

## **We Must Disenthrall Ourselves**

Byron C. Bangert

June 8, 2009

Mark 12:13-17

Daniel 3:1-30

The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is one of my Old Testament favorites. Unfortunately it does not appear anywhere in the Revised Common Lectionary. It is a great story, with real tension and drama, lots of repetition, and a happy ending. It is just the sort of story you might want to read to your children, or grandchildren, as a bedtime story. Try it some time!

The most important part of this story, it seems to me, comes right after King Nebuchadnezzar calls Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego on the carpet. The King is not an altogether evil man. He wants to be sure that the reports about these three young men are true. He also wants to give them another chance to obey his command. After all, these three fellows evidently had some talent, so the King had appointed them to serve in authority over the affairs of the province. They were not rebels or misfits. They were not ne'er-do-wells. They were bright young fellows who had been engaged in government service. The King was hardly stupid. He would not have wanted to waste good men if it could be helped.

The three young men answer the King, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. 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." In other words: "No matter what, come hell or high water, whether God delivers us or not, we will not bow down to your idol. Play your hand with punishments and rewards if you must, but our bottom line is we worship no god but God."

This is the most impressive part of the story. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are not about to be compromised in their loyalty and devotion to God. Whether their lives are spared or not, whether their God is even able to deliver them or not, their allegiance remains with what they know to be the one and only true God, the only ultimate reality of their lives. They will bow down and worship no other.

So, it's not about winning or losing, succeeding or failing. It's not about career advancement or being a team player. It's not about making the grade. It's not about punishments or rewards. It's about being true, loyal, faithful servants of the one true God. It is about fulfilling the first and greatest commandment, about giving God our utter and complete devotion and allowing nothing else to take God's place.

One could imagine a lot more to say about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as exemplary young men of faith. They are presented here without any character development. Nothing is said about how their faith has been nurtured. There is no commentary on their courage. There is no hint of ambivalence in their response to the king. No explanation is offered regarding the calm, self-assured manner of their refusal to bow down to the golden idol. In real life, people do not

come to such courage, conviction, and calm without some inner struggle against all their needs and desires for self-preservation. In real life, we can imagine that such young men would try to reason with the king, and try to bargain for their lives. After all, they were performing a valuable service to the king in their respective positions of responsibility. There must be some way to satisfy the king that they were loyal subjects without having to betray their God. It is hard to imagine "having no need to present a defense" to the King in this matter of life and death.

But isn't that the point of the story? They have no need to explain or defend themselves. They have no need to try to weasel out of their predicament. They have no need to become defensive, to cry "foul," or to humor the King. They have no need because they are not out to prove anything. This is no contest of wills, no demonstration of power, no calling of anyone's bluff. They are not out to embarrass the King, or to deceive him, and they are not out to save their own skins. They have no mixed motives. All that they are doing is seeking to remain true to their God.

In its stark simplicity, the story may not be entirely true to life. Nonetheless, it presents us with this wonderfully vivid and engaging picture of what it would be like to have no other agenda than to be a faithful servant of God.

In one of the beatitudes, Jesus speaks of a similarly singular devotion. He says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." What does it mean to be "pure in heart"? The Danish Christian philosopher, Kierkegaard, wrote a book on the subject. In English it is titled *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. The one thing to be willed, according to Kierkegaard, is the Good--with a capital "G". According to Kierkegaard, if it is possible to will one thing, then that one thing must be the Good, because only the Good is one. The Good, of course, is that which is of God. Moreover, if it is possible to will the Good, says Kierkegaard, then whoever wills the Good must be at one with self in willing to renounce all double-mindedness. In other words, you cannot will the Good and at the same time be willing something else [cf. 68]. So, concludes Kierkegaard, whoever desires the Good for the sake of reward does not will one thing [cf. 69ff.], and whoever wills the Good out of fear of punishment does not will one thing [cf. 79ff.], and whoever wills the Good simply in order to score a victory also does not will one thing [cf. 99ff.].

