

July 14, 2024

Daniel 3:16-28

Let's just get this out of the way. How many of you know what "hallowed" means? It's an older word that we don't really use anymore except around October: "Halloween." "Halloween" is a mix of the two words "Hallow" and "Evening," or "eve" for short. November 1st is traditionally when Christians celebrate "All Saints' Day" and thank God for the things he's done for all the saints, his holy people, that have come before us. But in early English, the word used wasn't "Saint," but "hallow"- as in "All Hallows Eve," which turned into "Halloween." So a "hallow" in archaic English is a saint, a holy one, and when it's used as a verb, it means to "make something holy- set apart, special." So, when we say, "Hallowed be your name," we are telling God that we want his name to be above all names, to be holy and honored. *Question: "Isn't it already?"* He's in Heaven being praised by millions of angels and saints in glory, I don't think he has a reputation problem. True, but we want all people to know how holy and gracious and special God is. You see, in a very real way, we bear God's name. When we were baptized, we were baptized into the name of God- the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We belong to him. We are associated with him. We bear his name- even though we are sinful, broken people, Jesus willingly was killed in our place so that his enemies could be his friends, brothers and sisters in God's family. That's who we are- like we talked about last week- we are sons and daughters of the King: that's who we are. Therefore, even though we aren't saved because of our good works, our goodness, our devotion to God, our moral performance, even though the way we live our lives doesn't contribute anything to Jesus' love for us, the way we live our lives matters. We are God's representatives. Whether you like it or not, you represent God- both your words and actions- and the way people are going to think about God, his reputation, his name, is affected by the conduct of his people. Today, we are going to see one of the greatest examples of God's people keeping his name by their words and actions, and we are see what we can take from Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

1. Keeping God's Name Holy in Babylon. In about 605 BC, the city of Jerusalem was attacked and conquered by the Babylonian Empire, and the Babylonians took the best and brightest Jewish young people to "Babylonize" them- to make them speak, act, and think like Babylonians so they could serve king Nebuchadnezzar as his scholars, advisors, and interpreters of dreams. Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were taken and were found to be extremely gifted and advanced in Nebuchadnezzar's service faster than everyone else. They were brilliant- think the cabinet for the President of the United States- they have to be smart, wise, and able to deal with powerful people- and Nebuchadnezzar wasn't simply a king. He was an emperor, one of the most powerful men to ever live- and he liked these 4 young Jewish men. When they got to Babylon, the four Jewish young men were given Babylonian names- Daniel was Belshazzar, and the other three were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. King Nebuchadnezzar, their boss who at any moment can snap his fingers and make them his top rulers or fertilizer for his fields, decides it's time to have a show of unity in Babylon: Babylon has become a melting pot filled with all kinds of cultures and worldviews, and there needs to be a big ceremony where all Babylonians, regardless of their differences, are Babylonian first. So he constructed this giant golden statue, which may or may not have looked strikingly similar to him, possibly one of the

Babylonian gods like Bel or Marduk, and there was going to be a worship service for the nation and the king. The music would play and all people would have to bow down to the statue and pledge their undying allegiance to Babylon. This may have been an ego trip for Nebuchadnezzar, or it could have been a way of trying to appease the gods so that they send rain and health on the nation. Regardless, anyone who didn't do this could not be tolerated. You can't have a healthy empire that's divided. Sure, people can have their own personal gods, but they must all be united. Any dissenters would have to die, and in such a painful way that everyone would fall into line.

Enter Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. While the worship service is happening, Nebuchadnezzar gets a report from some of his advisors saying that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, some of his most loyal, gifted, successful, promising young advisors weren't doing what they were supposed to. "No, that can't be right! There must be a misunderstanding, of course these advisors tattle on them- they want to get ahead. I'm sure they have a good explanation of what's going on." Nope. "We don't owe you an explanation. We'll honor Babylon. We'll pray for Babylon. We'll serve Babylon. But we will not worship Babylon, or her gods, or you. And if you have to kill us, so be it." And if you thought that was bold, look at what they said: "Our God is able to save us, but even if he doesn't, he is still good, he is still mighty, and he is still worthy of all our worship, not just some." No one speaks to Nebuchadnezzar that way, let alone tell him "no." Into the furnace they go, bound up in their nice clothes because it's urgent- no one says no to Nebuchadnezzar, no one gets to defy him, no god can deliver anyone out his furnace. Except this one- Nebuchadnezzar can't believe what he's seeing, four men, not three, walking, not writhing, alive, not dead. And Nebuchadnezzar realizes how wrong he's been, foolish he's been, and although he doesn't worship God himself, he can't deny how powerful he is. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego kept God's name holy- his reputation among believers and unbelievers alike is accurate and true. You see, what if Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would have said, "it's a ceremony, we know who the true God is. We are just doing this for the good of our people- so they don't get persecuted." They would have given their neighbors and all the Jewish watching them the impression that God doesn't mind if you worship other ones, that he isn't *that* powerful. What if they had given Nebuchadnezzar some long-winded excuse- "Normally we'd bow, but we have a reputation- we can't be seen doing that in front of our Jewish countrymen, we really do worship it." None of that. "Our God is the only one, we only worship him. Kill us if you must." And because they did that, God did something that gave his people courage to continue to say and do what's right. In their actions, their sacrifice, their courage, and in their testimony, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego kept GOD's name holy, and his believers were strengthened and unbelievers were amazed.

2. Keeping God's name holy in Whitewater. There are some striking similarities between our world and the Babylonian world in which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego found themselves. Primarily, it's this: Nebuchadnezzar never said that people weren't allowed to worship their gods, but they weren't allowed to not worship his god. The problem with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego wasn't that they served the God of Israel, but that they went so far as to say, "Our is the only true God- yours is false." I'll tell you what I see, and you tell me if I'm wrong. I don't think anyone here would ever say anything against you for being a Christian. I haven't seen any pushback from that. What I have received

pushback for saying is, “No, Catholics and Lutherans are not pretty much the same, and it does matter to God which church you go to, and there are things that that churches teach that aren’t simply a matter of disagreement, but could actually destroy your faith and your relationship with God.” “No, the idea that as long as you’re a good person it doesn’t matter what you believe is not true, and any pastor that says that is lying.” “No, Jesus wasn’t just a good teacher, he is the Holy God of the Universe, and to be saved you have to believe in him.” “And no, I’m not a good person. In fact, if you knew more about me and what really goes on in my mind, you wouldn’t want to talk to me ever again. I deserve to go to hell more than everyone I know. But Jesus loved me. Jesus was punished in my place and he put his name on me- I’m a Christian- I am identified with Christ and therefore I’m saved, and if this can happen to me, why not you?” Now, I can say that when I say things like that, then I get some looks and some pushback. And if you’re honest and truthful about what the Bible teaches, you will too, and there may be friends and family members who mock you for it, especially the parts of Jesus’ teaching that fly directly in the face of our culture. But you know what else will happen? When you’re honest about your sin, your flaws, your shortcomings, and you confidently express that you don’t need to do a thing to earn God’s favor because Jesus has done it all for you, people will listen because that’s so different from whatever else they’re hearing, and they are going to look at how you live and see if Jesus really makes a difference.

That’s right. You can’t just talk the talk. You have to walk the walk. As Peter says in our first reading today, if you are truly a citizen of Kingdom of God, then your words and actions should show it. You can proclaim and celebrate Jesus’ forgiveness that he gives you all you want, but people are going to watch to see if you are a more forgiving person because of it. Jesus has been kind and generous and honest and loving toward you. People are going to see if that makes you kind, and generous, and honest, and loving toward people who don’t deserve it. Jesus has made you pure and clean- is your language clean? Are your jokes and conversations pure and honest? Look at what Peter says- you ultimately belong to an eternal kingdom and serve the ultimate king which means you are going to be okay regardless of what happens to this country or who’s in charge. You can honor and respect the president, the governor, the senator, your boss, your overseer, all authority because in the end, Jesus is your ultimate authority and he is good. Do you? People are watching. They are watching to see if Jesus really makes a difference, if the joy and forgiveness he gives really works. As God’s perfect children who are unconditionally loved, cherished, saved, forgiven, and free, *prove to others that it does*. I’ll end with this encouragement: *it doesn’t have to be big*. Tim Keller was a pastor in New York City, and he died last year. His wife, Kathy, talked in an interview about raising three boys in New York City in a pastor’s family, which has many challenges. She said that all three of her sons separately said this to her and her husband after they grew up: “Mom, the Bible stories, the devotions, the prayers, they were great and they helped me know Jesus. But one of the moments I realized that everything about Jesus, faith, the Bible is true, is when I saw you and Dad apologize to each other after fights, and forgive each other. That’s what made it real.” Friends, you all have family members, children, siblings, friends who don’t know Jesus. Don’t be afraid to be honest. Don’t sugarcoat any of the Bible’s truths. And then prove it in the way you forgive, love, and honor those around you. Sure, everything in the Bible is true,

but that will be just another way it's proven true. Yes, God's name is already holy, but your honest words and joyful love will be another way it's made holy. Amen.