting about pastors and health entitled “Who’s Destroying God’s Temple?” The discussion was lead by Dr. Kenneth Dudley. Studies have reported that pastors, like the general population, suffer from lack of physical activity, high blood pressure and heart disease. While health and nutrition are important, event attendees openly wondered if Dr. Dudley’s emphasis on health bordered on a fixation with food, exercise and physical well-being.

Currently, Calvin College and the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship are hosting the annual Calvin Symposium on Worship. Guests from the symposium are from all over the world, including the general secretary for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi. The *Kerux* was privileged to interview Dr. Nyomi to learn about his role and the role of WARC, which represents 75 million Reformed Christians (including us) worldwide. This interview will be published in an upcoming edition.

Human rights activist and current book of the quarter author Ayaan Hirsi Ali gave a lecture at the January Series on January 23. Ali’s book *Infidel* describes her life as a Somali-born Muslim who escapes an arranged marriage and the Muslim cultural factors which continue to degrade women around the world. Her view that relativism is complicit in allowing the abuse of women to continue in certain Muslim communities in the West coupled with her abandonment of faith give her a lone but clear voice in the debate regarding Muslim Western relations and even Muslim Christian relations.

FEATURE

The Purpose-Driven [Inaugural] Prayer

Which prayer will you remember?

by Adam Stout

President Obama asked two pastors to pray at the historic inaugural ceremony on January 20th. The first to pray was Pastor Rick Warren. Warren is the author of *Purpose-Driven Life* (one of the top-selling non-fiction books of all time), pastor of the eighth largest church in the U.S., and director of six nonprofit organizations. The media coverage of Warren’s comments on homosexuality only added to an already electric environment surrounding the inaugural celebration of our first African-American President. (I’m cheering as I type this!). The world was watching as Warren stepped to the microphone, his hair blowing in the wintry air, a sea of over one million people stretching out before him, and countless more watching on TV. The energy was palpable. The fruit was ripe for the picking. But Warren didn’t pick it. Instead, Rev. Joseph Lowery, age 87, picked that ol’ fruit

right off the vine.

When someone ten years from now asks me what Warren said, they'll be lucky if I can recount some vague recollection of how he asked God to remind us we're Americans and said "Jesus" in about 14 different languages at the end. However, they will be happy to know I still remember Lowery's prayer. He asked the Lord, "to help us work for that day when black will not be asked to get in back, when brown can stick around, when yellow will be mellow, when the red man can get ahead, man; and when white will embrace what is right. Let all those who do justice and love mercy say, Amen!"

So, what makes Lowery's prayer, as we're fond of saying around here, "stick?" Here are a few thoughts I had. Firstly, poetry is not dead. It's a great way to get across something profound in a brief, memorable way. Secondly, who you are matters. God uses certain people at certain times. Lowery may not have an imposing physical presence, but he carries the ethos of someone who has lived through tough times. I don't care if you have the popularity of Michael Jordan, the reputation of Billy Graham and the money of Bill Gates. You can't buy that credibility. Someone who has been treated unjustly and now speaks about justice commands our attention before word one. Thirdly, humor is a powerful gift. Humor can easily be misused to distract from or trivialize a serious problem. But it can also be used effectively, even when communicating with our Creator. Lowery held in one hand the long history of injustice toward minorities and the poor that continues to this day, but the other hand offered us the grace to see the humor in humanity. He helped us laugh at ourselves. Rather than being sacrilegious in prayer, I think humor can be seen as an act of humility. And an act that is, I hope, contagious.

ESSAY

Death with Dignity

Coming to a town near you

by **Nate Van Denend**, co-editor in chief

The advance of what John Paul II called "the culture of death" has taken another bold step forward. On election day Washington state became the second state in the union to authorize physician-assisted suicide. This was part of the *Oregon Plus One* strategy advocated by those, some famous and wealthy, who want to extend the legalization of euthanasia to more and more states. Proposition 1000, the aptly named *Death with Dignity Act*, was the title of the ballot measure in Washington that allows terminally ill patients to request in writing with witnesses a lethal overdose of medication.

