

Daniel 3

Today's reading from Daniel may seem like an odd text to begin Advent. We are waiting for the Christ-child and here we get a story of a crazy king who's angry mad that he is not getting the proper praise from his subjects. This is a story that in some ways repeats itself in the birth of Christ when another crazy king is jealous that a tiny baby might take his place. Advent is a time to not just prepare for Jesus, but to prepare for the one who is greater than any earthly ruler, even if that ruler thinks that after all, he is the greatest and most powerful.

The Book of Daniel is an amazingly complex work. The Hebrew version of the text, which contains large sections of material written in Aramaic, contains two distinct parts: stories of Jews living in exile in Babylon in the first half, and apocalyptic visions shown to the title character, Daniel in the second half.

Daniel is a prominent character throughout the book, depicted as a young, wise and pious Jew whose prophetic abilities are recognized by even the pagan Babylonians. Today's chapter is the only one where Daniel himself does not appear. Instead, the story tells the tale of three other Jewish men who face dire consequences for their piety.

While the book is set during the Babylonian exile (586-538 BCE), the story was written down during a period of Greek colonization, some 400 years later. The book is not interested in presenting an historical account of the Babylonian exile.

Many of the Jews living in Babylon started to settle down, realizing they would be in Babylon for a while. In last week's reading, Yahweh warned the Jews through the prophet Jeremiah, that they would be captives in Babylon for seventy years. So they started to take part in Babylonian society as instructed by Jeremiah. Among them were four young Jews; Daniel and his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. All of them took part in the Babylonian government. The Jews of that time decided for themselves how much of the alien society they would accommodate to. For example, Daniel is always referred to by his Hebrew name, even though he did have a Babylonian name; Beltshazzar, but his friends changed their names to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

The story explores the vulnerability of peoples living under a religiously oppressive regime, a situation that better fits the time of the Greek overlord Antiochus IV Epiphanes (167-164 BCE). The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego represents the choices faced by those who must either support an oppressive regime or face certain death.

As the story begins, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, erects a massive golden statue and commands that all must bow before it. Initially, it appears that the central conflict of the story involves idolatry. However, as the story progresses, a different conflict emerges – that between the kingship of Nebuchadnezzar and the power of God. This court tale about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is part of a larger series of stories in Daniel dealing with the relationship between the God of Israel and the gentile kings. At times, the foreign king recognizes that the source of

his power is the God of Israel and publically announces that fact.

At other times, the kings are recalcitrant and refuse to recognize the ultimate sovereignty of God. They try to claim their power as their own, and, in doing so, they create intense conflict and danger for the Jewish community caught in the middle of the struggle. This is the situation in which Daniel's friends find themselves. At the end of the previous chapter, Nebuchadnezzar had announced that true knowledge and true power comes from Daniel's God. But at the beginning of today's chapter, the king seems to have forgotten his earlier confession, and, at the prodding of some Babylonian sages (the Chaldeans), he entraps the Jewish friends and arrogantly dismisses their God.

What may be puzzling for some, is Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's answer to the king: "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up." Not a very enthusiastic defence of God's sovereignty! It may seem to suggest that they have doubts about God's power to rescue them and are not confident that God will do so. However, the friends' response may actually convey an unconditional and absolute faith. Their devotion to God is not based on any kind of quid pro quo from the LORD. Unlike Jacob who attached all kinds of strings to his commitment to God, the friends announce that their dedication to God is absolute, regardless of what happens to them.

In the midst of tension and conflict created by this clash of sovereignty, the story offers some comic relief with the long lists of government officials and musical instruments that are repeated so frequently and so unnecessarily. The repetition of these complicated lists creates exaggeration and makes the king and his officials look silly. As the story continues to unfold, the king comes off looking rash and easily manipulated. The king begins the story with an arrogant command, then becomes the pawn of his jealous officials who wish to get rid of the Jewish wise men. He then flies into a rage when the Jewish men do not obey them, but ends by blessing their God!

