

Daniel 3: 1, 8-30
The World Is About to Turn:
Hope in the Fiery Present
December 3, 2017
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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(Note: This sermon was greatly influenced by and largely shaped by a paper on this text delivered by the Rev. Rebecca Messman at The Well—Richmond in April of 2017.)

It was late fall into early winter of 1940. The United States was still officially neutral in the war that was devastating Europe. Word of the persecution of the Jews by Hitler had gotten out, but not the details of his ultimate solution. There was still strong sentiment in some circles supporting the nationalist, populist, fascist regime of the Third Reich, and then that movie happened.

Written, directed by and starring Charles Chaplin, “The Great Dictator” debuted and took the nation by storm. The Great Dictator was Adenoid Hynkel, a bloviating purveyor of populist hate speech with a tiny mustache and a silly salute. The film so effectively mocked Hitler that, when word of the movie’s production made it to England just before they entered the war, the British government offered to ban it as an appeasement to Hitler. But American audiences were enraged even as they laughed. Many call “The Great Dictator” the first great political satire on film.

Perhaps a similar honor should be granted to the Book of Daniel, the last great satire of the Old Testament. The writer of the book of Daniel is writing in about 165 BC, making it the newest book in the Old Testament. But he is not writing about his own time, he is writing about the exile, some 450 years before when Israelites were living in Babylon under the oppressive rule of Nebuchadnezzar.

In the time Daniel was written, Israel was controlled by the Seleucid Empire based in the north of what is now Syria. Seleucus was a general under Alexander the Great and the Syrian kingdom he established lasted about 200 years before being swallowed up by the Roman Empire. In the early 2nd century BC, the Seleucids had made the Jews in their midst perhaps the first Syrian refugees, having outlawed Jewish worship and the rites of Sabbath and circumcision, and keeping a tight lid on all gatherings.

One dared not write about the Seleucid leadership. They didn't have Twitter, but they did have very short fuses for any dissent and any direct attack would get you killed. But to tell the story of a tyrant from long ago, this ridiculous character of a king who no one really remembered anymore, how could they object to that? He would make a perfect foil. So Nebuchadnezzar, the name almost sounds funny to say, became the foil for a wicked satire on the Seleucids. Like Alec Baldwin in an orange wig, there would be no doubt who was being mocked.

So this funny story is written, with its funny sounding heroes — Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego — mocking one who places himself above Yahweh, who dares to challenge the relationship of Yahweh with his children — our divine mother hen with her brood.

All of the repetition is designed to highlight the comedy, as does the hyperbole. The golden fake God statue talked about in the passage is no wall, but it is ridiculous. It would be 90 feet tall and only 9 feet wide, something their technology just couldn't accomplish and that defies physics. A light breeze could likely topple it, or perhaps that is the point. So why is this bizarre satire important? And what on earth can it mean to us on the first Sunday in Advent, the Sunday of Hope?

Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann once said, "As long as you have hope, you're human." Hope is the most powerful strategy to resist Empire. Hope is how we live into our baptismal identities. Hope isn't self-reliance or confidence in progress that things are getting better. Hope is a trust God *has more gifts to give and more promises to keep* and that Empire cannot prevail. Just look at the events of the last week. Empire is desperately grasping in the middle of the night to increase or maintain power even when all logic points it in a different direction. Empire is stuck in how things look right now. Hope calls upon the past and leans into a future in and above human history.

This Advent, let us join the company of "hoppers", many we've heard about this fall — Abraham and Sarah, David, and yes, even Daniel — and many more await us — Mary, Joseph and those who lived hope.

Did you notice how Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego lived their hope in the story? They did not profess that God would save them from a martyr's death. *"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."

So much hope hangs on those three words, "but if not." They lived in a hope that did not rely upon the outcome, but relied on God and God's presence with them, in and through everything, even a fiery furnace. It seems too often cultural Christianity is presented as a self-improvement scheme to make our lives better, to keep us grounded while we wait for things to improve. It is tied to a result rather than to God's presence in and through everything. We *hope* that the cancer will be cured. We *hope* that the current administration will see the error of its ways. We *hope* our loved one will be freed from the furnace of addiction. But as my colleague Rev. Becca Messman has noted, "Hope, real Advent hope, takes us farther than just a result. It takes us into the scarier territory that we know by those three words, "But if not..." You may find deep and lasting joy, a return to health and new love, *but even if not*, the Lord is with you in the heat and smoke and flames.

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.

I think at least a few of you have read Paul Kalanithi's, *When Breath Becomes Air*. He was a neurosurgeon, forced to face the blur on his own MRI and brain cancer. Irony turns him from doctor to patient, from subject, and master of his life, to a direct object, a *thing that is acted upon*.

In summing up the influences in his thinking — medical, philosophical and theological — Kalanithi says they all agree on one thing: "the defining characteristic of the organism is striving. Describing life otherwise was like painting a tiger without stripes. After so many years of living with death, I'd come to understand that the easiest death wasn't necessarily the best. We talked it over. Our families gave their blessing. We decided to have a child. We would carry on living, instead of dying." Somehow I think that's what God decides in the Incarnation.

Let's face it. Whatever your political persuasion, whatever your opinion of this proposed piece of legislation or that deadlock in Springfield or Washington D.C., we are facing some fiery times where our hope is being tested. Some say the same thing about the Church of Jesus Christ. In

everyday life and in the greater church, there is a blur on our MRI and we wonder what the future holds.

“The question,” according to Fred Craddock, “is not whether the church is dying, but whether it is giving its life for the world.” And I would say the same about each of us. The question is not whether our world is on fire, but are we offering ourselves to smother the flames of division, of hatred, of despair, of self-righteousness, of scorn, of envy? It could be that we are on the brink of a season in history when culture bends back toward the liberating wisdom of Jesus Christ. But if not, if not, will we carry on living? Will we carry on giving our life for the world?

That is the ultimate hope of Advent, that regardless of what we can see, regardless of the dangerous actions of whatever mock-able Empire is holding sway in our lives, we hold on to the hope in Jesus Christ, whose humble birth mocked the powers of Rome, who stood up to betrayal and rejection and more bizarre dictators and fussy crowds and even death itself. He prayed in the garden that the cup might be taken from him, *but if not* — but if not — may thy will be done. That’s the Gospel.

As Rev. Messman puts it, “If we want to be a ‘hoper,’ we need to look beyond our fiery present. We look to the past to see how much ground this powerful story of God’s love has already covered. We look to the future and confess that even what we see as the end of *our* world, God has already claimed. What we see as the end of *our* world, Christ has gone beyond. There are gifts that God has yet to give. There are promises God has yet to keep.” And that is worthy of our trust; that is a source of our hope — not just for then, but for now. Will we find our way? We hope, *but if not*, surely God will find us.