The ad campaign for the proposition was well-calculated and carefully targeted. It played on the natural human fears of suffering and death. It played on the political sensibilities of those who do not want any religious group to tell them "what to do with my body." And it played on the ignorance of the body politic with regard to the effectiveness of hospice and other long-term medical care facilities in numbing pain and providing palliative care to the dying.

As with abortion, advocates needed to redefine some terms in order to make their proposition seem more acceptable to the general populace. The first of these terms was the term "dignity." The Judeo-Christian ethic states that humans are created in the image of God and thereby are inherent possessors of dignity. Yet, the nature of the ad campaign in Washington was to argue that one's dignity could be taken away by disease or accident. "Who would want to live like that?" the ads would ask. A commercial described a person who needs to be changed and washed as a person who has lost their dignity and thereby lost a reason to live. Yet a Judeo-Christian ethic demands changing and washing of the sick because they have inherent dignity – a dignity that should be respected by both caregivers and the ill person.

But this is just the issue. There is a Judeo-Christian ethic that needs to be addressed for the proposition to go forward. The media company that was hired to pitch this proposition was aware of the need to confront this ethic. Their strategy was to highlight a common cultural sensibility in the Northwest. They ran a series of ads claiming that the voting populace should not let "religious groups" dictate what happens at the end of one's life.

So before “religious groups” even realized what was happening, their credibility in the public square was taken away. The rhetoric became even more insidious as the campaign developed. The ads claimed that families would be helped by taking away the stigma of having a family member who committed suicide. This would not be suicide, it would be a legal, dignified death. The implied message was that religious groups are responsible for this socially mediated suicide stigma. Why should anyone listen to them? It is not really a suicide; it is a dignified death. What was happening here was an attempt to use the legal system to change the moral status of an act from morally reprehensible to morally permissible in the eyes of the populace.

Finally, little attention was paid to the hospice movement, to the research done in the area of palliative care to the dying, or to the testimonies of the dying themselves. We live in a time when dying is less physically painful than it ever has been before. We can treat almost any physical pain that one encounters with a whole warehouse of drugs. There are many stories of cancer patients or seriously ill patients wanting to die in the face of the most painful moments of their illness. But these stories sometimes turn out to be survivor stories. Stories in which someone offered hope rather than a quick death. These are stories where the patient’s desire to die was not granted, and it was out of love, not indifference to the patient.

What is at stake here is a fundamental change in how our culture thinks about life and death, dignity and compassion. My hope is that the church will not be taken off guard when the campaign *Oregon Plus One* becomes *Oregon Plus Two*.

FEATURE

Christian Leaders Urge Obama to Consider the Poor

An ecumenical conference on social justice

by Sean Baker

This past week, Christian Churches Together (CCT), arguably the most diverse ecumenical organization ever to meet in the United States, went to Capitol Hill and urged the Obama Transition Team and over 30 U.S. Senators to prioritize the poor and the vulnerable in their governing, for Christ’s Sake.

About 120 pastors, denominational leaders and Christian political activists met in Baltimore to put flesh on a Christian Statement on Poverty released two years earlier at their last meeting. The 2007 Statement posits, “The gospel and our ethical principles place our service of the poor and vulnerable and our work for justice at the center of Christian life and witness.”

That such a strong statement could arise by consensus from such a diverse group is nearly unprecedented. Among the many denominations were leaders from the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Mennonite Church, the Korean Presbyterian Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the American Baptist Churches, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church and the Christian Reformed Church. With all denominations accounted for, nearly 101 Million Americans were represented at CCT.

While the 2007 Statement spoke clearly, it never ventured far into details. The 2009 meeting’s intention was to see how much more specifically the group could speak so that the church leaders could deliver a message with one voice to the federal government, their churches and the general public. Without differentiating among the three audiences, the process of discerning specifics proved tenuous. The group agreed that any attempt to address poverty in the US would require tactful public policy. Such public policy would have to include strengthening families, strengthening communities, making work work and improving education.

For a whole day, policy experts led small groups and big groups of diverse church leaders. In the groups, participants shared and honed ideas about how the church and how the state can prevent and respond to economic injustice in their communities and in this country. By the evening session, the group had collected a long list of proposals, some as specific as changes to tax code, some as generic as “we affirm the central importance of healthy families to strong communities.” Though the group never formally adopted specific positions much beyond their 2007 statement, the leaders left for the Capitol on the next day equipped with the

fruits of prayerful and stimulating debate, ready to urge the federal government and Christians of all kinds to address poverty and injustice.

