

This is What Resistance Looks Like!

The book of Daniel is a hard one to get through. It doesn't appear in any lectionary reading. Some believe that it is a real description of actual events. Others believe that it is simply a myth to illustrate a truth if we dig deep enough. I have never preached on anything from the book of Daniel before, but this story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abendego kept coming to my mind this week as we continue our Black history month theme of Resistance.

How many of you are familiar with this story? If you grew up in a church that did youth musicals you would have heard this story through the musical, "It's Cool in the Furnace." There is also a Veggie Tale video about it. In it, there is an old onion named George who is the gatekeeper of a Nezzzer Chocolate Factory. The main characters of the story, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, but in the Veggie Tales they are Rack, Shack, and Benny.

In the Veggie Tales version, Rack, Shack and Benny work at the Chocolate Factory, where they are employed making the chocolate bunnies. When the two millionth chocolate bunny is shipped, Mr. Nezzzer decides that everyone is allowed to eat as many chocolate bunnies as they like for the next half hour.

While the rest of the employees ravenously eat as many of the bunnies as they like, Shack is a bit uncertain about this decision, telling Rack and Benny that they shouldn't eat any more bunnies, because it isn't good to eat too much candy in one sitting. When Rack and Benny argue about this, stating that everyone else is doing it, Shack retorts back that they should remember what their parents taught them.

After the half hour free for all, Mr. Nezzzer heads into the workroom. And he notices that Rack, Shack, and Benny are the only ones who are still standing up, while everyone else is sick as a dog. So Mr. Nezzzer promotes the three of them to Junior Executives.

But the next morning, Rack, Shack and Benny are greeted by Mr. Nezzzer, who then explains that he will have every one of his faithful employees bow down to a chocolate bunny statue. He wants them to bow down to the statue and sing a song called "The Bunny Song." After they hear the song, Rack, Shack and Benny are a bit troubled by the lyrics with Rack asking what will happen if anyone doesn't sing the song. Mr. Nezzzer answers that question by showing the three boys the furnace where the "bad bunnies" are sent to be destroyed.

I encourage you to watch the video to see what happens. So why did I choose this scripture in the book of Daniel?

Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego were three teenagers who loved God. They were born into royalty but taken from their homes and re-purposed by the Babylonians. Despite their path in life, they maintained their faith in God and did whatever they had to do to follow the laws of Moses.

So here they are, in chapter three, hearing this decree from King Nebuchadnezzar that when they hear the music play, they must bow to this giant gold statue. They decide they are not going to do it. Think about that. The whole kingdom bows down to this statue, as required by law, and these three teenagers stay standing. I can just imagine the people around them, wondering what might happen to the ones still standing. And then there are these jerk astrologers who can't wait to run to the king and tell him what's happened.

Nebuchadnezzar is not a happy king. He's furious that these three teens would dare to defy him. He has them brought in and confronts them. He gives them one last chance, standing there in the king's court, surrounded by armed guards and people who have vowed to kill or die for their king at any moment.

Surely at this point, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would be like, "Sorry, our bad, we'll bow down now." And maybe in the back of their heads they are thinking, "Sorry, God, we'll make it up to you. We are just trying not to get killed here." But that's not what they said. Instead they said, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. God will rescue us from your power. But even if God doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue that you have set up.

That's resistance, my friends. These three are so confident in their God that they flat out refuse an order from the king.

If you know this story, then you know that the king is ticked off! So he has the three of them thrown into the furnace. And yet they do not burn.

Can you imagine the people's faces when they walk out? Can you imagine the teens' faces? Everyone must have been in equal amazement that they survived and that the only thing that burned was that which was binding them.

They resisted. They made a stand. And they lived to tell the tale.

In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision outlawed segregation in public education. Little Rock School District Superintendent Virgil Blossom devised a plan of gradual integration that would begin at Central High School in 1957. The school board called for volunteers from all-black Dunbar Junior High and

Horace Mann High School to attend Central. A woman named Daisy Gaston Bates, who was a member of the NAACP picked the brightest and best students to be a part of the first group to enter the school.

Prospective students were told they would not be able to participate in extra curricular activities if they transferred to Central, like football, basketball, or choir. Many of their parents were threatened with losing their jobs, and some students decided to stay at their own schools.

District Superintendent Blossom said, “You’re not going to be able to go to the football games or basketball games. You’re not going to be able to participate in the choir or drama club, or be on the track team. You can’t go to prom.

Minnijean Brown, one of the Little Rock Nine said “when my tenth grade teacher in our Negro school said that there was a possibility of integration, I signed up. We all felt good. We knew that Central High School had so many more courses, and dramatics and speech and tennis courts and a big, beautiful stadium.

On September 3, 1957, the Little Rock Nine as they were called arrived to enter Central High School, but they were turned away by the Arkansas National Guard. Governor Orval Faubus called out the Arkansas National Guard the night before to, as he put it, maintain and restore order. The soldiers barred the African American Students from entering. Thelma Mothershed Wair, one of the nine said I thought the governor was there to protect me. How wrong I was.

The students arrived at Central alone on that first day. By prior arrangement, they gathered at the 16th Street entrance with several local ministers who accompanied them. Elizabeth Eckford, who you can see in the bulletin, arrived at the other end of the block by herself. She was met by a mob screaming obscenities and threats, chanting, “Two, four, six, eight, we ain’t gonna integrate!

