

“God’s Sustaining Power”

Daniel 3:8-30 & Matthew 21:1-11

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Before I went to seminary most of what I knew about the bible I learned from a few Sunday School classes I attended between the ages of 8 & 15. Which means I knew Jonah, Moses, Noah and some fishing stories from the NT. Essentially I knew the stories that little kids could act out. I know the story of S, M & A because we acted it out in SS. Several years later there was a children’s musical about it called “*It’s cool in the furnace!*” Apparently someone read that story in Daniel and thought “this is a musical waiting to happen!”

But when you’re a kid it’s fun to pretend to be taken captive, thrown into a great fire only to be rescued by God and then laugh at the guards and sing “nah, nah, nah”.

As an adult, however, there is limited joy in the fact that these Jews, S, M & A, were not actually burned by the flames. Because there was another time, not that long ago when millions of Jews were not given the luxury of choosing the flames or not, they and many non Jews were thrown into fiery furnaces to their deaths. Faithful or not.

I don’t believe the power of the story of S/M/A is solely based on their rescue and the fact that they weren’t burned in the fire. It is less about making brave choices. I believe the power of the story is remembering that they weren’t alone in the fire- that God was with them- in the midst of the heat God’s love surrounded them. Ann Gibbs The power of the story is what God can do.

Today is Palm Sunday, a perfect day for children in church, pretty suits and dresses, shouts of Hosanna, getting to carry plants into the church and wave them around. We call it Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It’s about victory, and overthrowing Rome and singing “nah, nah, na” to the powers who think they can beat us. But I imagine Jesus felt a bit like S/M/A did.... I know I’m going to make it through this because of who God is but it’s getting real hot right now. Remember Jesus could see Golgotha from atop that donkey.

Things heat up when God’s people shout and sing the message of Gospel freedom “to imperial authority”. It evokes hostility from all authority types. It makes the status quo ancy and angry. People get their shackles up and then somebody ends up wearing those shackles. The grip gets tighter, the flames get hotter and the stakes get higher. Living the life of freedom offered by Christ is alternative... and the faithful are ultimately vindicated and not defeated. But on the way to the cross vindication and victory seem far far away.

In our rhetoric charged atmosphere today it can be easy to miss the toll that hate takes on segments of our population. For example, the University of Oslo recently revealed some research on the damage Islamophobia has on children.

The research found that Islamophobia negatively affects the mental health of Muslims worldwide *ranging from increased feelings of anxiety to depression. What's more, the study shows one does not even need to actually face discrimination; just the knowledge society fears and shuns those who look like you affects psychological health.* [Huffpost article](#) That means it's not just Muslims who can suffer from this, but Sikhs, Hindus and even atheists who look like Muslims in someone else's opinion. Gunita Kaur, a young Sikh woman said to one of the researchers:

*I was nine years old when I became painfully aware of the fact that Sikhs living in the United States are at heightened risk of experiencing brutality. Living in New Jersey at the time, my family visited Ground Zero shortly after 9/11 to see the site and pay our respects to those who lost their lives. I vividly remember the smell of the ashes, the omnipresent dust and debris, the solemn, grim, looks on everyone's faces — but most vividly I remember dirty looks directed at my dad. My hero. My friend. A person who adds enormous value to the world and who did not deserve the targeted stares of negativity and suspicion aimed at his turban.*

*I remember feeling several different emotions: I was confused - confused as to why people felt entitled to judge someone they didn't know. I was angry - angry because something as seemingly harmless as a dirty look in fact stood for disgust, discrimination, and unfounded hatred. I was sad - sad because even at such a young age I understood that intolerance and ignorance are difficult problems to overcome.*

Pledging our devotion to God is a lot more complicated than looking a king in the face and saying "I will not worship you" because that "powerful king" doesn't always have a face or a name. What we need to denounce is often just a dirty look, a comment on social media, a microaggression, or a crowd's taunts.

The challenge of faithfulness comes to us at various times too. It comes in the middle of the night, in the credit card bill and the choices we make in relationships. It comes to us through artists and books and ballots and offensive jokes and ministry team cards. Pondering the journey of Jesus towards the city, his conflict with the empire and his relentless acts of compassion and love – we can see that God does not send what is conventional and predictable to fight oppressive powers. God sends what does not make sense and what some may never believe.

The choices of faith that we all are asked to make are hopefully less terrifying than that of S/M/A but also far more ambiguous. The choices that some of you have been asked to make, some of the challenges you've been given are complicated and still unresolved.

Lives of faithfulness will provide sustenance and community but it can also lead to an overheated furnace of pain. That is why God walks with us - we are never without access to a power greater than any other. Something about Jesus' words and his acts of love, compassion and urgency led people to shout "Hosanna, save us!" with such confidence that the oppressive Roman empire faded if only for a day. To shout *Hosanna* is to praise God and hope for something from that God too.

What are the ways we can lay claim to the same power that the disciples saw and responded to? How can we lay down our tributes of honor and proclaim the truer powers? How does the way you move through the world demonstrate what you have faith in?

Speaking truth to power, laying down images of love in the galleries of hate, challenging what is normal... for this we need strength that can only come from the one who laid the earth's foundations, who commands the morning and empties the tomb. Fastening ourselves to this reality comes at a risk... Because as much as we might fight against the imperialism too many of us have benefitted from it as well. To shout protests against the powers that be is also to identify the ways we have participated in the power structure. To put it another way... We lay down our palms one day and shout "free Barrabas" the next.

We need God's sustaining power because we cannot sustain ourselves, at times we cannot even trust ourselves. We will step out in faith and then retreat another day. But if there were no risk to this we wouldn't need stories about fiery pits, courageous midwives, and commanders with skin diseases. We wouldn't need a God who can conquer evil if evil were not a very real threat in the first place.

In some gospels it says the people threw down the coats off their backs in respect for a king. In others it says they waved palm branches, also a symbol of honor. In either case I like to think at least some of the people, probably the youngest ones, picked up some of those trampled branches, those trampled coats and took them home. Placed the palms in a place of remembrance... Like the metaphorical refrigerator door, or wore the coat as a cloak of bravery and confidence. Christ passed over this so now I can walk through anything.

This week we are facing death. We know how this holy week ends. It starts with hosannas and confidence but in a few days we will hear the story of Christ's love and our betrayal. And then one day later, on Good Friday, we will remember his death.

There will be resistance to our rootedness in God's story. There will be push back to speaking the truth and there will be risks to living lives based on abundance, grace and life instead of scarcity, fear and death. People will say you are a fool, too young and immature, uneducated, biased, even too old or out of touch .... There will be accusations about your reputation, questions about your abilities. Some of us will be threatened with discrimination and isolation. None of the people from the scripture stories today walked away unscathed.

Shad, Mes and A might have come out of that fire unsigned but I bet their blood pressure was never the same. Peter went on from that parade to deny Jesus three times. So Jesus met him on the beach to forgive him and compel him forward so he could do the work God needed him to do.

We can do none of this without God. Thank God we're not doing this ourselves.