Whatever one's political persuasion or feelings about the church's right to speak specifically to the federal government, the diverse meeting stands out as an extraordinary witness to the unity of the church. Worshipping, eating and meeting together at tables with Anglican Bishops, Baptist Preachers and Christian Reformed Ecumenical Officers offers a window into the unity which Christ prays for in John 17. Though the group couldn't speak in policy-level detail with one voice on very much, it could engage in meaningful discussion and debate. In just one afternoon the debate yielded surprising levels of consensus. What's more, pastors from denominations which share an often regrettable history, swapped stories of ministry failures and successes in their local congregations. Students from Catholic, Coptic and Christian Reformed seminaries shared their stories of calling and their hopes for the church and kingdom.

This experience caused me to pause and reflect on our church, the Christian Reformed Church's modus operandi in ecumenism and its relation to the state. It is too often based in fear and ignorance. I have encountered well-meaning Reformed Christians who do not associate with a Disciples of Christ Church down the road because they think they can't trust a cult founded by some radical heretic out in Utah. I have heard well-intentioned Reformed Christians wonder about the Coptic Church's relationship with the Muslim Prophet Mohammed.

Personally, I do not have much confidence that a national ecumenical gathering can direct government to work much better than it works now. I do not trust a seminary-trained preacher to speak authoritatively on matters related to the Federal Tax Code. However, inasmuch as a national ecumenical conference can model for local churches and Christians the possibility of church unity in action, I am exceedingly grateful for organizations like CCT. It is true that the national heads of the ABC, the ECC, the RCA and the RCC may not be able to give President Obama much in the way of substantive policy advice. Yet their unity in concern for the poor and systems of injustice carries its own weight. Though the President and Congress may not see the significance, I hope local congregations who are too threatened or afraid to speak and minister across denominations will stand in wonder at such a bold ecumenical display as took place this past week in Washington. They can then stand in the ranks of communities who have already acted on Jesus' words in John 17. With fear and ignorance abated, communities from Bellflower to Baltimore and from Cadillac to Kalamazoo are coordinating ecumenical efforts already yielding fruit in dismantling unjust systems and providing meaningful relief with those around them.

SERMON

"Who's This God That Will Save You?"

Waiting for God (preached the second week of Advent)

by **Chelsea Harmon**

My friend Annette emigrated from the Netherlands to the U.S. after WWII. Her real name isn't actually Annette. She was born Ankia. But when she started school in America, she was called into the principal's office. He told her that her name was too hard for others to say and they needed to change it if she wanted to fit in. He said, "You'll be Angela from now on." A few days later, "Angela" was playing on the swing set when she realized that she didn't much like her new name, so she went back to the principal's office and asked for a new one. That day, Ankia's identity shifted from a Dutch girl in America, to being Annette, the Dutch-American girl.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego went through a similar identity shift. They were Jews in exile, a foreign people serving in a foreign land and a foreign king. As three of the best and brightest young men, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were taken from their family and trained in the Babylonian court in their way of doing things. They were given new Babylonian names, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, to replace their Hebrew ones. Each new day in the Babylonian court seemed to bring with it new obstacle that kept them from their Jewish identity and way of life.

Nebuchadnezzar, the vain-glory driven king, didn't help matters much either. He built statues that displayed his wealth and power. He made laws concerning his subject's worship practices. He let himself be misled by his astrologers as he pursued supreme status in the kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar didn't care about equality and the right to religious expression. He cared about obedience, and he cared about his own greatness.

So when Nebuchadnezzar built a ninety foot tall statue plated in gold to commemorate his greatness, he threw a party, calling anyone who was anybody together for its dedication. Once they were all assembled in the shadow of the statue, the decree was made public. It was now the law that anytime you heard the band strike up and play a tune, you had to bow down and worship the statue. All people. All nations. All languages. No exceptions. Failure to comply was to seal one's fate: death in the flames of the furnace.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego may have been able to hide some of their religious practices like praying and sacrificing up until the day the statue was raised. They may have been able to thwart some of the king's attempt to take away their Jewish identity. But no more. With this decree, whenever they heard the music, they were to do as everyone else did and worship a golden statue.