More than two weeks went by before the Little Rock Nine again attempted to enter Central High school. On September 23, 1957, the Little Rock Nine entered the school, outside, rioting broke out and the Little Rock police removed the nine for their safety.

The next day, September 24, 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered units of the U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne Division – the “Screaming Eagles” into Little Rock and federalized the Arkansas National Guard. In a televised speech delivered to the nation, President Eisenhower stated, “Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of the courts.”

On September 25, 1957, under federal troop escort, the Little Rock Nine made it inside for their first full day of school. The 101st Airborne left in October and the federalized Arkansas National Guard troops remained throughout the year.

The Little Rock Nine were assigned guards to walk them from class to class. The guards could not accompany the students inside the classrooms, bathrooms or locker rooms. They would stand outside the classrooms during class time. In spite of this, the Little Rock Nine endured verbal and physical attacks from some of their classmates throughout the school year. Although some white students tried to help, few white students befriended any of the Nine. The ones that did received similar treatment as the nine such as hate mail and threats.

One of the Little Rock Nine, Minnijean Brown was suspended in December for dropping chili on some boys after they refused to let her pass to her seat in the cafeteria. She was later expelled in February 1958 for calling a girl who had hit her with a purse “white trash.” After her expulsion, students passed around cards that read, “One Down, Eight to Go.”

Talk about willingly walking into the fire. They could have stayed in their segregated schools. They would have been safe.

Try to imagine the torrent of emotions that ran through those young men and women. Imagine the courage they had to muster each day. Try to picture the white students who jeered and harassed them. Imagine also what it would have been like to be a white student or teacher who supported the Little Rock Nine.

The nine brave black students were Melba Pattillo Beals, Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Gloria Ray Karlmark, Carlotta Walls LaNier, Thelma Mothershed, Terrence Roberts and Jefferson Thomas.

If you haven't ever heard of the Little Rock Nine, please do some research. The Governor of Arkansas, Sarah Huckabee Sanders is an alumni of Little Rock Central High School. She even talked about the Little Rock nine in her response to the State of the Union Speech this week.

She said “Down the street from where I sit is my alma mater, Little Rock Central High. As a student there, I will never forget watching my dad, Governor Mike Huckabee and President Bill Clinton hold the doors open to the Little Rock Nine, doors that forty years earlier had been closed to them because they were black. Today, those children once barred from the school house are now heroes memorialized in bronze at our statehouse. (you can see the picture of that statue in your bulletin)

She continued “I’m proud of the progress our country has made. And I believe giving every child access to a quality education – regardless of their race or income – is the civil rights issue of our day.

That sounds really lovely until you realize she is behind the banning of books and doesn’t want public schools teaching about the history of American systemic racism that led to what the Little Rock Nine Endured.

Last week, I asked you to choose an issue either in the world, or in your personal life and to reflect on how the church, worship, prayer and scriptures helps you define that issue.

Today, I am asking you to think about what you are willing to go to bat for. What is that golden idol that you are going to stare down and refuse to bow to? Or maybe it’s a chocolate bunny that someone has put in front of you. Or maybe it is racism, oppression and white nationalism. What is that thing that God is calling you to, that seems a bit scary, but that issue needs your voice, that issue needs your resistance.

I hope that time softened many of the hearts of the people in that mob that day in Little Rock, Arkansas. I’m sure many of them have changed. But I am just as sure that some of them just buried their bigotry from public view for decades. I’m certain that some of them were waiting for a leader to emerge who would rally them once again – to embolden them to step out and speak up in the light of day again. They were waiting for someone to call out for us to “Make America Great Again.”

Even with angry mobs of whites promoting hatred and evil ideology, there were many others who joined with the righteous cause and risked their own well being for the ones being attacked.

What sometimes seems like ancient history isn’t really ancient at all. The Little Rock Nine were going through all of that a mere 2 years before I was born. I simply can’t imagine what those 9 students and millions of others like them had to go through just to get an education.

I still remember hearing on our tour about another student that went to Little Rock Central in the 50s, who wouldn’t go in to the school on a tour with her grandchild. She finally acquiesced and had tears in her eyes the entire tour of the school. She finally shared with the tour guide that she was in the bathroom when another student, one of the Little Rock Nine was attacked. Remember, the National Guard said that they would give students “privacy” in the bathrooms so they let everyone know that they wouldn’t be in there to protect the nine at all.

This woman was in the bathroom and she watched as another child was beaten. She stood there and she never opened her mouth. And it haunts her to this very day.

I don't want it to be said of me that I could have made a stand and I didn't. I don't want it said of me that while others were bowing down to white supremacy and anti-semitism, homophobia and transphobia, sexism ageism and Asiian hate that I simply went along with them because it was the safer thing for me to choose.

Let me close with this poem by Terry Jenkins Jr. entitled Little Rock Nine

As my day began
I realized I'm doing this for my kin
Paving the way for the future
So that you can win.
They don't like us cause our skin
It's rich, Black and beautiful.
For some reason it offends them
They think we're not suitable
But we'll show the World
This day is truly a revolution
Giving us a way to better education
So one day we'll rule this nation
Do work that's heaven sent
Maybe see a Black President

Man that'll be so cool
Just from us choosing to go to school
Integrated with whites who hate us
They stand here mad making a fuss
As we get off the bus
I hold my head up high
Looking straight to the sky
I can see the change
A lil boy who one day will be a man
A Doctor, Lawyer, Even Professor
What we're doing is truly divine
I promise you they'll forever remember
The Little Rock Nine.

May it be so. Amen.