Jesus taught that no one can serve two masters [Matt. 6:24]. The Epistle of James warned against all "double-mindedness" [4:8]. Kierkegaard says that "purity of heart is to will one thing." To put this in terms of our own religious faith and practice, it is not possible to serve God truly if our aim, thereby, is some reward. Not for wealth, or health, not for success or happiness, not for power or prestige. In the ancient world of King Nebuchadnezzar there was a clear propensity to worship the God who had the most "stuff" or the greatest power. That is why the King was so impressed when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego manage to escape the fiery furnace. Their God must be the "Most High God," the One who could out-perform all rivals. So far as the King was concerned, this was the God to latch on to, because this was the God who could help him secure his power. That is to say, there was nothing very pure of heart in the King's new-found devotion.

At the end of our story, the King makes a new decree that says, "Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this

way." The King readily transfers his loyalty to the God of the three young men, not in order to render more faithful service, but as a matter of prudence and expediency--precisely as a way to extend his own imperial power. He wants to remain King. He wants to be on the winning side. And he still seems quite willing to destroy all those who disagree.

The pure of heart are those for whom religion is *not* a means to some self-serving end. The pure of heart are those for whom God is not a winning or losing proposition. The pure of heart are those for whom God is the source and center, the end and goal, the truth and the life and the way.

Of course, refusing to submit to the powers that be can also get you killed. Kings and Presidents and earthly rulers have little tolerance for those who stand against their decrees. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to worship his golden idol, Nebuchadnezzar did what he thought he had to do. He had to show that he was tough and resolved, that no two-bit Jew-boys were going to get away with defying their king. And so he had them tossed into the fiery furnace.

How would we feel about this story if that had been the end of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? The truth is, untold millions of human beings have met their deaths in the course of defying their worldly rulers. Many of them have done so quite simply because they had a higher loyalty, a higher allegiance they were not willing to betray. For Christians, Jesus is the obvious example. He was not crucified as a common criminal. He was crucified by the Roman authorities, presumably with the consent of some of the religious leaders of his own people, as one who posed a threat to the ruling powers. In our world of mixed motives and competing demands, there is little place for the individual who seeks nothing more than to remain true to the highest and best that he or she knows, to the God who is above all other gods, to that Ultimate One in whom we live and move and have our being.

"You shall have no other gods before me" is the first commandment, and the one most difficult to keep. One strategy we take is to try to persuade ourselves that there is no practical difference between our actual loyalties and devotions, and that which God requires. If we serve the Church, then we are serving God. If we serve our country, then we are serving God. If we are loyal to our family and friends, then we are being loyal to God. If we do our work with utmost care and commitment, then we are serving God. So God becomes indistinguishable from the dominant loyalties of our lives.

Another strategy is to assume that our devotion to God really does not compete with other devotions. It really is possible to serve God and Mammon. Or it really is possible to obey Caesar, the Emperor, the State, while also obeying God. The story where Jesus is asked about paying taxes to Caesar is often misconstrued to be a kind of first-century endorsement of the separation of Church and State, as if these are not competing devotions. That's not what the story is about at all. In the first place, Jesus is asked a trick question. In the second place, the coin he is handed bears a likeness of the Emperor, which for the Jew would have been a graven image, in violation of the second commandment. In the third place, Jesus' response is to say, effectively, "Caesar can have his graven images, but give to God whatever belongs to God." For a first-century Jew like Jesus, there would have been precious little if anything that did not belong to God.

Christians, in fact, must live with a fundamental and ineradicable tension between their loyalty to God and the demands of everyday life. There is no way to dissolve this tension. There is no way neatly to divide up our world into the things that God requires and all the things that make no difference to God so we can do whatever we want. We need to learn to live in such a way that we do not let the things of this world assume priority of place in our devotion. We need to learn how to live without becoming captive to worldly powers. We need to learn how to tread lightly on the earth, giving ourselves to every time and circumstance without expectation of permanent possession or tangible reward.

The title of my sermon this morning comes from a speech delivered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a man whom many regard as America's greatest public theologian. He is almost universally judged to have been one of the greatest Presidents of these United States. Speaking to Congress on December 1, 1862, Abraham Lincoln presided over a country deeply divided and at war. The context of his remarks suggests that Lincoln was anticipating what was to become the Emancipation Proclamation. This was one step that he envisioned in a strategy that required breaking with the past and forging a new future for the country. What else may have been on his mind, I don't know, but Lincoln observed to Congress, "The situation is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise – with the occasion. . . . We must disentrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country."