But hadn't Israel already learned that lesson? Didn't that lesson cost the Israelites forty years in the wilderness? It was the people who built the golden statue while Moses was on the mountain that were not allowed to enter God's promised land.

And hadn't the prophet Hosea told the people of Israel how angry God was that they were worshipping idols? Didn't Hosea warn God's people of their impending destruction and exile for their wayward faithfulness? It was Hosea who symbolically named his children "Not pitied" and "Not my people" to show how God was feeling about his people.

When the Israelites made the statue of Baal during Moses' absence, they did so because they didn't believe that Moses was coming back. The dark times of their slavery were creeping back into their memories and they wanted something – anything – to follow to safety. In Hosea's time, the Israelites were looking to secure their agricultural well-being; it seemed prudent – almost a matter of survival – to worship the god of fertility along with the god of Israel.

For Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and every other Israelite in exile, worshipping King Nebuchadnezzar's statue was a matter of survival. The king's edict made that clear enough. But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego weren't dumb. They knew their people's sordid past, that their exile was a punishment for Israel's decisions to live in darkness. They also knew that God called them to faithfulness—even if it seemed rather pointless.

So they stood their ground and were dragged before the king. And Nebuchadnezzar, full of himself and his own power, full of evil, mocked them, "I am the man who captured you. I am the man you serve now. I gave you new names. I own you. There's no other god here. Who's this god that will save you from me?"

Who's this god that will save you?

Who's this god that will save you from economic ruin when your 401 k has dried up and you've lost not only your job but your savings?

Who's this god that will save you from physical harm in a world of abuse, violence and war?

Who's this god that will save you from cancer and Alzheimer's, arthritis and miscarriages?

Who's this god that will save you from oppression and segregation, racism and sexism?

Who's this god that will save you?

We live in a time of crisis. Our identities are shaken and tested by the overwhelming darkness. Will we bow down to the statues of our day – will we do what will help us survive? Nebuchadnezzars come in more forms than prideful kings because evil is very present in our world.

At my church, there's a garden commemorating the numerous children who died too young, some never reaching their first birthday. The unemployment rate in the state of Michigan is the highest its been in almost twenty years. Terrorist attacks in the streets of Mumbai, India target people of all nations and religions. These acts of evil in the world mock us and our faith in God. They ask us, "Who's this god that will save you from me?"

Who is the god that will save you when you're bed-ridden and frail? When you are lonely and depressed and wonder if people really do love you? When your kids no longer want to speak to you because of some rift or heartache? Who is the god that will save you when the darkness is all around and seems to smother any hope of light?

As they moved from the shadow of the statue to the shadow of the king, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were in the thick of darkness. They knew that they were walking to their deaths. What they didn't know was what God was going to do. These three Jewish men told the king matter-of-factly that they had no need to defend themselves before evil and darkness in the world. They had to stand for the light. They answered the king's "Who will save you?" with a steady reply: "Our God is able to save us from you, King Nebuchadnezzar. But even if our God doesn't, we're still not going to bow down to your golden statue."

Their defiance sent the mighty king into an uproar. Who were these Jews to disobey him? Nebuchadnezzar wasted no time turning the heat up, seven times hotter than before—the hottest it could get. He rushed to have his guards tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. He threw them into the flames of the furnace. He thought that'd be the end of the fight, that he – and evil – would have the last word.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego just stood up to the most powerful man in the country. The men who threw them into a blaze of flames all died instantly. And yet, here they were in the flames, but not consumed by them. Surrounded by the heat and scorch, but not singed or burned.

And there's this fourth person in the furnace, untying them, walking around with them, calling them by their real names: Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Maybe they've died and this is some sort of ritual cleansing by the angel. Or maybe, just maybe, they are still alive, still living and breathing in the Babylonian court, still standing up instead of bowing down before an idol.

