

Out of the book of Daniel there are two stories that I remember from growing up. Every evening my parents would gather my brothers and I on the couch to read Bible stories together. We had all sorts of picture Bibles. Most of the pictures were animated and tame. But not so much for this particular story. It is hard to hear the words of being thrown into a fiery furnace, let alone depict it in a picture. Yet, as hard as this story is to think about, it still speaks to us today.

Nebuchadnezzar, probably the same Nebuchadnezzar who repented last week when Daniel interpreted his dream, has done exactly what God predicted. He ends up building this large gold statue to honor himself and his leadership. More than that, he expected people to stop and venerate the statue by bowing the way to show that they saw him as a god.

But these three men, who as a child, I simply thought as those guys with the hard names, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refuse to bow before the statue of Nebuchadnezzar. In retaliation, Nebuchadnezzar decides that they must give their lives - tossing them into a furnace of fire. Only they don't die. Instead, when the observers look into the fire, they see not three people, but four - with an angel protecting the three men.

Nebuchadnezzar has another “ah-ha” moment and calls Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego - and again praises the name of God. Only this time he takes it a step further. Instead of simply lifting them up in the leadership structure, as he did with Daniel, he says that anyone who spoke out against them, would be torn apart limb from limb.

When Benedict was speaking about the ladder of humility, the third step is obedience. Now in relationship to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, what I am about to say is going to sound odd. Step Three - submit yourself to your superior in obedience, out of love of God. So how did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego live into this step of humility if they weren't obedient to the one who looks like their leader - Nebuchadnezzar . Remember that Benedict is writing to people who are to be in relationship with Christ. The person who is charge (words that I use loosely) and they are to submit to that person because they trust that person is seeking and submitting to Christ in their lives and are seeking to be led by God alone.

This type of humility does *not* require Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to be obedient to what is ungodly - which bowing down to a statue of a man who has made himself into a god certainly is. We are to be obedient to God, not to what is against God. When Benedict asks monks to submit to their superiors, this was to be someone who was to point the community to Christ. They are known for their relationship with God, which has been tested and seen as fruitful by the community as a whole. And we submit to the superior because we trust that they have the best interest of our spiritual life in mind.

In my community the person I submit to is Mary. I remember when I joined the community and Mary asked me first how I saw myself serving on the worship team. I love to write liturgy and it seems like a good use of my skills. Mary received what I said, but then asked if I would become a dean - which is a person who teaches and provides pastoral care. This was something that I never considered. I thought I was too new. But Mary asked me to pray about this opportunity, while gently closing the door to my idea to help write liturgies. I then prayed and came back to Mary and said “yes”, I would serve. That is the type of obedience that Benedict is talking about. And this is certainly not the type of leadership that Nebuchadnezzar showed.

So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were obedient to God.

The problem, friends, is when we believe that we do not need to consult with the wise people who have a vibrant relationship with God. You know the type of people I'm talking about

right? They might not be the named leaders. Might not have a position. But they are the people who listen to you and pray with you and want the best in your spiritual life. Do not think you are being obedient to God without asking others to examine what you are discerning with you. Those who can hold you accountable and remind you that we do not seek to be obedient to God alone. We all need people who can help usher us into deeper spiritual growth while allowing us to see the areas that we are blind to. Which is why so few people seek to truly be obedient in the spiritual life.

The fourth step of humility is perseverance when obedience is difficult. It would have perhaps been easy for the trio if they were asked to do what met the status quo, was of benefit to them and aligned with their beliefs - but this is not usually the case. So they were obedient to God, even when it was difficult and had the very real potential to cost them their lives. So step four, weaves together both obedience and self-denial.

Obedience without any sting or pain is easy.

What Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did was difficult.

Which leads us to ask if we would do the same thing? Would we accept the challenge of obedience to the point where it requires our perseverance or would we give up and give in? Would we abandon the way of Christ for our own comforts? And would we let ourselves be brought low so that God can be esteemed?

The fifth step of humility is repentance. Now we don't see this step of humility from Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego - they had nothing that we are told of in this particular story that they needed to repent from. But we do see some sort of repentance from the king.

When we screw up and sin - when we distance ourselves from God and break relationship with other people, we need to confess that. To bring it before God and ask for forgiveness.

Now, we might not be building tall statues of ourselves, but we do break covenant with God. So, church, what does confession look like in your life? And who are the people around you that encourage you to acknowledge your offense and bring it before God?

Benedict actually had his monks confess their faults to an abbot - someone who had authority over them. It wasn't the job of the abbot to scold them. It was the job of the abbot to point them to God. Why? Because left to our own devices so many of us would never bring our shortcomings and sin before a holy God. We would rather pretend that everything is okay than to have an honest conversation with God about the state of sin in our lives.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego show us the character of true humility - no matter the cost. What is interesting about this path of humility today is that no one was making another person take it. People chose to follow because it was the desire of their heart - to set themselves aside and to grow closer to God. So, brothers and sisters, what will you choose? Will you choose the path of humility no matter what? Amen.