The satirical elements serve an important purpose. They help negotiate the conflicts that might arise between the Jewish community's fidelity to God and its dealings with gentile kings. By showing him to be bumbling and blind, the story undermines the king's fearfulness and tyranny and encourages resistance. At the same time, the story shows the king to be teachable – he learns to show honour to the true God. Thus God is shown to accommodate the king and also vindicate the participation of the Jewish men in the gentile government.

Despite the story's comic playfulness, its liturgical context highlights the weighty theme of deliverance from death. The three friends of Daniel, despite being bound in their clothes and tossed in, survive the overheated furnace and come out unbound and physically unharmed. In the midst of the fire's damaging flames, there is a fourth person who looks like a man but has "*the appearance of a god*" or, literally, "a son of a god." Although the Hebrew text does not tell us exactly who this

figure is or what he does in the furnace, he seems to be an angel of the Lord who has come to protect and deliver the three.

The story has continued to inspire resistance for communities facing unspeakable injustice. Jewish activist and holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, reminds readers that we live in a world where our neighbours continue to face the threat of eradication through fire and violence. Wiesel describes seeing the fires of the crematoriums as he and his fellow Jews, crowded into train cars, approached the concentration camp. His life reminds readers that while Daniel's friends survived the fiery furnace, the gas chambers and crematoria claimed millions more. For him and others who lived through and resisted injustice, Daniel and his friends offered hope for survival. The story serves as a reminder that we are all called to the work of faithful resistance.

While loss of cultural identity threatens exiled populations, those who are colonized face a different but no less serious threat. An exiled population often maintains the sense of being "Other" in their new place of residence; even if they try to assimilate, they are often treated as perennial outsiders by native populations. Those who are colonized have their status inverted. Although they are the native population, regimes that practice cultural colonization try to wipe out that native culture and replace it with a foreign one that now becomes hegemonic.

This is very evident in the colonization of North and South America which destroyed the indigenous culture and language. Here, in Canada, we had residential

schools that not only destroyed the language, culture, and feelings of self-worth and equality, but also destroyed families and the culture of family unity, love, and support, especially with the “Sixties Scoop”.

Colonized peoples face different choices than exiles. Often the choices made by a colonized individual affects whole families who still may be trying to preserve property and autonomy, culture, and language. Some choose to cooperate with the colonizers, others subvert it, while still others participate in active resistance. This was as true for the Judeans colonized by the Greeks as it is today.

The story of the three men gives a glimpse into those choices. They could accept the religion of the king as superior to their own. They could go through the motions of bowing to the statue while still maintaining their own belief. Or they could organize a rebellion against this oppressive religious practice. They chose none of these.

Instead, they decide to become living witnesses to what they believe in, offering their bodies as martyrs as an act of faith in their God. It is a form of peaceful resistance often associated today with people like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bishop Oscar Romero.

Throughout the Christian traditions, these martyr stories ended with the death of the righteous sufferer, whose reward comes in their post-mortem sanctification. The story of the martyrdom of Perpetua preserves visions she had of the reward awaiting her in heaven.

We have little idea what brought Perpetua to faith in Christ, or how long she had been a Christian, or how she lived her Christian life. Thanks to her diary, we have some idea of her last days – an ordeal that so impressed the famous Augustine that he preached four sermons about her death.

Perpetua was a Christian noblewoman who, at the turn of the third century, lived with her husband, her son, and her slave, Felicitas, in Carthage. At this time, North Africa was the centre of a vibrant Christian community. It is no surprise, then, that when Emperor Septimius Severus determined to cripple Christianity (he believed it undermined Roman patriotism), he focussed his attention on North Africa. Among the first to be arrested were five new Christians taking classes to prepare for baptism, one of whom was Perpetua.

Her father immediately came to her in prison. He was a pagan, and he saw an easy way for Perpetua to save herself. He entreated her simply to deny she was a Christian.

In the next days, Perpetua was moved to a better part of the prison and allowed to breast-feed her child. With her hearing approaching, her father visited again, this time, pleading more passionately. He threw himself down before her and kissed her hands. "Do not abandon me to be the reproach of men. Think of your brothers; think of your mother and your aunt; think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride!"

Perpetua was touched but remained unshaken. She tried to comfort her father

– "It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills, for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power" – but he walked out of the prison dejected.