Within those flames of darkness, the life-giving light of the world shone forth. Within that furnace was God with us, Emmanuel. And Emmanuel, with great care and might of his own to outmatch Nebuchadnezzar, untied Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and freed them from the evil that desired to take their lives and identities away. Darkness was all around them. Evil tried to consume them in the flames of the furnace. But God was there too, and in God's light, there is no darkness that can overwhelm.

It's easy for us to see God's hand and miracles in this story. Even the proud king was humbled by the almighty God who stayed and sustained in the flames of the furnace. But what if Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had died? Would we still read this story? Would we tell it to the next generation as an example of God's faithfulness?

In the catacombs of the persecuted church, the story of the fiery furnace is painted all over the walls. It's painted there because it gave Christians hope as they suffered in their own flames of evil and as they watched their loved ones be consumed by it. The story of the three Jewish guys in the flames of the furnace spoke the truth of a good God who is able to save, but doesn't always in this life. The death of the martyrs speak clearly with the same resolve of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to the mocking question of oppression and evil, "Who will save you?" Their deaths resound the truth and pronounce, "Our God is able, but even if he doesn't we will not bow down and give in to the darkness of evil."

Unlike Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, there are many in this world and in history that were not delivered from the flames unscathed. But unlike Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, we know one very important thing:

We know what God's going to do.

We are advent people waiting for Jesus to return and end all suffering once and for all. In these little candle's flames that we lit this morning, we look forward to when Jesus will bring flames of his own, destroying evil and building a new heaven and earth. In the new heaven and earth there's no room for the furnaces of Dachau and Nebuchadnezzar or the mass gravesites of the Rwanda and the forced exile of any of God's people. There's no room for lonely nights in hospital beds, frailty and dying. There's no room for pilfered savings accounts, or communication breakdown among friends and family. In the new heaven and new earth, there's no room for bread lines and food stamps, hunger and poverty. There's no room for darkness and evil.

There's no room for darkness and evil because in Emmanuel, God with us, the world has seen a great light. The Emmanuel who was in the flames of the furnace so long ago, came to this earth once before and gave us a glimpse of what's to come—what we're waiting for this advent season. The Emmanuel who untied Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the bonds of the evil king, freed us from sin and suffering in this world by his death on the cross. But he also fed the hungry and cured the sick. He healed the broken and he loved deeply. He preached good news and said, "I will save you completely. I will give you eternal life." For truly no other God can save in this way.

Waiting in advent is waiting for eternity to begin. Waiting in advent is to begin to live into the reality of God "breaking in" to the darkness of this world. It's doing our part, proclaiming God's truths and doing God's work by the power of the Holy Spirit. Like Jesus, it's feeding the hungry and loving deeply. Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, we stand for light as we follow Christ's model.

So when suffering and evil and the world mocks you, and asks, "Who's this god who will save you from me?" wait for the advent of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and proclaim with the resolve of Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and the martyrs of all times and places, that our God is able to save us from the darkness of evil. Now and for all eternity. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

SERMON

These Are Hard Times

A sermon on Daniel 3

by **Nate Van Denend**, co-editor in chief

These are hard times. My friend, who works at a local manufacturing company, had to walk three of his workers down the hall. "Get your things together," he told them. "We don't have work for you anymore."

A man in Gaza watched from his home as his wife and his two daughters lifted white flags above their heads and stood by the door during one of the humanitarian breaks, waiting to catch the attention of the Israeli soldiers nearby. The soldiers lifted their rifles and fired. Now this man's wife is wounded, one of his daughters is wounded, the other daughter is dead. What will keep this man from hate?

Meanwhile, Hamas is rounding up and harassing residents whom they think cooperated with the Israelis. One more barrier in a nearly impossible road to peace.

Back at home, on inauguration day, Rev. Joseph Lowery prayed in his benediction, "And while we have sown the seeds of greed – the wind of greed and corruption, and even as we reap the whirlwind of social and economic disruption, we seek forgiveness..." The lure of quick riches has ensnared our economy and brought it almost to a halt.

Everyone seems to be waiting ... watching and waiting. Is anyone in control here?

A note in a Boston-area restaurant may capture the mood of our times better than any other: “Due to budget cuts, the light at the end of the tunnel is being turned off.”

It seemed to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego that the light at the end of the tunnel had indeed been turned off. They were plucked from their Jerusalem homes and taken into exile in Babylon. Jerusalem sacked. The Temple looted. Parents separated from children. Hopes and dreams dashed. Blood flowed in the streets. The words of that wild-eyed Jeremiah had come true. His thunder echoing in the ears of the exiles, “Therefore the LORD Almighty says this, ‘Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations.’”

King Nebuchadnezzar, my servant is a murderous, unstable man and prone to fits of rage. Filled with pride, he equates himself to God. He sets up a golden image. He demands that all his subjugated peoples bow down before the image. Like an adolescent boy flexing his newly formed muscles in front of a mirror, King Nebuchadnezzar wants to show the world and himself just how big and strong he is. He tells his people, “As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.”

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego hear these words with trepidation. They stay up late into the night. They feel like dead men, but they haven’t died. They have survived the exile from Jerusalem; but they know they cannot survive an exile from their faith. Late into the night while the smoke from the furnace drifts into their nostrils, they talk and pray together. They know that night that they cannot bow down. They hear that night the words of the LORD saying, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” They see with a God-given clarity the gravity of their situation.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego must face the lie of their time. King Nebuchadnezzar is no God, and his image is nothing more than a lump of gold.

The day comes and the trumpet blasts. Nebuchadnezzar strolls out to see all the people bowing down in front of his image. Clearly everyone is as impressed with Nebuchadnezzar as he is of himself. Everyone, that is, except the Israelite delegation. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are standing there with their backs to the image, defying the king’s orders. He becomes furious with rage. “Get over here!” he screams. “Do you not know the rules? Let me make this really simple: Music plays, you bow down, very good. Music plays, you do not bow down, I throw you into the fiery furnace. And then what god will be able to save you from my hand? Look at me Shadrach, Look at me Meshach, Look at me Abednego! I am godder than god. I am going to out god your God. I am going to stick you in a place where your God cannot touch you!”

King Nebuchadnezzar has fallen for the oldest temptation in the book. A long time ago a serpent said to a woman, “You will be like God.” Pride. King Nebuchadnezzar’s coveting of the worship of Shadrach, King Nebuchadnezzar’s rage against Meshach, King Nebuchadnezzar’s murderous intent toward Abednego – they all come from this: What god will be able to rescue you from my hand? I am more of a god than your God. I am godder than God! Pride. A pride that could destroy even Nebuchadnezzar himself.

It is almost humorous in hindsight, once you know the outcome of the story. Thousands of people prostrate on the field of Dura. All of them obeying the king’s command. And here is the king, thrown into a rage over the three who do not. Why does he care? If Nebuchadnezzar was a god and all, couldn’t he tolerate a little dissent from the Israelite delegation? Wouldn’t Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego figure out his godness soon enough?

No. Think about it. In order for a lie to be persuasive everyone has to believe it. Think of the childhood story of the emperor’s new clothes. As long as no one confessed to the truth, he was able to march around with glorious clothes that even he couldn’t see. He has lied to himself that he is a god and now he needs everyone

to believe it too. Truth doesn't work that way. Truth stays true even when people don't believe it. People committed to the truth can handle a little dissent because the truth doesn't depend on everyone's agreeing to it. Lies cannot handle dissent; they depend on everyone's agreement.

And now Nebuchadnezzar's lie is put to the test. He thinks he can put Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in a place where no god – I mean no god at all – can touch them – the fiery furnace. This is the one thing that will restore his pride. He must suppress those who testify to the truth.

Pride drives the coveting, pride drives the rage and now pride drives the murder.

And it seems that God is letting this happen unchecked. Jeremiah called King Nebuchadnezzar "my servant," but Nebuchadnezzar is about ready to demonstrate to all the people that the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is actually Nebuchadnezzar's servant.

We don't have to look too far to see people who think that God is actually their servant and not the other way around. There are plenty of dictators, rulers and authorities who share this pride of Nebuchadnezzar and demonstrate it by attacking Christians. Christians are persecuted in Afghanistan, China, India, Pakistan, Burma, Eritrea and North Korea, just to name a few of the many, many places where Christians are not free to practice their religion. In many parts of the world Christians are faced with the same stark choice that faced Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Deny one's faith and live or stand as a servant of the one true God in the face of pride and lies, knowing full well that such people will stop at nothing even murder, to suppress the truth.

