



*Fannie Lou Hamer  
Freedom Fighter, (1917-1977)*

## CONTEMPORARY HEROES AND HEROINES DAY

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, February 15, 2009**

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**Lection - Daniel 3:19-30** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 19) Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace to be heated up seven times more than was customary, (v. 20) and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. (v. 21) So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. (v. 22) Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. (v. 23) But the three

men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire. (v. 24) Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, “Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?” They answered the king, “True, O king.” (v. 25) He replied, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god.” (v. 26) Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. (v. 27) And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men; the hair of their heads was not singed, their tunics were not harmed, and not even the smell of fire came from them. (v. 28) Nebuchadnezzar said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king’s command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. (v. 29) Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.” (v. 30) Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

## **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

At many points in American history, especially during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, leaders such as James Lawson, Rosa Parks, James Bevel, Medgar Evers, and so many others, challenged the church and the world to recognize the God of the oppressed who calls Christians to lead the fight for liberation from systems of injustice. On this Sunday, we honor these and all contemporary African American heroes and heroines for their faithfulness to God and faithfulness to the service of all people.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Daniel 3:19-30**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

Since the early 1970s, the U.S. prison population has grown 600%, regardless of increases or decreases in crime.<sup>1</sup> As a prison chaplain, I am very sensitive to this fact. Every week I see a new crop of young men coming in for orientation to the New Jersey state prison system. Today, the U.S. has two million incarcerated people, and the numbers are growing. Today, pastors in areas where there are significant numbers of black Americans must face the fact that there are a lack of young black men in churches and an increase in women and children whose sons, boyfriends, husbands or fathers are incarcerated.

Of the many commentaries that have been written on Daniel, Chapter 3, one calls us to notice that salvation is happening within the fiery furnace—showing us that God (the “Son of God” according to Daniel 3:25) is present in the fire (a burning prison) with the Hebrew children.<sup>2</sup> This perspective calls the church to engage those who are in the fiery

furnaces of poverty and all types of prisons and to help them find their way toward freedom. This is the work of heroes and heroines. This is the type of work that they do each and every day. They do not do it for notoriety; they are not typically well paid, if paid at all. Some do not know all of those whom they save, but we do know that the world is a safer, kinder, and more just place because of their living and, in some cases, dying for others. These persons are often inconvenient heroes thrust into situations, ugly situations. So it was with the Hebrew boys of our scripture for today.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

“Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said ‘Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! (v. 26)”

Remarkable! This is one of the more accurate words we can use to describe the story detailed in this scripture. It was remarkable that these three Hebrew boys maintained their testimony of faith in the midst of the fires of pain and punishment brought upon them by a system of oppression and idolatry. It was remarkable that the chief defender of this unjust system changed his mind and became a defender of their faith (v.29). It was remarkable that the political power that saw them as insurgents to be destroyed by the state came to recognize these young men as sages, who should be honored by the government (v.30).

This account is among those attributed to the prophet Daniel and set in the days of Israel’s Babylonian exile. It was penned during the time when the Jews were under the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanies (167-164 B.C.E.). Daniel wrote in hopes that those suffering under persecution would be encouraged by stories of how faithful Jews, loyally practicing their religion, were enabled by divine aid to triumph over their enemies.<sup>3</sup>

King Nebuchadnezzar, prior to Daniel, Chapter 3, had a demeanor of honor and respect toward Daniel and his young Hebrew companions, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. However, after seeing their disobedience to an idolatrous law, his demeanor toward them changed (v.19a). This change meant that he wanted the young men to be punished in a way that was seven times worse than what had been reserved for other transgressors of state law (v.19b). However, we see in verses 25 to 27 what the ancient historian Josephus once wrote: “God made their bodies so far superior to the fire that it could not consume them.”<sup>4</sup>

In light of this extraordinary event, the king has a severe change in perspective that causes him to go from anger (vv.19-23) to renewed respect toward the young Hebrew men (vv. 28-30). Those who truly stand up for God and for what is right, even against governments, are vindicated. Vindication is not always as swift in coming as it was in our text, but the work of heroes and heroines, even if their bodies are killed, always rises again. These persons labor in righteous certainty. The Hebrew boys, when threatened with death, said to the king, “If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it

known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.” (vv. 17-18).

