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## But Even if Not

Daniel 3:8-30

A Sermon preached at the Divinity School Baccalaureate in Duke Chapel on May 12, 2012 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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I wonder if you feel like an exception. You look around you tonight, and you see the energy, and excitement, and effervescence of a happy day, a much longed-for day, a triumphant day. But inside, a part of you thinks, "I'm different. It's a great day for everyone else, but I'm taken up with other stuff right now. Don't tell anyone, but I actually can't find a job. Don't let on, but I'm in a denomination that doesn't seem to know what to do with someone who looks or believes or loves like me. Don't make a big deal of it, but I don't actually feel any call to serve a church, or even The church. Don't dwell on it, but there's been such a huge row in my family in the last day or two that I can't even concentrate sitting here in the service right now."

I wonder if one of those is you, tonight. I wonder if every one of us is one of those, deep down. If every one of us is an exception.

If so, we're in good company. The Bible's full of exceptions. If you're a minority, imagine being in Babylon during the Jewish Exile. If you're feeling like God's forgotten you and you've been written out of salvation's script, try being transported a thousand miles and living without land, king and temple – all the signs of God's presence. The book of Daniel's about obscure people, faraway people, exceptions, those who don't fit the script. And yet they trust in God. It's a story about a people who lost their home, lost their hope, lost their security, lost their families, lost their heritage, lost their land, lost their story... and found God.

Could that be you? Let's find out.

Nebuchadnezzar is God. That's what we're supposed to think. That's why he has satraps, prefects, governors, counselors, treasurers, justices, magistrates, and on and on. He's just got so many staff he's oozing them. He's so up himself that he makes an enormous golden statue, and everyone has to bow down and worship it when he clicks his fingers, or rather when he clicks his horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, and drum. Anyone who doesn't is thrown into the blazing fire. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are having none of it. Their story shows us what salvation means.

What salvation *doesn't* mean is freedom from care, anxiety, fear, pain, or threat. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego don't avoid the fiery furnace. Christians don't believe they're immune from suffering, sealed off from worry, aloof from conflict, inoculated against panic, exempt from grief. Quite the opposite. As this story makes clear, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego face suffering, worry, conflict, panic and grief precisely *because* they're people of faith and *because* they uphold God's name.

What salvation *does* mean is one of two things. This story shows us both of them. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are thrown, bound, in the fire, *God is with them*. There aren't *three* figures walking in the flames; there are *four*. My guess is every single person in this Chapel tonight has seen or at some time owned a small picture of footprints walking across a beach and an inscription that explains that for a stretch there was only one set of footprints because for that part of the journey Jesus carried you. It's a pious sentiment but I'm not sure it's what Christians call salvation. What Christians call salvation is what we see in this story. Jesus is with us in the fire. The destiny of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is settled not before they reach the fire by some stunt that makes them avoid the flames; nor is there any dramatic rescue from the flames. Their salvation takes place *in* the flames, as they discover Emmanuel: God is with them *in* the flames. Your salvation will be the same. Here's the bad news. God isn't going to spare you from the fire. God isn't going to rescue you from the fire. Here's the good news. *God is going to be with you in the fire*. "Though I walk through the valley

of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me.” “When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” That’s the gospel.

In this story the fire represents Babylon. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego aren’t spared from the fire, nor rescued from the fire; they find they’re *with God* in the fire. Somehow the fire is a fire not just for them but for God too. The same is true for Israel in Babylon. Israel isn’t spared exile. Israel isn’t rescued from exile. Israel finds in exile that God’s there too. The appearance of the fourth figure in the fire sums up the experience of exile for Israel. God is *with* us. That’s salvation. And we see the same in Jesus. Jesus has his own fire, which we call the cross. Jesus isn’t spared the cross. Jesus isn’t rescued from the cross. Jesus is *with* God on the cross. The bonds of the Trinity are stretched to the limit; but not broken. When we see the cross we see that God is with us, however, whatever, wherever... forever. This is our faith.

But of course that’s not all that salvation means. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego *do* emerge from the fire. But look how it happens. They’re called out by Nebuchadnezzar! See how God works. We want the dramatic intervention miracle. What we get is conversion instead. The embodiment of pride and cruelty, the Babylonian king, becomes the one who calls Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the flames. There’s no Christianity without conversion. We can talk all we like about people of good will; but salvation works through conversion. Nebuchadnezzar was the agent of imprisonment, punishment, and trauma, and he becomes the agent of deliverance, transformation, and restoration. That’s called conversion. And how and why is Nebuchadnezzar converted? Nebuchadnezzar sees Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and sees that God is with them; and because God is with them they feel the force of the flames but the fire has no final power to damage them, distort them, destroy them. That’s called being a Christian. We feel the force of sin and suffering, we’re stricken down by sin and suffering, but, because God is with us, sin and suffering have no final power ultimately to damage us, distort us, destroy us. That will be your ministry. That will be your witness.

I wonder if you know who Nebuchadnezzar really is. I wonder if there’s been such a person or power in your life, dominating, oppressing, threatening, hurting. I wonder what it’s like to go into the flames. I wonder what it’s like to feel that whatever Nebuchadnezzar has done to you, in Jesus, God is with you, and nothing Nebuchadnezzar can do can damage, distort, or destroy you. I wonder what it means to imagine Nebuchadnezzar’s conversion, and the hope that all your grief and suffering and exile will one day be redeemed, and become part of what we call the gospel. I wonder what it’s like to discover you’re a Christian.