But we don't have to look too far to see this happen on a much smaller scale. A friend of mine is teaching a class. He asked his students why more citizens did not protest in Nazi-occupied Europe. No one seemed to know the answer. Then he asked, "How many of you are opposed to abortion on demand? How many of you feel like you cannot speak your views on this issue? How many of you find it difficult to stand up for your view in a room of pro-choice people? I think many of us have felt this pressure."

I heard a story from a man who went to a party in Hollywood. Hundreds of the Hollywood elite were there. A rumor began to circulate in the crowd that this man was a preacher. The man was faced with questions almost as soon as he walked in. "So you really believe that some guy who died 2000 years ago actually has something to say to us today?" "You really believe that this guy rose from the dead?" "Really?"

To stand up for convictions can be disorienting. Challenging. Frightening. We feel these emotions even when the threat is only imagined and the penalties involved are mere social exclusion. How much greater the challenge? How much greater the fear? How much greater the disorientation when life – your own life, my own life – is on the line for the truth in the face of the lie?

Where do we turn for the strength to face these fears? Where do we turn for the courage to stand up for our convictions? Where do we find solid ground to stand and truth to hold onto? Where do we turn for hope and truth in a world of disorientation and lies?

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have an answer. They think to themselves that frightful night before the trumpet blast, "Maybe there is hope the words of the wild-eyed prophet Jeremiah. Maybe this king is a servant, subservient even to the LORD." They remember their Hebrew names. Shadrach is Hananiah which means "the Lord is gracious." Meshach is Mishael, "Who is what God is?" And Abednego is Azariah, "the Lord has helped." They remember the LORD and his promises. They trust in the LORD. They know that the time has come for them to prove their faithfulness. They know the command of the king and feel the cunning of the evil one. Surely, when the King said those frightful words "What god can save you from my hand?" they remembered this same king had destroyed Jerusalem. They remembered that this same king had taken all the vessels from the temple and even burned it to the ground. Your city is plundered and the temple of your God is burned down. What God can save you from my hand?

But they stand defiant before the king because the LORD gives them strength. We do not need to defend ourselves in this matter. The Aramaic literally is we do not "need to return a word to you." Here they stand with

Jesus Christ himself who also did not need to return a word to his accusers. His actions of faithfulness to God and defiance of false gods and false religion needs no defense. It needs no return word. The action is the point. The standing there in the truth is the point.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego do explain their position, however. If you throw us in our God will save us. Even if he does not we will not serve the image you have set up. Clear, crisp and clean. God has given these men wisdom and insight. Now is not the time to condemn the King's pride. Now is not the time to invoke the second commandment. Now is not the time to explain all the reasons. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego make it really simple. No matter what you do King Nebuchadnezzar, you will lose. Even if we die, you still lose. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have accepted their fate. They testify that their God is not bound to temples or to cities but is over all nations and people. And now they testify that their God is also over life and death. They believe that somehow even if God does not save them, even that fact would not separate them from their faith in God. What surrender to God! What trust in God's sovereignty! This is the ultimate, Not my will, but thine be done!

Not unexpectedly, this response invokes a flood of rage. Literally in the Aramaic, the text says that he was filled with rage and the appearance of his face was altered. His face is purple with rage! He orders the furnace heated up seven times and throws Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into the fire.

But instead of burning up his resistance, Nebuchadnezzar ends up smoking God out. "Wasn't it three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" Nebuchadnezzar excitedly says to his ministers. "Yes," they say in response. "But, I see four men, untied and walking around in the midst of the fire! No harm has come to them! And the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

This is what happens when the faithful are thrown in to the fire. God shows up. God keeps his promises. God does not abandon to the grave. God does not let the faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be in vain.

But who notices the one "who looks like a son of the gods" in the fire? Perhaps, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego notice him. But they may not. I gotta tell you, church, sometimes when people are walking around in the fire they can't see what God is doing. Sometimes when faithful people are thrown into the fire, God's working is hidden from them. Maybe Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego don't see. Maybe the smoke and the heat and the surprise of it all blind them to God's presence. But that does not mean that God is not working. That does not mean that God will not reveal himself to those he has come to save.