"We must disentrall ourselves." Lincoln doubtless chose his words carefully. The primary meaning of the word "thrall" is bondage or slavery or servitude. Lincoln was calling upon the leaders of the country not simply to free the slaves but to free themselves from past policies and practices that limited their vision and bound them to former conditions. It was a call to recognize the new reality of their situation, to become liberated and liberating in the course they must set for the country. It was a call for spiritual as well as political transformation.

I have thought a lot about these words of Lincoln ever since September 11, 2001. If ever our nation has been in thrall, in bondage and servitude, to constricted visions and narrowed sympathies and debilitating policies, it has been these past seven years. We have been in thrall to terrorism and fear. We have become enthralled with something called patriotism and something called national security. The claim is made that for our country to be made safe and secure, laws must be changed, liberties must be sacrificed, tens of thousands of suspected terrorists must be detained without charges or trials, harsh interrogations (aka torture) must be conducted, wars must be waged. The claim has been made that it is unpatriotic to question our government, its leaders, and their policies. In consequence, a great distortion has taken place in our public life. If the events of 9/11 were really about a handful of terrorists bent on destroying the American way of life, they have succeeded far beyond what they could have imagined.

In my view, much of what has been best about this country has been diminished or destroyed in recent years, but not because of some Middle Eastern terrorists. The real problem is far more basic and long-standing. The real problem is that we Americans lack a right estimate of ourselves. We do not see ourselves as others see us. We live with illusions of superiority that blind us and enslave us to ideologies that do not fit the realities of our world or the circumstances of our times. As Christians we profess a God of love, but our public life has manifest a politics of fear. As

Christians we profess a God of forgiveness, but our public life has manifest a politics of vengeance and punishment. As Christians we profess a God of compassion, but our public life has manifest a politics of American dominance and power. As Christians we profess the virtues of humility, but our public life continues to be governed by the ideology of American exceptionalism.

We tend to think of ourselves as the exceptional nation, the city set on a hill, the last best hope of humankind. This is our national myth, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. We live in thrall to this view of ourselves as superior and exceptional. I would hardly deny that there are many exceptional features of our country, some of them to be cherished and celebrated. I hardly think it is wrong to love one's country. But it is a serious moral and spiritual failing to regard one's country as morally superior and exceptional. It is a form of idolatry.

We must disenthral ourselves – about ourselves. The United States has more people in jails and prisons per capita than any other industrialized nation. We rank far down the list on all kinds of measures regarding the care and treatment of the most vulnerable members of society. We are outpaced by all kinds of nations when it comes to education and knowledge about the world. How can we possibly think that we are a morally superior nation!

Christians understand, or at least should understand, that a true love of one's country—a true patriotism—does not mean blind allegiance, or blind obedience, to those who rule, the laws they make and the policies they practice. We must never be in thrall to the prevailing principalities and powers. There is nothing about our system of government, and there is certainly nothing about the people we select to govern us, that is beyond criticism. Protestant Christianity was in large measure a movement of dissent against an unholy alliance of Church and State. Protest, dissent, is a way of life for those who grasp the irresolvable tension that exists between the call to be a people of God and the conflicting demands of temporal authorities and powers.

I offer no solution here, no way out of this tension. Rather, I invite you to recognize the ever-present need to become disenthralled of all those notions that cloud our vision, that hold us captive to ideas and ideologies that obscure the realities of our day, that blind us to the truth about who we are and what failings we have. We cannot continue as we have. Our planet cannot sustain us. The global community will not support us. Our military power cannot vindicate us. We must learn to think and act anew.

For us as Christians, I believe, the place to begin is with a kind of indifference to our own safety and security and well-being. This is not the indifference of being reckless or uncaring. It is the relative indifference that comes from understanding that, whether God delivers us or not, whether things turn out well for us or not, there's really only one thing to be done: In a world of awesome powers and unknown dangers, we must hold fast in our allegiance to God, apart from whom nothing of meaning, value, or truth endures. Anything that departs from what God would have us to do is but vain imagining, an idolatry of mind and heart, a failure in our calling. AMEN.

*Copyright 2008 by Byron C. Bangert*