

Promise

The Bible is full of promises made by God:

Psalms 119: this is my comfort in my distress; that your promise gives me life.

Isaiah 2: They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Jeremiah 31: The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will write my law upon your hearts.

Matthew 28: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

John 3: I came not to condemn the world but to save it

John 14: I go to prepare a place for you, and I will come again and take you to myself.

Romans 8: Neither death nor life nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Revelation 21 See the home of God is among mortals, he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

That's just a small sample. The question posed by today's Bible reading is, "How much do you trust in those promises?"

The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is one I remember from my Sunday School days. There was even a song that went with it, although I can no longer recall it. But even though I knew the story very well, I never knew what it meant until later in life.

I had this image of three men defying the mighty Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, who promised them a fiery death if they disobeyed his order to bow down and worship his golden statue. They refused and the king sentenced them to die in the hottest fire ever made by humans.

I had in my mind this picture of these people who had such faith in God that they confidently thumbed their noses at the king and, almost smugly marched off to this furnace. They knew how powerful God was and how faithful and so they knew they had nothing to fear. They walked into the fire as if it were just a stroll in the park. As they knew would happen, God protected them the fire. They had a good time in there, and the king of Babylon was brought low.

Then I discovered reading a book by Robert McAfee Brown, that this isn't what happened at all. Once he pointed it out, I couldn't imagine how I could have been so dense. I guess, like a lot of us, I heard what I wanted to hear.

When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were hauled before the king, they were scared. Nebuchadnezzar was one of the most powerful, ruthless rulers of all time. His name meant, "the one who will do anything to protect his power." When he sentenced them to die in the flames, they were terrified. They did not say, "We have nothing to fear from you, King. God will deliver us. Just watch what happens and you will see how much more powerful God is than you."

They said, "If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire, let him deliver us." That statement begins with an "if." If means, maybe yes, maybe no. They freely admit they don't know if they are going to survive this. They've seen bad things happen to good people.

They have seen the Babylonians sack their cities, destroy their temple and their cities, and carry them off in captivity to Babylon. They know how that "if" ended. No, God did not save them or protect them in any way. They have no reason to think this is going to be any different.

Nevertheless, they conclude with the statement that is the heart of this passage. "But even if God does not save us, know this, O King, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden stature."

They had no idea how this was going to end up, and every reason to expect they would die in agony. Yet they refused to give in to a tyrant who was making a mockery of God's creation. Because they trusted in the promises of God, that love and justice would win out in the end. And in this case, they were spared from paying the price of their devotion.

Jesus encountered an almost identical situation during Holy Week. He faced a choice whether to bow down to the rulers and principalities of this world, to bow down to injustice and the perversion of God's word, or to stand up against it. He knew that if he took a stand, he would be sentenced to death on a cross.

He, too, knew that God was fully capable of delivering him from this death. And in the Garden of Gethsemane, he made the decision, "Even if God does not spare me in this case, know this O Powers of Sin and Death, that I will not serve you or your gods."

It was not his choice whether he would be spared or not; his choice was to trust in God's promises or not. He trusted and so refused to bow down, but stood up for what was right. And in the end, his trust was rewarded.

We face the same choice in our lives. The consequences may not be as brutal for us, but the choice is the same. In the face of injustice and destruction of God's creation, we are faced with a choice. Do we concede that those powers are too great for us? That it is too dangerous to stand up for what is right and openly defy these powers, and so if we want to get anywhere in life or want to avoid ridicule, we have to bow down to these realities?

That while we may grumble and complain in private, we're going to shrug our shoulders in helpless resignation and do the safe thing?

How we answer that question depends on the question we posed earlier. "How much do you trust in those promises?"

If all of this sounds scary and even hopeless, Rev. William Barber provides this hope:

When God knows that our serving God is not predicated on knowing we're going to be delivered, God starts shaking things—when we refuse to bow down, it moves God.

As we approach Holy Week, remember when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trusted God's promises and refused to bow down. Remember when Jesus trusted God's promises and refused to bow down. Trust the promises and stand your ground, because bowing down is not an option.