

Into the Fire

A homily preached by Jennifer A. Hudson at St. Paul's on the Green Episcopal Church, November 8, 2018

Daniel 3: 16-27 and Luke 24: 36-43

Have you ever endured suffering that seemed too great to bear? Perhaps an experience so terrifying or painful that you felt as though you'd been abandoned by God and thrown into the deepest pit of hell?

I'm enduring three different challenges at the moment. Each is equally scary. Each has tested my trust in God. Each feels like baptism by fire.

When challenges disrupt our lives, it's hard to imagine the possibility that things will get better. Whether watching a loved one battle a serious illness, or facing health concerns of our own, or mustering the courage to live honestly and come out to our spouse, or finding ourselves unemployed, it's easy to feel things will never improve, or like we're being punished for some mistake. We fall into the infernos of hopelessness and we lose our trust in God.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are thrown into a fire for being faithful to God instead of worshipping Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue. They have no guarantee they will come out of the experience alive. Yet Nebuchadnezzar,

when he looks into the flames, finds the three unharmed, and with the presence of a fourth (divine) person.

Jesus endures hours of physical, emotional and mental anguish on the cross. Even before that he is whipped and stripped. He is ridiculed. His friends desert him. He doubts the presence of the Creator. He dies. He descends into hell.

Yet on the third day Jesus rises—not just in some spiritual sense, but also in body. The apostles are dumbfounded. How could anyone come out of suffering, even death, unharmed? Is Jesus appearing to them as a ghost? Dead people don't ask for something to eat.

The miracle of Jesus' resurrection—even of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego withstanding the flames—points to the miracle of God's loving presence and ability to surprise us when all hope seems lost. But the miracle requires trust before it can manifest.

I may not know what's ahead, but I do know that I'm never alone. God can't wave a magic wand, but God can comfort me and God can use my challenges to forge me into someone stronger, more courageous, and more open and compassionate—if I trust.

Adam Benson puts it this way in a meditation from *The Upper Room*: “Intense suffering can leave its mark on us. God does not promise to keep us from the fiery furnace, but God is with us in it. And like a ceramic piece that becomes even more beautiful after having been through the oven, God can take the most intense moments in our lives and form us into something different, too — something more beautiful, more durable, and more like Christ.”

Physical, emotional or mental suffering is part of the human experience. And that God, in Jesus Christ, not only shared in our experience but also rose above our afflictions points to an even greater miracle: that we can triumph too if we stay true to God.

What fires are you withstanding? Feel God present. Trust God will deliver you. You might just be surprised.