

# Prepared to Say No

A Children's Talk by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

Bryn Athyn Church Community Worship Service - November 3, 2024

- We're talking today about being prepared – being ready.
  - Something happens and we're ready to do the right thing.
- We'll start with some simple examples from math.
  - Math class prepares people to be ready for math questions.
    - What's  $1 + 1$ ? (2)
    - What's  $2 + 2$ ? (4)
  - Now for older kids,
    - What's  $5 \times 5$ ? (25).
    - What's  $8 \times 7$ ? (56).
      - Often you have to do work to be prepared.
      - People who knew the answer to that question may have practiced their times tables so that they could be prepared for that kind of question.
- Another kind of being prepared is being prepared to say, "No."
  - Let's practice: everyone say, "No."
    - That's a good skill – being able to say no.
  - Let's practice with the 10 Commandments.
    - Should I steal something? (No.)
    - Should I lie? (No.)
    - Should I take the Lord's name in vain? (No.)
- You were prepared with those answers.
  - You were ready to say no.
  - We're going to read a story about some good men who were prepared to say no in a very difficult situation.
- The 3 men's names were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and they were from Israel but they were living in captivity in Babylon, far away from their home.
- The king of Babylon's name was Nebuchadnezzar and one day he made an enormous golden image.
  - It was so big!
  - It was twice as tall as this ceiling!
- Nebuchadnezzar made this huge image and then gathered many people there and commanded that, when all the musical instruments played, everyone had to fall down and worship the image.
  - And he threatened that, if people didn't worship his image, he would throw them into a burning fiery furnace.
  - And so, when all the musical instruments played, lots and lots of people bowed down and worshiped the image.

- But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were prepared to say no.
  - They knew that the first of the 10 Commandments was “You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image... you shall not bow down to them nor serve them” (Exodus 20:3-5).
  - And so, when all the musical instruments played, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said no and did not fall down and worship the golden image.
- Some people told King Nebuchadnezzar that these three men hadn’t worshiped and so they were brought before the king.
  - And he was so angry – he was trembling and in fury!
  - He told them again, “When you hear the music, you will fall down and worship the image; but if you do not, then you will be thrown into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the God who will deliver you from my hands?”
- Listen to what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego do:
  - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we will not hurry to give you an answer about this thing. If it be so, 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, let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image which you have set up” (Daniel 3:16-18).
    - They said no.
    - They said, “Maybe our God will save us; maybe He won’t but, either way, we will NOT worship your image!”
- Nebuchadnezzar was furious and he commanded that the furnace be heated seven times hotter and that the three men be tied up and thrown into the furnace.
  - They were thrown in and fell down inside the furnace.
- But then Nebuchadnezzar was amazed because he then saw 4 men, not tied up, walking in the midst of the fire and one of them looked like the Son of God.
  - And so Nebuchadnezzar called for them to come out of the furnace and they did and they were not burnt at all – not them, or their clothes, or their hair – and they didn’t even have the smell of fire on them.
- Those three men were prepared to say no, even in a very hard situation.
- The Lord can help you to be brave and be prepared to say no too.
- And when you are prepared to say no to all the bad things then you also are prepared to say yes to all the good things that the Lord wants to give you.
- *Amen.*

**Prayer**

- Lord, thank you for teaching us to say no. Help us to say no to hell and yes to following You.

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## Introduction

- Are you prepared for the elections in two days?
  - Are you prepared for whatever happens *after* election day?
- The *best* case scenario is that millions of people in our country are disappointed and upset by the results.
  - Regardless of which candidates win the elections, that's the *best* case scenario.
  - I would guess that you can think of some scenarios that are *worse* than that.
- In the face of that reality, it is easy to feel worried and powerless.
  - That's an unpleasant combination – feeling worried about something but also feeling like there's nothing you can do to change the outcome.
  - Maybe you're not overly concerned about the election, but there might be other aspects of what's going on in our country, or in your personal or professional life about which you feel worried and also powerless to change the outcome.
- With those areas of life in mind, I want to invite you to reflect on the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.
  - They seem powerless to change what's happening, and yet they also do not seem worried.
  - They are prepared to respond calmly and appropriately to the situation.
    - How can we be prepared to do the same?

## Their Confidence Was Not Tied to External Outcomes

- The first thing that I want to draw your attention to about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's way of being is that their confidence was not tied to external outcomes.
  - They did not know for sure that their God would rescue them from the fiery furnace.
    - They said, "If it be so, 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, let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image which you have set up."
  - Even if God did *not* rescue them, they still were *not* going to worship Nebuchadnezzar's golden image.
  - There's such peace and calm in their response, in the face of Nebuchadnezzar's fury and the burning fiery furnace.
    - Just a simple, "No, we're not going to do that."

