

Introduction: Good morning, and welcome to Chapel. My name is Kerry Kuehn; I am a Professor in the Physics Department here at Wisconsin Lutheran College.

Overview:

Our chapel theme for this week is “Trust in God’s Strength”. Today, we will focus specifically on the theme “God’s Strength Will Not Fail You.”

For our liturgy, we will be using the order of Morning Chapel 6 (Morning Devotion II) on page twenty-one in your white service bulletin.

Our opening **Hymn** is number 431: I walk in danger all the way.

Responses:

In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice;

in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.

We do not make requests of you because we are righteous,

but because of your great mercy.

May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us;

establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands.

Let me live that I may praise you,

And may your laws sustain me.

Chapel talk

Meteors can be terrifying. Eyewitness accounts of meteors describe a blinding flash—like a new sun igniting—as the meteor detonates in the sky. The 2013 Chelyabinsk meteor above Russia was relatively small, but its explosion was more powerful than 30 atomic bombs. Live videos show a blinding flash—brighter than the sun. This is followed by wave of intense heat and a shock wave that blew in garage doors and shattered windows. Widespread panic ensued.

The Tunguska meteor was even bigger. When it fell in remote Siberia in 1908, it must have been absolutely terrifying to the few villagers who witnessed it. One, who lived 40 miles from the explosion, explained it this way:

At breakfast time I was sitting by the house at Vanavara Trading Post, facing north. I suddenly saw that directly to the north, over Onkoul's Tunguska Road, the sky split in two and fire appeared high and wide over the forest. The split in the sky grew larger, and the entire northern side was covered with fire. At that moment I became so hot that I couldn't bear it, as if my shirt was on fire; from the northern side, where the fire was, came strong heat. I wanted to tear off my shirt and throw it down, but then the sky shut closed, and a strong thump sounded, and I was thrown a few metres. I lost my senses for a moment, but then my wife ran out and led me to the house. After that such noise came, as if rocks were falling or cannons were firing, the Earth shook, and when I was on the ground, I pressed my head down, fearing rocks would smash it. When the sky opened up, hot wind raced between the houses, like from cannons, which left traces in the

ground like pathways, and it damaged some crops. Later we saw that many windows were shattered, and in the barn, a part of the iron lock snapped.

So pro tip: if you see such a flash in the sky, do not stand looking out the window in amazement. Duck. Because in a minute or two, the shock wave is coming.

It is no surprise, then, that meteors were held in reverence by many of our ancestors. Meteors were called “thunder stones”, “star metal”, or “god’s axes”. They fell from the sky like gods descending to earth enveloped in fire. The iron debris—the meteorites—collected after such an event were venerated. They were used by black smiths to form mythical weapons—hammers and swords—long before iron ore was extracted from mountains.

But even as metallurgy advanced, the craft of the black-smith retained a mythical and religious significance. In ancient Egypt, in India, in Africa, in Assyria, and in Babylon, the smith who worked the forge was not merely a technical expert who made horseshoes and swords. The smith—the “master of fire”—was a combination of witchdoctor, warrior and sage. He was trained, initiated, and consecrated to carry out his mysterious craft: the joining of rock and fire to form bronze and iron.

Rene Guenon, a well-known historian and philosopher, points out that if you want to understand how our ancestors looked at matter—whether mercury, iron, granite, or fire—look no further than how we Christians view Holy Communion. The way that we Christians see Holy Communion: as a mysterious union of bread and wine with the very body and blood of Christ himself—that is how the ancients viewed matter. This is particularly true when considering meteorites. There are a mysterious fusion of the earthly and the heavenly, the mundane and the celestial.

Yes, the smith, and the forge itself, were infused with mysterious powers. And because of this, it was sometimes necessary to make a sacrifice—an animal sacrifice or even a human sacrifice—in order to consecrate and prepare the forge for use. How else might the forge must be *quicken*ed or *animat*ed in order to give it such mysterious power.

These ideas die hard. Isaac Newton, writing in the early 18th century, refers to mercury—that shimmering liquid metal—as quicksilver (or living silver). This term, quicksilver, points to the traditional idea that mercury is formed by an earthly metal with an animating spirit. If this sounds like alchemy to you, then you are correct. Here, in traditional metallurgy, science meets magic.

Why do I bring all of this up? Because I think it is important in understanding the Book of Daniel, specifically the account of the three young men who were cast into the fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. Specifically: If the Book of Exodus shows how the God of Israel has authority over the Egyptians gods, then the Book of Daniel shows how the God of Israel has authority over the Babylonians gods. Let us explore this idea.