The center of the story is what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego say to Nebuchadnezzar. I challenge you to hear these words without trembling. “If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.” Hear those words echoing down your ministry from this moment forward.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are speaking to a skeptical king. You’re going to meet a lot of skeptics in the years to come. You may have one or two even among those gathered to celebrate your graduation today. Skeptics say things like, “Jesus expected the imminent end of the world. But it didn’t come. So why should we believe the rest of the things he said?” You know that if the end of the world had come the church wouldn’t have written the New Testament, and if it wasn’t for the New Testament, we wouldn’t know anything about what Jesus did or didn’t think or say or do. But what you say is, “The end of the world may yet come. *But even if it does not*, we will trust the incarnation and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus as the foundation stone of everything that we know.”

Skeptics say things like, “If Christianity’s true why doesn’t it make better people? Why are Christians so mean and unfaithful and greedy and bigoted?” You know Jesus saves us from our sins. We never pretend we have no sins for Jesus to save us from. The gospel is about forgiveness, not about never getting things wrong. But

what you say is, “Christianity may make us better people. *But even if it does not*, we will trust that God in Christ has come among us as the truth and in the Holy Spirit has made it possible to see and know the truth today.”

But of course you’ll be less concerned with skeptics than you’ll be with people you’ve come to love who’re facing agonizing suffering or distress and who turn and look at you and say, “Where is God now?” You’re going to visit a vulnerable person, who’s overheard frightened relatives sharing hushed whispers of fear, and yet is surrounded by people who seem to think their job is keep cheerful and so ensure it may never happen. And this person looks to you as the only one who has the courage and the faith to tell them the truth. And they say to you, “Am I going to die today?” And you’ll say, “Your doctors hope you might get over this setback. *But even if not*, God is with you in your last breath and God will not let even death destroy you. Neither death nor life can separate you from the love of God, dear one.”

Or maybe you’re sitting down over a drink or a coffee or a burger in a diner in Durham, Des Moines, or Detroit, and your companion says, “D’you think she’ll ever come back? D’you think she has any idea how much I love her? D’you think there’s anything I can do to get through to her?” And you see the drink on the table in front of you tremble, and you realize it’s because your companion’s gripping it for dear life because there’s nothing else in the world to hold on to. And you say, “I hope she’ll come back. *But even if not*, know that God will never leave her alone; and God will never leave you alone. And even in the fire, where you are right now, God is making something beautiful out of your lonely, broken heart.”

But ministry isn’t all about others, what they think and how they feel. Your first job in ministry is to save your own soul. And there may be people here who’ll have flourishing ministries, healing neighborhoods, nations, even denominations, meanwhile pausing to rewrite the *Dogmatics*, stay one step ahead of popular electronic devices, and even run a year’s youth program without a single person eating a slice of pizza or producing a mission trip T-shirt. But you may be here tonight realizing that church-based ministry is not for you; or that your heart and soul isn’t going to lie in career and public profile but in rearing children and being a friend and neighbor; or that as far as understanding where you belong in the kingdom of God you’re none the wiser, albeit better informed. And I say unto you, “Maybe you’ll flourish in ministry; maybe you’ll have a clear sense of call and that call will be honoured and fostered by disciples and overseers alike. Maybe every day you’ll wake up and feel a freedom in God’s service that surpasses any other possible joy. *But even if not*, know that God is redeeming the world through your hands, your feet, your heart, your love, your gentleness, your kindness, whether you’re aware of it or not.

Or maybe you’re sitting here tonight thinking, “Perhaps I’m the only person here whose faith is fragile, whose prayer life is a bomb site, whose lifestyle is unrecognizable as Christian, who just can’t seem to find God anywhere near a church. I feel like the ultimate exception.” Well if so, you’re a gift to this community, because there ain’t anyone here who at some moment in the next 40 years won’t be sitting where you’re sitting tonight. To go through life without the fire (or the refrigerator) of doubt may sound like being a Christian; but it doesn’t sound much like being a human being. I say unto you, “Maybe you’ll know God’s presence every hour, every breath, every touch. *But even if not*, know that God is with you and God is for you in every moment of the universe’s existence. You may believe and trust in the living God. *But even if not*, the living God lives for you.”

We all know that most beloved verse in the scripture, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” But we also know that, if it was that simple, we wouldn’t need the rest of the Bible. The poignancy of what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego say to Nebuchadnezzar is finally not just what we say to a skeptic, or to a person in pain, or to ourselves, but what the members of the Trinity say to one another. When Jesus goes to the fire, when Jesus faces the flames of hell for us, when Jesus hangs on the cross, what does he say to the Father? Is it so different from the words

of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? "If you will to deliver me from the cross, O Father, then take this cup away from me. *But even if not*, be it known to you, O Father, that my love for you will hang on forever, and that those who somehow find that they have lost you can hang onto me." Isn't that what makes Jesus' final words so wondrous? Jesus loves us so much that he goes to the cross even if there's no certainty of resurrection. Jesus isn't just keeping his side of the bargain. Jesus is loving *even if not*. That's the definition of love.

We've come face to face with God. We've come to the foot of the cross, the heart of Jesus. We've come to the definition of love. It lies in those four little words: "*But even if not*."

Those words are the heart of God. Make them the heart of your life. Make them the heart of your faith. Make them the heart of your love. Make them the whole of your vocation. In them you will find God. *But even if not*, in them, God will find you.