- We can sometimes feel like our faith and confidence in the Lord is contingent on how things go down: "If things happen this way, then I can trust in the Lord."
  - But, if our confidence is based on what happens in the world, we are not going to be calm, we are going to be blown around in the wind.
- The Lord said to His disciples, "It is impossible that no offenses should come..." (Luke 17:1).
  - It's just how things go in this world.
- And another time He said, "In the world you will have affliction,..."
  - But then He went on to say, "...but have confidence, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).
  - The Lord has overcome the world and, if we have confidence in Him, then we can overcome the world too.
    - The Lord said, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace" (John 16:33).

### ***Not Peace Through Not Caring***

- One way we might try to find peace is by letting go of caring about any outcomes but I think that's not quite what the Lord is wanting for us.
  - To not care about what happens in our country or to other people in our country sounds cold and unloving and not like the kind of disposition that our God would want us to have.
  - It seems very likely that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego cared about whether they got burnt in the furnace or not and that they cared about all the other people who were being forced to worship an idol.
  - They still care about the outcome but their confidence and sense of peace was not contingent on it.
- Our confidence cannot be in a vague, "Oh, I'm sure things will work out."
  - We know from history that there are countless examples of things going very badly and that there's always a chance that they could go badly again.
  - We know even of plenty of examples of good people like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who stood up for what was right and who suffered or were killed as a result.
- Our confidence cannot be tied to any outcome in the world.
  - Instead we can have confidence in our God who has overcome the world.
  - We can find peace and calm in knowing that, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, regardless of what happens in the world, we will try to follow our God.
    - Whether our God will save us in the natural world we do not know, but let it be known that we will not serve selfishness and hell.

## Preparation Through Prayer

- We might marvel that these three men were able to take a stand like this.
  - How were they prepared to face a circumstance like this?
- We don't know but it seems awfully likely that part of how they were prepared was through a regular practice of praying to God.
- We know that their companion, Daniel, prayed regularly.
  - We're told that three times a day he knelt down on his knees and prayed and gave thanks before his God and that that was his custom from when he was young (Daniel 6:10).
- It seems likely that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had the same custom (Daniel 2:16-19).
  
- When we pray, we can prepare ourselves for different circumstances.
  - In Gethsemane the Lord prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39).
  - We too can pray to the Lord that certain things not happen but also pray that His will be done.
  - And we can pray to be prepared for the situation.
    - "Lord, if the election does not go the way that I want it to, please help me to not do x. And please help me to do y."
  - In the quiet and reflective state of prayer we might be able to get a better sense of how the Lord might want us to respond to a difficult circumstance so that, when we're in that difficult moment we are more prepared to respond in a good way than if we were just trying to figure out what to do in the heat of the moment.
  
- Part of what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego say to Nebuchadnezzar is this: "O Nebuchadnezzar, we will not hurry to give you an answer about this thing."
- "We will not hurry."
  - I love this as a target to aim for in our prayer.
  - Things can feel awfully urgent and hurried in the moment.
  - They can even feel that way when we're praying about them but, as we pray about them, we can be asking the Lord to calm our thoughts so that we're not in a hurry to respond.
  
- On this topic of how prayer can prepare us for situations, I was listening to a podcast episode about the Lord's Prayer ("BibleProject: What Forgiveness Is and Isn't (The Lord's Prayer Pt. 4)", Jun 3, 2024 - <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/what-forgiveness-and-isnt-lords-prayer-pt-4/>).
  - One person was talking about the effect of daily praying the part of the Lord's prayer about forgiving our debtors.
  - He was saying that it is meant to shape each of us into the kind of person who is prepared to be wronged by people.
  - If each day we are praying, "And forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors," we are mentally preparing ourselves that we are going to be wronged by somebody today.
  - And hopefully we are preparing ourselves to respond to being wronged with forgiveness because we have recently reminded ourselves of how often we have done wrong and that we need the Lord to forgive us.

- I love this because it's realistic.
- We're not imagining some perfect world in which everything always goes well.
- We're imagining a world in which there's miscommunication, and hurt being caused by both people in a relationship, and people doing things that they shouldn't, and people not doing things that they should.
- And if all the people are also regularly praying for forgiveness and praying to be forgiving, those flawed people are going to be so much better prepared for life and their relationships are going to be so much better, even if those people strongly disagree about what's best for the country.