Before reading the text itself, let me remind you of some of the historical background to the Book of Daniel. The City of Jerusalem, as you probably recall, fell to Nebuchadnezzar, one of the most famous kings of the Babylonian Empire. Historians tell us that the Babylonian empire was the most powerful kingdom in the region during the sixth century before Christ.

When Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar, many of the Jews of the Kingdom of Judah were taken into captivity in Babylon. Daniel, a Jewish youth, along with his close friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were among those carried away to Babylon.

Being of the Jewish nobility, these four were brought into the royal court, and were given new names in order to assimilate them into Babylonian culture. This, of course, is what you do when you want someone to forget his history—who he is—you change his name.

Daniel was given the name Belteshazzar. His friends were given the names Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They served in the royal court and as administrators in Babylon until Babylon was captured by the Persian King, Cyrus the Great.

Their service at the royal court in Babylon was not without its ups and downs, so to speak. Once, you might recall, Nebuchadnezzar made a law—a patriotic law no doubt—that required everyone in the kingdom to show honor and respect by falling down before a massive golden statue, forged in the furnaces of Babylon, and set up by the king.

To get a sense of the enormous scale of this statue: it was purportedly the same size as the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C.

Anyhow, Daniel and his friends bravely—but quietly—ignored this silly rule. And here is where we pick up our reading.

At this time some astrologers (also called Chaldeans) came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “May the king live forever! Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.”

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?”

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the

flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

At first glance, this might appear to be a typical case of overzealous punishment for lack of loyalty to those in power. But as I mentioned earlier, I think that there is more going on here. The blazing furnace—the forge itself—is significant. The furnace was the divine womb, so to speak, from which the Babylonian gods were crafted.

I, for one, am opposed to human sacrifice. (Just to put it out there; I won't make you raise your hands to see who all is in agreement.) Throwing virgins into volcanoes, burning captives in smelting furnaces—I find all this repulsive. It is not just that it doesn't work—that the science is bad, so to speak. It is that I find it intuitively, morally repulsive.

But what if human sacrifice worked. I mean: what if it *actually* worked. What if the empirical evidence suggested that sprinkling blood on the soil really made the soil more fertile. What if burning victims in a furnace actually allowed ore to be smelted into iron; if new life could not be brought forth without the sacrifice of another life—whether human or animal? This, after all, is what the scientists, the sages, the royal astrologers and the wise men of Babylon believed and taught.

What if human sacrifice really worked? How would that affect how we act? How would we vote differently about policies if we believed that some individuals must be sacrificed, in one way or another, for the betterment of society? After all, it could be argued, one must break a few eggs in order to make an omelet, right?

Perhaps King Nebuchadnezzar was simply trying to make an omelet, so to speak. Dissent, confusion, lack of unity, lack of patriotism—these weaken the state, do they not? And Daniel and his fellow Jews were certainly guilty.

But here—just when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fire — this is where things get interesting:

Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, “Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?”

They replied, “Certainly, Your Majesty.”

He said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”

A fourth man, one that, according to Nebuchadnezzar, looked like *a son of the gods*, was with them in the fire, protecting them. Who was this fourth man, who was protecting them? Was this Christ himself? It is hard to say. What can be said is that the book of Daniel is clearly messianic. It points to Jesus.

In fact, in the chapter just before the episode in the fiery furnace, Daniel relates the prophecy of the coming kingdom of Christ. This Kingdom, Daniel says, will *not* be built upon a rock that was cut by human hands from a mine or from a mountain. Rather the kingdom will be established by the God of Heaven. It will be like a small rock that shatters the kingdoms of this world, along with their idols of clay and bronze and iron; a small rock that grows into a mountain that fills the earth.

And while the Babylonian smiths work at their forges, the God of Heaven is preparing to unite his divine nature with human flesh. He would come down to

earth in Bethlehem. Incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. This event was accompanied by a spectacle in the skies even more spectacular than a blazing meteor: a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” Indeed, Christ would establish his Kingdom, an everlasting kingdom. And in this kingdom—the Church—he would provide his people with his body and blood, united with bread and wine, to renew them and to give them eternal life.

I suspect that Nebuchadnezzar sensed the divine significance of what he saw that day in the blazing furnace. He saw the true God, a God of power, whose strength would not fail his people.

Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!”

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.”

Please rise for Luther's Morning Prayer:

I thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, your dear Son, that you have kept me this night from all harm and danger. Keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please you. Into your hands I commend my body and soul and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen

Blessing: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Sanctify us and keep us from all evil; may Christ drive all hurtful things far from us and purify both our souls and bodies; may Christ bind us to himself by the bond of love; and may his peace abound in our hearts.

Amen