**Sermon: Even If**

**Scriptures: Daniel 3:16-30; Luke 12: 4-12**

**Preached: February 12, 2017 at Grove Presbyterian Church by Rev. Merritt N. Schatz**

 Even if. The most powerful words in this story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are the simple words, “even if.” It is one thing to stand firm against the unreasonable demands of a king who has the power to kill you when you are confident in the power of one who can rescue, and whom you are confident *will* rescue you. It is far more impressive to stand firm with the understanding that although God is able to overcome the evil, God might choose not to do so. The faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego declares that their trust in God does not depend upon God rescuing them, even from this fatal threat. *This* is faith indeed!

 This is also not the first time that these men, and their good friend Daniel, were faced with believing “even if.” Imagine yourself on the streets of ancient Jerusalem. Dust from destroyed buildings fills the air. Your hands are tied and you are in a long line of once wealthy and prominent people being led to Babylon. The exiles are marched through the streets so that the common people can see their elite being taken away. You are prodded past what little remains of the temple, once a magnificent building, renovated by Josiah just a few decades previously. Place one foot after another for months to travel the 900 miles from Jerusalem to Babylon. Lift your head as you approach that great city. The walls of the city stretch 300 feet into the air. The foundation of those walls sinks 35 feet into the ground. These walls were 80 feet thick. There will be no escape! Enter through the massive gates and see the central temple – an ornate building big enough to house a table which weighs at least 25 tons! Fifty-three more temples were spread across the city! [Exploring the Story, Adam T. Barr, p. 100] Settle into a sparse room and spend some time wondering what was going to happen to you. Then a man comes and calls your name and the names of three of your close friends. You are taken to the palace, dressed in fine clothes, and offered sumptuous food from the king’s table. *You* are among the privileged few who will receive education and occupation and power. There will be some compromises, but what do you say?

 If you are Daniel, you say, ‘Even if I have seen my city destroyed and my country laid waste, and even if this means that I could live a more comfortable life, I will be faithful to my God. Even if it means that I will be thrown out of this program, I will speak my concerns and risk being rejected.’ God did rescue Daniel and his friends. God entered the heart of the person in charge and showed him a way to accommodate Daniel’s request for simpler food and drink. Daniel could not have been sure of that before he asked. Yet he asked, even if.

 Later Daniel learns of the king’s decree to kill all the wise men because some of them had not been able to tell the king what his dream was, let along interpret it. Daniel turns to his friends and asks them to pray. He himself prays to God. Daniel does not demand that God give him the answer that will save their lives. Daniel asks. God tells Daniel the dream and the interpretation. Daniel takes this information to the king, crediting God. The king is impressed.

 Then, after the awesome power of God displayed in the even if story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, there comes yet one more “even if” moment again for Daniel. A new king arises, a Persian king named Darius, who recognizes Daniel’s abilities, but may not have known all these stories about the God of Daniel and his friends. Jealous officials create a trap for Daniel. Flattering the king they convince him to declare a month in which no one can pray to anyone divine or human other than the king. The officials know that Daniel will not abide by this command. Daniel knows about the edict, but prays to God *openly* anyway. King Darius is caught in a trap. He must fulfill the punishment which he has decreed. Daniel prayed, even if it meant he would be thrown in a lions’ den. Daniel prayed, even though he did not know whether God would choose to rescue him from the lions’ mouths. God did, but Daniel did not assume that God would.

 These men were given every opportunity to assimilate into the culture around them. They were taught the Babylonian language and history. They were given jobs in the Babylonian hierarchy. They only needed to keep their heads down and they could have lived the “good life.” They could have thought, “What difference will it make even if I speak, even if I refuse to bow down, even if I don’t pray to God for just one month?” They chose a different “even if.”

The “even if” faith of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (to return them to their Hebrew names) is powerful. It was powerful to their fellow exiles and to the prophets who were also giving hope to the exiles. It was even powerful to the kings who held control over their lives. It is powerful for us today.

What are the “even if” idols we face today? What do we stand up for or against because we know it is what God desires, even if we do not know that God will rescue us from the consequences of challenging the prevailing attitudes or customs?

Chances are we will never be faced with a fiery furnace or a lions’ den, although some in our generation across the world *are* faced with the modern equivalent.

Can we say that “even if” the conversation of politics has become rife with half-truths and outright lies, we will take the time to make sure we speak only the truth? Will we challenge those who share our cultural norms or social positions when they demean others, when they misrepresent what has been said or done, even if that means we lose friends, or do we keep to the relatively safe route of only challenging those with whom we disagree?

Will we listen to one another, hearing the wounds, the concerns, the needs of one another, “even if” we are then accused of betrayal, or pandering to the “enemy”? Can we share our opinions, our wisdom, our insights, without assuming we are 100 % correct in all matters, even if this means we do not always get what we think is best (we won’t anyway! – but can we?)

Will we take matters to God – big matters of national and international impact, and little matters which may impact only one person – because we know that God cares for even the least of these? Will we hear God’s voice in Jesus Christ saying, “Do not worry about what you will say; the Holy Spirit will give you the words.” Will we hear and have the confidence to speak even if, we know that some who have spoken for Jesus have been killed? Does our “even if” faith go that far?

Let us take heart with the example of Daniel and his friends. They knew the holy God who transcends geographic boundaries. They knew the awesome God whose ways lead to healthy minds, bodies and spirits. They knew the God of all creation who alone deserves our worship. They knew the God who listens, and who speaks to us to provide direction and hope.

The God of Daniel, Hananiah, Mischael, and Azariah is our God – who is revealed in Jesus Christ and who directs us today in the Holy Spirit. This is the same God, who was and is and is to come! This trustworthy and faithful God does not act at our command, but works for the good of all. Just as God called Daniel and his friends, God calls us to exhibit an “even if” faith – a faith that trusts and obeys even when we do not always get what we want, even when things don’t go our way, even if the way forward seems impossible. God calls us to be open to the Holy Spirit which can fill us with such love and hope that we are able to speak of God’s grace even if we stand before those who are very powerful according to the world’s view. God calls us to know that we are beloved children of the almighty God, and to find courage in that great love and mercy which God has given us in Jesus Christ.

Let us rejoice in the power of the God whose faith is “even if” not “if only.” In this God we give witness to God’s righteousness, justice, and love, and give hope to the world!