The acts of contemporary African American heroes and heroines are reminiscent of the courage of the young Hebrews. Their actions say, “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around.” Such persons adorn the pages of history books, though far too few. Speeches are given about them and poems are recited invoking their memory. The quotes of some are even used throughout the year. God’s vindication of such persons and their work make clear again the willingness of God to stand with the abused in the fiery furnaces of oppression and injustice.

One contemporary heroine was a civil rights leader. She, like the Hebrew boys, suffered through fire. Hers was the fire of racism. Her name is Fannie Lou Hamer. She was the founder and “guiding spirit” of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>5</sup> She was Martin Luther King Jr.’s peer in her levels of faith, sacrifice, and commitment. Mrs. Hamer survived severe beating and torture at the hands of Mississippi police after trying to claim her constitutional voting rights. Born into a system where so much of her humanity was taken from her by brutality (including her ability to bear children), she still proclaimed with her mouth and with her actions that “something [was] wrong” with the American political system, and she aimed to change it.<sup>6</sup> Alice Walker said of such women, “They were women then, my mama’s generation. Husky of voice. Stout of step. With fists as well as hands how they battered down doors...”<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Hamer, who died before she was 60, from being over worked many say, is representative of a long list of contemporary African American heroes and heroines who, while standing against unjust laws, were thrown into fiery pits of hell. To say that the list of such persons is long is an understatement.<sup>8</sup> If I call the roll of every hero and heroine who has worked, fought, and died to make the lives of African Americans and all people better in the last forty years (the contemporary period), as an old song says, “I just couldn’t tell it all.” We thank God for their extraordinary lives.

### **Celebration**

Contemporary African American heroes and heroines, especially those who fought in the 1950s and ‘60s, like the Hebrew boys, were punished severely by their government and those representing the government. Today, there are many who are born into furnaces of poverty, poor education and prison without any true compass for escape. Thanks be to God that he is still raising up heroes and heroines who are standing up against all odds and in every arena to right some wrong, bring some light into a dark corner, and provide a helping hand to some soul who has lost their way. Let the church call the roll of these heroes and heroines. Give honor to whom honor is due.

### **Descriptive Details**

Some of the descriptive details in this passage include:

**Sights:** The blinding glare of the intense flames (vv. 19-23);

**Sounds:** The cries of the men who died lifting the Hebrew men into the intense fire (v.22); the shouts of praise from King Nebuchadnezzar after changing his mind toward the Hebrew men (vv.28, 29); and

**Smells:** The singed clothes and flesh of the men killed by the fire (v.22).

### Notes

1. Western, Bruce. Punishment and Inequality in America. New York, NY: Russell Sage, 2006. pp. 11-20.
2. LaCocque, Andre. "Daniel." Patte, Daniel, and Teresa Okure. Global Bible Commentary. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004. p. 259.
3. Anderson, Bernhard W., Bruce Manning Metzger, and Roland Edmund Murphy. The New Oxford Annotated Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments: New Revised Standard Version. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994. p. 1126.
4. Josephus, Flavius, and William Whiston. The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus, The Learned and Authentic Jewish Historian and Celebrated Warrior, to Which Are Added Seven Dissertations Concerning Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, James the Just, God's Command to Abraham, Etc. Philadelphia: J. C. Winston Co, 1957. p. 316.
5. Haskins, James. One More River to Cross: The Stories of Twelve Black Americans. New York, NY: Scholastic, 1992. pp. 120-123.
6. Haskins, One More River to Cross. 112-119.
7. Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." (1974) Keetley, Dawn, and John Pettegrew. Public Women, Public Words: A Documentary History of American Feminism. Madison, WI: Madison House, 1997. p. 92.
8. For one list of great African Americans, which includes many freedom fighters, and Mrs. Hamer, see Asante, Molefi Kete. 100 Greatest African Americans: A Biographical Encyclopedia. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002.