## The Value of Religious Community

- Another thing that helps us to be better prepared for the challenges of life is having religious community.
- Imagine if Meshach had been confronted with this command to worship the golden image on his own.
  - No Shadrach or Abednego along with him; no Daniel in his life as a great example of someone who lived according to his principles, regardless of the consequences.
  - Would Meshach have kept up with his habit of praying to the Lord regularly if he didn't live with people for whom that was a normal thing to do?
  - Would Meshach have been able to calmly state that he would not worship the image if he had had to do it on his own?
    - We don't know but it certainly seems likely that part of what prepared Meshach and the others to be ready to respond well in that difficult moment was the fact that they had good spiritual community.
- It's the same for all of us.
  - We learn how to read and understand the Word in community.
  - We learn how to share ideas about religious topics, how to disagree, how to acknowledge our faults, how to forgive, how to pray, how to trust in the Lord – the list goes on.
- We also learn how to spiritually "sweep our house" from our religious community.
  - Let me explain what this means.
- There's a great passage in the teachings of the New Church that explains the spiritual meaning of "sweeping" when it occurs in the Word.
  - The reason why "sweeping" means preparing and being filled is that nothing else is asked of anyone except to "sweep their house," that is, to reject evil desires and resulting false persuasions. If a person does this they are filled with all forms of good, for good from the Lord is constantly flowing in. ....

As in Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Sweep (prepare) the way of Jehovah; make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3).

"Level out, level out, sweep (prepare) the way; remove the stumbling block from My people's way" (Isaiah 57:14). (*Arcana Coelestia* 3142)

- Nothing else is asked of us than that we reject evil desires and false persuasions and then the Lord will flow into us with all forms of good.
  - But what does it mean to reject evil desires and false persuasions and how do we do that?
  - I learned how to do that from my church community.
    - Hearing people talk about how they identified evil desires within themselves and worked to reject those is what taught me how to do the same thing myself.
    - For example, hearing other people reflect on how a desire to control others could creep into their interactions helped me to know to look for that in the house of my own mind.
  
- I love the correspondence of sweeping a house because that is also a skill that is learned in community.
  - Learning how to handle a broom.
  - Learning how to get into the corners of the room.
  - Learning how to sweep the dirt into piles and then collect those piles with a dustpan and brush.
  - Learning how to avoid make a new mess when you dump those piles into the trash can.
  - All of us learned how to do those things by some combination of 1) being explicitly taught how; 2) watching other people do it; and 3) doing it ourselves and learning from our mistakes.
    - It's the same for learning how to spiritually sweep, how to spiritually prepare ourselves for the Lord to flow into our lives.
    - We each need to sweep our own minds but we can learn how to do it from others.

## In the Worst Times, You Have the Most Freedom

- Even with the most supportive religious community there will still be times when we have to confront incredibly difficult circumstances, to all appearances, completely on our own.
  - Times when we are dealing with someone as furious as Nebuchadnezzar in our face.
  - Or times when we are feeling the fires of hellish desire burning within us like a terrible furnace.
  - At those times, part of our preparation can be to know (somewhere deep within us) that at the absolute worst times in our lives, we have the most freedom and the Lord is in fact even closer to us.
  - Listen to this passage:
    - In self-compulsion there is freedom. .... [And,] although the contrary seems to be the case, there is more freedom in times of temptation than there is outside of them. Indeed at such times freedom is stronger as assaults are made by evils and falsities and it is strengthened by the Lord in order that a heavenly proprium may be given to the person. For that reason also the Lord is closer in times of temptation. (*Arcana Coelestia* 1947)
  
- Yes, the world and hell can throw all kinds of terrible things at you, but you always have the freedom to say no to hell.
  - And those times when we don't manage to say no to hell can become part of how we learn how to be better prepared to say no to hell the next time.

## Recap

- We've talked today about how Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were prepared to respond appropriately to their difficult circumstances.
  - 1) Their trust in the Lord was not contingent on external circumstances: they were going to follow the Lord, regardless of the outcome.
  - 2) We talked about being better prepared for difficult situations through regular prayer.
  - 3) We talked about how religious community can help us be better prepared.
  - 4) Finally, we talked about how, in the worst times, you have the most freedom.

## Conclusion

- The point of all of this is that the Lord can help us, as individuals and as a community, to be better prepared to deal with whatever afflictions and challenges the world throws at us.
- And whatever hardships we go through in this life, they all are preparation for the eternal life that the Lord has prepared for us.
- One of the places where these teachings are best expressed is in the twenty-third psalm:
  - 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil;  
For You are with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
  - 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
You anoint my head with oil;  
My cup runs over.
  - 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
All the days of my life;  
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD  
Forever. (Psalm 23:4-6)
- Amen.

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