

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

Daniel 3:1,8-26

3rd December 2017

Spirit... when we do not always understand... may we trust instead... that which draws together the best of the world... through the richness of your story... that calls us into that world... to live in that story... So be it... Amen

So it is day three of advent calendar opening... Jessica perhaps... but most of our children will have at least one... but probably more advent calendars to open...

It is a long time since I ever had an advent calendar... and you can tell it was a long time ago... because when I opened advent calendars there was no chocolate... We had one calendar between my wee sister and me... and we were given alternate days to open a door... and I remember getting quite a row from my mum... when she discovered that I had secretly opened the door my wee sister was meant to open... closing it again before she got up in the morning...

It was just the satisfaction of knowing what was behind that door... even if it was just a snowman... a stocking... or some ridiculous penguin in a woolly hat...

In fact I think that was the last time I ever had an advent calendar... Of course... even chocolate ones are old fashioned now... This year one of my daughters aunts has bought her a beauty advent calendar... each day there is a different beauty product instead of the the wise men... a sheep... or a donkey... changed days!...

But if beauty products aren't your thing... panic not... you can have advent calendars that supply daily... scented candles... lego... nail varnish... coffee beans... Kellogg's variety packs of cereal... jewellery... play-doh... jam and marmalade... which sounds particularly good... or even build your own FM radio advent calendar... and you can also get advent calendars for your dog... your cat... and your horse... because we all have one of them...

I'm not actually complaining about that... there is no point... Advent long ago lost any sense of the power of what it is about... however... even if you had an old fashioned advent calendar... with just pictures... you wouldn't expect to open a door and see

Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego... walking into a fiery furnace... Yet it is our first Advent story this year...

Many who have grown up in the church... are familiar with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego... It was certainly a favourite Sunday School story... the drama... the flames... the king with the strange name... and the miracle where there was not a single singe on the three men's clothing... not even the smell of smoke... It makes great story telling... with the ultimate point... remain true to God... even if the consequences are as serious for you as they were for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego...

But I'm not sure that was ever the point of this story... Open the advent door a little wider and you have a story that is somewhat more consequential...

Here are three young men... who refuse to bow down to the great statue Nebuchadnezzar has created... despite the decree for everyone to do so... but given this story is a probably a parable that speaks into a different age from the events the story speaks of... what the three are actually doing... is refusing to bow down to the gods of empire...

This tale... is an insight into what the world can be like... and it says... do not accept and bow down to a regime... that takes away your freedom... or a populism that turns us against each other... or a way of ruling that makes us fear others that are different from us...

So much so... it is with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego... Martin Luther King...found company... This is parts of a sermon he gave on this story...

It is important to see that there are times... when a man-made law... is out of harmony with the moral law of the universe... there are times when human law... is out of harmony with eternal and divine laws... And when that happens... he says... you have an obligation to break it... and I'm happy that in breaking it... I have some good company... I have Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego... I have Jesus and Socrates... And I have all of the early Christians who refused to bow...

And there you are... out of a story we heard as children... an insight... into how we are to live more significantly in our contemporary world...

One of the things about faith... is that it sometimes keeps us children... and we forget to hear again these stories... with new wisdom... as adults... so they can offer new meaning in our world...

So as we shift from one presidential tweet to another... one BREXIT negotiation to another... one North Korean missile to another... Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego do just that... offer meaning... and invite us:... do not bow to the gods of empire... to populism... to fear... do not just accept the way things are... choose not to take sides with that which tries to limit us... a populism that appeals to our narrowness and fear... corrodes our humanity... Live instead to a higher authority... live instead to the God called love... compassion... grace... which is what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego chose to do...

It is a tale... where the insight is about living with an eye focused on those greater values...

But perhaps... the story appeals to us to do one thing more... and that is measure the values of the gods of this world... against those higher values...

For example... measuring how we treat those who are strangers... or the poor... Do we bow to the ways of the gods of empire... of populism... of fear... of limited welfare... or choose with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego... the higher... more nuanced... moral code of the universe... and the God of compassion... and justice... and love...

This ancient tale... is perhaps a lot more complicated than we remember it being... but as a community of faith... ours is to offer the world... the invitation... to choose between the statues and rules the world puts up... where they limit life... oppress that life... build conflict into that life... or model and invite the world to focus on a higher set of values...

Which brings us right to the heart of incarnation and this Advent season of preparing for that way... Here comes the one... who will be set against the Nebuchadnezzers... set against the populists of today... set against the fear of the future that limits our humanity

towards each other... that are gods by any other name... and offer us a greater... higher moral engagement with the world based instead on compassion and justice and love...

Advent is ours... and the power can return to the season... as we prepare to make the choice... to have a baby born whose purpose is simply the final door in our advent calendars... in among the beauty products... lego blocks and chocolate... or a God who has set gods-self among us... and against all that Martin Luther King says... are the man-made laws that are out of harmony with the moral universe...

The advent door is no less than that... Incarnation is no less than rebalancing the world... and Advent is the fiery furnace... the door that has a different gift behind it... for the world... for Jessica... and for us all...

References

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| Martin Luther King Jr | "But If Not" - A Sermon - November 5th, 1967 |
| W Sibley Towner | Daniel, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary |