

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Not Business as Usual, No. 4*

Even If

May 17, 2020 (video)

Daniel 3:1-18

Hello, church family in and around Wilmore – and those of you who are worshipping with us at a distance.

One of the few benefits of this online stuff, other than the fact that we can worship in our pajamas if we want, is that we're able to welcome many more people from even far away into our corporate worship, so if that's you, we're glad you're with us.

You all should know that we are discussing just when and how to re-gather in our sanctuary for worship, but as we do, you should also know that we are intending to continue our online presence for as long as needed, either through pre-recorded services like these or through live-streaming or recording and then broadcasting our sanctuary services, once they resume. And of course, we're doing this because we realize that this season of life is certainly not-business-as-usual.

In fact, it's *anything but* business as usual.

This mask is also something that's not business as usual, and no, I'm not going to wear it for the whole message – I know you're wondering that. [Take off mask.]

Some are wishing I would because it breaks up the monotony of my face, and I happen to have a lot of face to break up.

This mask, actually, is one from a package of masks that we've had at home. We were given them as a joke – as part of a diaper changing kit that we were given when Ben, our oldest, was born, and this is the first time we've actually used them. For eighteen and a half years this box has been in our barn, only to be brought out now – for this not-business-as-usual day in which we live.

I guess sometimes God gives us just what we need – long before we actually need it, doesn't He? We don't recognize it at the time. At the time, we may wonder, "What on earth is that about?"

But over time, eventually we see, "Ah, now I see what God was doing, how God was preparing me, even years and years ago, for this event today that I could have never foreseen."

That's one of the heartening and reassuring – and honestly sometimes frustrating – parts of the way our God works with us.

We've invested the last few Sundays looking at some of the not-business-as-usual events in the Bible and how God had prepared people like Moses and Mary, Jesus' mother, and even the nation of Israel itself to handle times in their lives that were anything but business as usual.

Today, I'd like us to consider another of those instances – this one taking place after both Israel and Judah had been

overtaken, and their people were living in exile in Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar, the greatest and longest-enduring of the Chaldean kings.

It was the custom of the Chaldeans to practice statecraft by bringing the best and the brightest of the young of the nations they conquered into their own governmental service, so as to assimilate them into Babylonian culture. That is how people like Daniel and Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah – the latter three we know better by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – that's how they got into Babylonian governmental service.

And they were apparently bright young men, trustworthy and attentive, because they were, over time, appointed to quite substantial positions – overseers or administrators of the province of Babylon.

Now Daniel, because he was able to correctly interpret the king's dreams, you remember, was appointed as "chief prefect," which meant he oversaw the Babylonian magicians – the so-called "wise men" of the King's court.

Which is kind of ironic when you think about it – Daniel, the faithful Jew, was placed in charge of people who depended on other gods for their insight.

Someone else in a situation like this was Joseph, who was placed second in command of all of Egypt, centuries before this.

So, you see, who says you can't be faithful to God and be in government? Even in high places of government? It can be done.

It's not common – not now, and it wasn't then. We know that because the other administrators – *natives* of Babylon – didn't *at all* like the fact that these *foreigners* held these important positions. We learn that because of their attitudes.

So, it was possible, but neither common nor easy, to be a believer in God and hold these high positions that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did. Theirs was a difficult situation in this way.

But something happened that made their lives even more difficult.

You see, Nebuchadnezzar was a successful king, and as often happens with successful people, the success seemed to go to Nebuchadnezzar's head – in a big, big way. So much so, in fact, that he began to think of himself as God.

Have you ever tried to work with someone who thought they were a god?

Some of you are thinking, "No, but I'm married to someone like that."

Seriously, it's really hard to work *with*, and especially *for*, someone who thinks they can do no wrong — that every decision they make is right, that they should not even be challenged or disagreed with."

That's really hard.

But you know, that situation is made even harder if they decide to try to make you worship them.

I seriously doubt that any of us have experienced that, but that's what happened with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

They already lived and worked in an environment that was hostile to their God. They were already not allowed to do this or that or the other. They had to watch what they said, what they assumed. There were many lines they had to toe, because they were, spiritually speaking, part of a tiny minority in their culture.

Yet that did not keep them from living their lives. It did not keep them from doing excellent work, succeeding in their profession, and even being faithful to God. Up to this point, they were able to keep all of life moving forward, in a way that pleased everyone, or at least everyone who mattered.

To this point, all was well.

But then there came a line that they could not cross, as so often happens with followers of God.

People seem to draw that line in different places, and in some ways, that's the history of denominationalism in our world.

People also draw lines, very appropriately so at times, due to conviction. Those are the lines in their lives that the Lord asks them to draw for themselves.

But here in Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's lives we see one line that affects every follower of God, because it has to do with the core — the central issue of every human person. Sooner or later, we all have to answer the question, "Who, really, is God of my life?" What or who calls the shots? Who makes the final decisions?

Sooner or later, we all confront that question — that point of decision, and this is how that came about for these three young men. We read about it in Daniel, Chapter 3, beginning in verse 1:

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. ² He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. ³ So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

⁴ Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: ⁵ As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

⁷ Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸ At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. ⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "May the king live forever! ¹⁰ Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹ and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. ¹² But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon — Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego — who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."

¹³ Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, ¹⁴ and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ¹⁵ Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "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."

There are, of course, many principles that we could pull out of this not-business-as-usual event.

I mean, there is just the ridiculousness of the event itself.

Of course, the account is told from a Jewish perspective, but what we're supposed to understand about this is that here is a very prominent political leader — a world leader — gathering a whole array of very important people together and telling them to do something that is very stupid.

