

Daniel 3:1–30
Easter Vigil
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
March 30, 2024

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

The readings for Easter Vigil are all about the creation, redemption, and sanctification we are freely given by our Triune God. There's an emphasis on water, especially in the first few readings. That lines up well with the ancient tradition of holding most, if not all, baptisms at the Easter Vigil service. There's an emphasis on water and then on the preaching of repentance and faith to all people. And finally, there's an emphasis on fire. We begin with the Service of Light, with the entrance of the Christ candle into the darkened church and the lighting of all the candles. And there's the baptismal candle for the newly baptized, a reminder that Jesus is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome and that in Him, Christians are lights in this world. The final reading for Easter Vigil, our sermon text for this evening, also deals with fire: the account of the fiery furnace from Daniel chapter 3.

King Nebuchadnezzar from Babylon ruled over many peoples, and nations, and languages. And like so many with so much control, the power got to his head. The king decided to force all under his control to worship a false idol he had established, a false god made of gold, even much fine gold. The LORD establishes earthly authority, but earthly authority is corruptible. The LORD gives gold, but the gold of this earth perishes. Like all material goods, it passes away. The rulers of this world continue forcing many peoples and nations and languages to fall down and worship the god of Mammon. They forget that God put them in the position they're in not to lead people away from Him, but to lead them closer to their creator.

Many Jews understood this, even Jews living in captivity in Babylon. They were surrounded by idolatry, yet Daniel and his companions—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—stayed true to the only true God. When ordered to worship an idol, they declared as all Christians ought: “We must obey God rather than men.” The punishment for not obeying King Nebuchadnezzar’s clear order to worship the idol? Death in the fiery furnace! When the three young men stood before the king, he was so enraged that he blasphemed the one true God, saying: “who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” The three young men didn’t hesitate: “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

The furnace was heated as hot as possible, so hot that the men who bound Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego perished in the flames as they threw the three young men into the flames. The three men fell into the flames, but King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished, asking his counselors: “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire? . . . But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”

Who is this fourth man? It could be an angel sent to guide the three young men through the entire ordeal. Maybe it’s an angel who was always with them, but revealed at this moment as a witness to the king? In the book of Job (2:1; 38:7) angels are called “sons of God.” The angels are sons of God in a certain sense. They stand before the Father in Heaven as attendants in His house. And then they are sent to us as ministering spirits, as spirits who serve us. So they’re part of the family. But to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you?” (Heb 1:5; 2 Sam 7:14). Even if the fourth man is just a regular angel, then this

angel would be a picture for us of the true Son of God, our LORD Jesus Christ, who descended into the furnace of Hell, unphased by the flames, to deliver those bound by the chains of death.

Or the fourth man could in fact be the Angel of the LORD, who throughout the Old Testament is described as God Himself. God sends Himself as a messenger to His people. The angel of the LORD is the Son of God, our LORD Jesus Christ before He took on our human flesh and blood in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He manifested Himself to His people throughout the Old Testament, and then entered our world permanently at the Incarnation, when God became man. The Second person of the Holy Trinity, the Word of God who communicates with man, became flesh and dwells among us, even today. In the King James Version of the Bible, King Nebuchadnezzar says: “the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.” It’s as though the pagan Nebuchadnezzar prophesies about Jesus Christ, which the unbelievers often do unintentionally in the Scriptures, from Balaam foretelling the star that would rise out of Jacob to Caiaphas, the High Priest, saying it would be better for one man to die for the people than that the whole nation perish. Nebuchadnezzar sees the Son of God and can only describe Him as the Son of God.

The fiery furnace is a picture of Sheol, a picture of death and Hell. It’s the place where all flesh goes to decompose, a place that for the unbelievers is a place of fire and torment, where “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48). But Jesus, the fourth man, enters the furnace that we might go through unscathed. He took the fiery wrath of God upon Himself at the cross and then went to proclaim victory to the spirits in prison. Jesus unbinds the captives and sets them free. And the ones who bound our LORD and His servants are themselves cast into the flames. That’s what we see pictured in the death of the mighty men of Nebuchadnezzar’s army. They were instructed to martyr the Lord’s servants, but then they

themselves perished instead. This is like when the Devil tries to kill our LORD, but in the process, he is himself destroyed. Or how death snatches away Jesus but in the end, death itself is thrown into the fire because the Lord rises from the dead, bringing the captives with Him.

The four men walked around, unbound, in the midst of the fire and they were not hurt. The fire that otherwise destroys becomes a purifying fire. As the LORD says through the prophet Zechariah: “I will put them into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them.. I will say, ‘They are my people’; and they will say, ‘The LORD is my God.’” The LORD puts His people through much suffering, even as He Himself endured much suffering on the cross. But that suffering is meant not for harm, but for good. After the suffering follows an eternal weight of glory in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and then the resurrection of all those found in Him, the resurrection of all those who believe and are baptized. The life of the baptized is a life of testing. We rejoice in our sufferings. We rejoice that we are counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus Christ, knowing that our faith is being tested and purified like gold being tested by fire. The result is praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 1:7).

When the three young men came out of the fire, everyone saw that “the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them.” Jesus Christ miraculously preserved His own through the flames. He came through with the nail wounds in His hands and in His feet, and with the hole in His side, that you might rise again in incorruptibility. When you finally come through your last little hour, contending with death and the forces of Hell, you will have passed through the fire to rise again in perfection, never to die again. The LORD holds in His hand the power of life and death. He is able to preserve you from all harm and through death

itself, that you finally attain eternal life. He is the Resurrection and the Life. In Him, you will live, even though you die.

Nebuchadnezzar then blessed the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who sent His angel and delivered His servants, who trusted in Him, and disregarded the king's command, yielding up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except the one true God. The death and resurrection of Jesus has the power to change lives. The suffering and glory of the servants of Christ is a powerful witness to the unbelieving world, a confession before those in high places. May the LORD continue working through His Word and through the lives of His people that the world might bend the knee before the true King: the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Savior of all, who gave up His life and took it up again. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.