The day of the hearing arrived, Perpetua and her friends were marched before the governor, Hilarianus. Perpetua's friends were questioned first, and each in turn admitted to being a Christian, and each in turn refused to make a sacrifice (an act of emperor worship). Then the governor turned to question Perpetua.

At that moment, her father, carrying Perpetua's son in his arms, burst into the room. He grabbed Perpetua and pleaded, "Perform the sacrifice. Have pity on your baby!"

Hilarianus, probably wishing to avoid the unpleasantness of executing a mother who still suckled a child, added, "Have pity on your father's gray head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperor." Perpetua replied simply: "I will not." "Are you a Christian then?" asked the governor. "Yes I am," Perpetua replied.

Her father interrupted again, begging her to sacrifice, but Hilarianus had heard enough. He then condemned Perpetua and her friends to die in the arena. When they entered the stadium, wild beasts and gladiators roamed the arena floor, and in the stands, crowds roared to see blood. They didn't have to wait long.

Second Maccabees, in the Old Testament Apocrypha, tells the story of a mother who watches the martyrdom of her seven sons by this same Antiochus, all the while exhorting them to be strong and face death. She and her sons trusted that God, who will eventually punish wicked Antiochus, will reward these sons after death.

In contrast to these later stories, this tale of willing martyrdom in Daniel ends with the miraculous rescue of the three men. The story makes visibly apparent that those who suffer are not alone. There is a heavenly being who accompanies them as they choose to meet their fate. In the resolution of the story, the men not only survive, but earn a job promotion as a result of their ordeal. This ending calls attention to three important elements of the story.

First, the story maintains its pacifistic attitude. Unlike the book of Esther which ends with the Jews slaughtering the Persians who attack them, there is no retaliation in this story. For this author, the perfect dénouement is the conversion of the pagans and the peaceful co-existence of everyone.

Second, the resolution includes the further assimilation of the men into the colonized system. Shadrach and friends are not just Jews; they have a hybrid identity. Their Babylonian Jewishness mirrors the Greek Jewishness of the book's original audience.

Third, the fate of these three individuals is really a story about the fate of a whole people. At the beginning of the story, these three stand up for the rights of all

those who live under this oppression. At the end of the story, the king declares religious protections for all Jews within his empire.

While the story is not a trickster tale, the narrative does subvert the hegemonic discourse of the colonizers. The king's propaganda rests on his claim of complete power within his realm. His claim is unravelled by the resolute refusal of these three men from the margins of that society to accept his claim as reality. Instead, they replace his claims, not with their own assertion of power, but rather with the statement that Yahweh is God.

Daniel invites contemporary communities of faith to reflect on the long-lasting effects of colonization on themselves and those around them. It provides a model response to violent oppression: the stubborn refusal to be afraid. It seeks a reconciliation of both oppressor and oppressed, through which the world is reoriented to God.

Even more miraculous than the three men being saved from a fiery furnace is the change of heart this mighty emperor exhibits at the end of the story. King Nebuchadnezzar declares that anyone who prohibits these immigrants from practising their religion or who harms them in any way will be subjected to an even worse fate. With this declaration, the implication is that it is possible for the Jewish immigrants to stay true to their Jewish identity and to survive even the most vicious attacks by those in power. And instead of succumbing to imperial power, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are promoted in Babylon.

This narrative encouraged its original audience, believers who found themselves under the Persian empire, to persevere. The story of the magical deliverance from the furnace promises that God is with them even in the most difficult of times – including being thrown into a furnace!

In today's context, this story of refugees and the challenges they experience may have a different function. The threat to identity that immigrants experience on many different levels – including language, culture, and religious practices – is a very real concern in a world in which there are more than 65 million displaced individuals. A story that tells what Daniel and his three friends experienced as refugees in a foreign land may be helpful in encouraging us to imagine what it must feel like for immigrants who find themselves in hostile environments. This story challenges communities today to respect others in their midst, which implies also respecting their freedom and agency to worship as they wish, as well as live out their cultural practices in their own way. This interpretation is especially important in this time of Advent when we remember that Jesus and his family were also refugees.

Amen.