That's why the guest list is repeated twice in the account, and why the list of instruments is repeated four times, and why Nebuchadnezzar's name is spoken seven times. It's all designed to drive home the vanity and self-importance and ridiculousness of what was happening.

This was an eyebrow-raising, not-business-as-usual event to everyone there — not just to the three Hebrews, you see.

But to them, it was transformational — and what we see here is that God actually used this not-business-as-usual event to give opportunity for another not-business-as-usual event to occur.

The King demands, "Admit that I am God."

And you notice, the three Hebrews respond with respect and lucidity, but also with conviction, "Oh King, you are King, but we simply cannot do as you ask."

"We can live in this pagan atmosphere. We can do our jobs with excellence. We can tolerate an ungodly environment. We can work for an ego-maniac. We can

handle the, 'When in Rome, or in this case, Babylon, do as the Babylonians do' to a point. But we cannot say that someone is God whom we know is not God. That is the line we cannot cross. That is the bridge too far."

Just parenthetically here, I wonder where our line would fall in reference to that of these three guys? Where do we draw our line of protest? Is it to the left or the right of that of these guys? Would we consider the things they did, the lives they lived, the way they went about their existence too liberal or too conservative if they were alive today?

I think that's worth thinking about.

All I know for sure is this: either God must have been pleased with them, or else He wanted to make a point to Nebuchadnezzar or those Babylonian leaders or someone, because, of course, you know what God did—you know what happened.

The unwillingness of those three men to call a non-god God made the king so furious that he threw them into a furnace, but not before he had it super-heated.

Ego is a powerful thing, you know? I mean, no one could survive being burnt alive, even in the furnace at its normal temperature. But the King had to show them that He was all-powerful. The heating of the furnace seven times its normal temperature is no accident.

And yet the one true God—the God of the Hebrews—proved that Nebuchadnezzar, even at seven times his normal strength, wasn't the truly all-powerful one. Even a furnace seven times hotter than normal was no big thing to the one, true God.

You don't need style when you have substance, you see. Understanding *that* is really what separates the men from the boys, or the women from the girls—if that expression carries over, and I'm not sure that it really does, but you know what I mean.

When you really are powerful, you don't have to prove it.

And when you know your God really is all powerful, you don't have to be in constant strife with this and that and the other. When you know your God is the truly all-powerful one, you can live in utter confidence in Him.

And that's what, it seems to me, God really appreciated about those three young men. God didn't have to prove Himself to them.

They already knew their God was powerful. He'd proven that to them years and years before this, so they had that fact—that conviction—firmly in their minds and hearts long before this moment.

You might say that long before they really needed to know it, they knew it, which is what allowed them to respond as they did there in verse 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. 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."

Can you hear the calm in that response, even the respect that's due the King—lousy and arrogant as He was?

This was no crisis of conscience to them, although I'm sure they'd have rather not have had to endure it.

They lived every day presuming that, very likely one day, they'd face that un-crossable line. And they did. And they responded with conviction, but also with humility and respect and a quiet confidence, not that God would save their lives, necessarily, but that He would most certainly deliver them.

And there is a difference, you see, between life-saving and delivering.

In this case, they went together.

In some cases, they don't. These young men recognized that, and they did the only thing they could in this case. And in so doing, they experienced one of the greatest, most miraculous, most not-business-as-usual events of the Bible.

We tell our children about this, just as I'm sure Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego told their children and grandchildren about it—about this not-business-as-usual event that profoundly affected everyone there, including the king who thought he was God, you see?

And the one true God was exalted in it all.

You see—as they did, we live our lives in the contexts we're given. We engage our culture—toward its improvement, certainly. We live as a witness to our culture, but not every disagreement with it needs to be a fight. We work. We serve. We love our families. We enjoy friends. We live in community. We are good citizens. We're builders and team players.

But remember, we do have lines as they did—God-given ones. But we have this one in particular: we know there is, and we bow down to, only one God.

We respect the King, but we do not worship Him.

We obey the law, but where the law of man and the law of God collide, we choose the law of God.

And we do all this in full confidence and peace, recognizing that sometimes, in doing so, God saves life.

And sometimes He does not.

Sometimes God does miracles—and sometimes He doesn't.

But even if He does not save life—and even if He does not do the miraculous—God always delivers.

We settle that in our hearts now, so that we know it, and can depend on it, when the day of the un-crossable line comes for us.

Prayer:

Lord, in the face of Nebuchadnezzar's not-business-as-usual demand, you turned around and provided an even bigger not-business-as-usual response, which was certainly good for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. But even more, it brought you great, great glory.

Father, would you reveal to us, in these not-business-as-usual days, the places where we are simply good citizens and also reveal the un-crossable lines, so that the positions we take and the decisions we make might bring you, and only you, the glory you deserve. Give us wisdom beyond our own, and the confidence to follow you past the miracles and even past life and death and on to deliverance.

We thank you for your faithfulness to us. Help us to be calmly, and yet with conviction, faithful to you in our days.

Amen.

Closing Hymn: *O God Our Help in Ages Past*

Benediction:

Just as God was the help that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego needed in ages past, so will He be our help today and our hope in days to come – to serve, to work, to engage, to enjoy – to live, as Jesus – in favor with God and all the people – but also, if need be, to die, not for our own sake, but for God’s – the one and only God.

The God who saves, but even if He does not, the God who delivers.

The Lord bless and keep you.