In the diaries of Mother Theresa she confesses that most of the time she was not able to experience God for herself. But everyone else saw God working there in Calcutta. Everyone else saw the hands of Jesus touch the untouchables, kiss the unkissables and wash the unwashables. And here everyone else saw God show up. Do not be discouraged in your sufferings and in your fires. God uses the measure of faithfulness he has given you for his glory. You can count on that.

But who sees? Nebuchadnezzar sees. King Nebuchadnezzar, my servant, sees His Master. The one who challenged God sees God. The one who thought he was godder than God, just got out – godded by God. The one who thought no God could save Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is forced to call God "the most High God." "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the most high God, come out! Come here!" The prideful Nebuchadnezzar is humbled in front of all his people. And God continues to humble his servant Nebuchadnezzar. We find at the end of Chapter 4 the final words of King Nebuchadnezzar, "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the king of heaven, for all his deeds are right and his ways are just and he is able to humble the prideful."

But what about those who walk in pride in our world today? It's a nice story, preacher man, but we got prideful people all around us. They are being impeached in Illinois, prosecuted for fraud in New York, breeding cycles of hatred and violence in thousands of dark corners of the world. What is God doing about them? And what's God doing about me? I've got my own pride to reckon with, and I haven't really been that faithful either over the years. In fact, there have been times when I have given in to fear and intimidation and not stood up for the

truth. There have been times when my own pride led me to believe that God is my servant rather than the other way around.

Let me tell you what God is doing about them, and let me tell you what God is doing about us. A few generations after Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, a teenage girl lived under the rule of a foreign king who also claimed to be a god. And quietly, in this dark corner of the world, she spoke the words of faith that resound the world over. Mary said to the angel, "May it be to me as you have said." With these words of faith, God himself comes down to heal the pride in this world. God shows us what it really means to be like God. It means to humble oneself. Paul writes in Philippians, "Jesus Christ, being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but he emptied himself, taking the very nature of a slave, being made in human likeness.... He humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place." While we try to build ourselves up and inflate our egos and claim to be like God, God comes down and becomes one of us. The way to exaltation is through self-emptying. The way to be like God is to be humble.

We don't take away the pride in this world. God does. We don't take away the sins of this world. God does. We can't get rid of our own pride. God does. On our own we lack courage to stand for the truth, but God gives us strength. We sometimes can't help our faithlessness, but God can. We look around at our embattled and broken world and we feel helpless. But God is our ever present help in times of trouble. We look at irreconcilable differences on grand intergenerational scales. Who can bring peace to such a situation?

Let me put it this way, when God steps into the fire of trouble, God doesn't take sides. He rescues both King Nebuchadnezzar, my servant, and Shadrach, my servant. Prosecutor and perpetrator. Martyr and murderer. Victim and victimizer. Offender and offended. Criminal and criminalized. Jew and Jesus lover. Sinner and sinner.

That is who God comes to save when he steps into the fire. Both are humbled by God's appearance, both are rescued, both can be redeemed through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And when God steps in to our current crises we can expect the same. Dr. Victor Makari, an Egyptian and the Middle Eastern liaison for the Presbyterian Church USA spoke at the January series about the 2000 year witness of Christians in the Middle East. When a baby is baptized in Lebanon, he said, is a 2000 year old baby! Then he continued, Christians inspire hope... In Gaza a Christian hospital offers help to the wounded and the sick. In Egypt a YMCA offers job training to a mostly Moslem lower class. On a formal level, Christians organize places for Moslem Christian and even Jewish dialogue, all in the midst of the fighting.

You see God does not take sides. God knows that the evil in Nebuchadnezzar is the same evil that lurks in every heart. And God sent his Son Jesus to heal that evil, to bring about reconciliation, to bring about peace. Jesus appears to save sinners on both sides of the furnace. Through dying and rising Jesus Christ proves that God's sovereignty extends over all situations, economic, political – even life and death. This is the God of heaven. This is the God who saves us. Thanks be to God.