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Easter 4 A, April 30, 2023

“Jesus – Our Joy – The Secret to Greatness”

Daniel 3: 8 – 18; Daniel 3: 17 – 18

What do you call a guy who builds a ninety-foot-tall golden statue of himself and commands everyone to worship it? I call him a fool. This was King Nebuchadnezzar, but from now on I’ll just call him Neb.

The book of Daniel tells the story of a group of young men who are taken from Jerusalem to Babylon when Neb conquers their city. These young men were the cream of the crop. It was not unusual for Babylon to do this. Their names were Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Perhaps you’re familiar with their names. If you’re not, I encourage you to read the first few chapters of the book of Daniel. Many who experienced this would just become Babylonian in their habits and actions.

However, our four young men did not. They continued to be faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It’s going to cause them problems, but it’s also going to open some doors for them to speak into the heart of the king.

The account of the statue is in Daniel 3, But that is not the first time that the king will run into one of these boys. In Daniel 2 the king has a dream and none of his wise men can interpret it. Because they can’t do it, he orders all the wise men of the nation to be killed.

Daniel comes forward and says that he can offer the king an interpretation, not by his own power, but by the power of his God. The king is so impressed by Daniel and his humility and ability, that he declares in Daniel 2: 47, “Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and the revealer of mysteries because you were able to reveal this mystery.” Daniel is made the head administrator and he brings his three friends along to help him.

Now you would think that after this the king would become wiser, but he does not. In chapter 3 we hear about the statue. Some of the other administrators were jealous of the boys. They come to the king after he asserts his privilege and tells him there are

some Jews don't bow down to that statue or worship like he does. They tell him it is Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He orders them to come to him.

He confronts them with their disobedience. He gives them one last chance to bow down, with the warning that if they don't they will be thrown into a furnace. They explain to him that they don't have to defend themselves, which only makes him more incensed.

And they go on to explain in Daniel 3: 17 – 18, "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us from your hand, oh king. But even if He does not, we want you to know, oh king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold that you have set up."

Now you would have thought that after seeing how powerful the God of Daniel was, that the king would have been more respectful. Remember, he's a fool. He had the furnace stoked up; had the boys thrown in. Some of the men carrying out the king's orders, died because the furnace was so hot.

When the King looks into the fiery furnace, he sees four men walking around. He commands them to come out. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego come out. Some commentators suggest the angel is Jesus Himself. That's speculation but, it's kind of interesting to know. Once again, the king sings the praises of their God. By now he must certainly have learned to be humble.

Daniel 4 tells of another of the king's dreams. Daniel interprets it and warns him that the dream is about his pride. The very king of Babylon, is going to be cut down if he doesn't find a way to be less prideful.

One night, as the king is walking around, he says to himself, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty." And as soon as those words come out of his mouth he hears a voice from heaven telling him that his royal authority has been taken away and he will live among the animals; he will eat grass like cattle.

His body will be drenched with dew and his hair grow like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird and that's exactly what happened. After a while, he raised his eyes toward heaven and his sanity was restored, along with his kingdom, and he praised the Most High God.

I would love to tell you that his family learned from this but unfortunately pride frequently keeps us from learning from our experiences. We are likely to blame others for whatever shortfalls happen, even when it's our own fault.

Perhaps we can contrast Neb with another man. St. Paul's School of Theology in Kansas City was seeking a new President. Over one hundred candidates applied for the position. The search committee narrowed the list to five eminently qualified persons. Then somebody came up with a brilliant idea: Let's send a person to the institution where each of the five finalists is currently employed.

Let's interview the janitor at each place, asking him what he thinks of the man soon to be president. This was done and a janitor gave such a glowing appraisal of William MacElveny that he was selected president of St. Paul's School of theology.

When you live close to Jesus you become so secure in His love, that you no longer relate to people according to rank, power, money or prestige. They treat janitors and governors with equal dignity; they regard everybody as a VIP. Children seem to be able to do that intuitively. Adults, even Christians, often have to relearn it.

The secret to greatness in the Kingdom of God is to serve. It's really no big secret. We only need to look to the life of Jesus to see how important it is. But it is hard for us to learn that lesson. There are so many voices telling us that to humbly service is foolish. We'll never be noticed, we'll never be recognized, we'll never get the big credits that we deserve.

They tell us that if we really want to be recognized, we need to proudly proclaim all of our accomplishments. This is so, even when we might not be as responsible for those accomplishments as we think, because otherwise how will we rise to high office?

We live in a world where humility is rarely seen as a virtue. In the Kingdom of God, the humble are not looking for reward, they are simply looking to serve God. Who gets the credit is not as important to them as that the poor are comforted, the sick receive healing touches, the lonely get visited and those in prison get cared for along with their families. Those are the things that the church has excelled at throughout the centuries.

During many plagues it was Christians who took care of those who were suffering and dying. They were thought to be fools yet their care for people changed lives, including their own. It is through humble service that we come closer to Jesus because we recognize that He humbly served us.

It is in humble service that we fulfill His command to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. In fact, Jesus wants us to be so inclined towards love, that we don't even recognize we're doing it. It is just our way of living for we know that it is Jesus who lives in us and empowers us.

Oftentimes, people who make great impacts don't start out to do so. They simply want to help people. During the Civil War, Clara Barton earned the honor of "angel of the battlefield." Her work with the wounded ultimately led her to found the worldwide organization that became the Red Cross. She simply wanted to be able to share the love that she had learned from Jesus with others.

When Martin Luther posted the ninety-five theses on the church door, it was not his intent to found his own church. He wanted to have a scholarly discussion with people about his concerns. It was only after his death, that the church became more commonly called Lutheran.

Luther was calling the church back to the centrality of the Gospel, centered in Jesus; His death and resurrection. It saddened him that the church refused to return. He looked feverishly to share that Gospel with people so that it would create a reformation in the church.

The reality is that many people do understand what Jesus is saying when He says if you want to be great in the Kingdom of God you have to be a servant. They are not looking for their names to be put on windows or plaques. Many of them don't even want their name in a bulletin. They go about their daily life, serving God by serving others.

Their hope is simply that by their humble service they can make the life of others better. They don't need or want accolades. Recognition is the farthest thing from their imagination. Yet, as we hold up people who serve, we are really shining a light on Jesus, who calls us to serve

He has called us to such service. We get to see the transformation that happens when we respond to His call. They serve humbly and with great joy for the Kingdom of God. Jesus invites us to have that same joy. Become a humble servant in the Kingdom of God and you will have joy and bring glory to Him.

Count me in: Plan a humble act that make a difference in someone's life.