

I'm going to go out on a limb here, but I think King Nebuchadnezzar needs a little work on his evangelism strategy. Worship my god or be thrown into a fiery furnace?

And then, when it turns out the God of the Jews does actually save Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, he decides Yahweh is the real deal after all.

He doesn't actually tell his people to worship Yahweh...but anyone who blasphemes against the Jews' God will be torn limb from limb.

Again, not exactly how I'd go about winning hearts and souls.

But then, is it so much different than some of the historical Christian methods of trying to convert people?

In 1856, Charles Spurgeon wrote a book called Turn or Burn. In it, he admitted that some of the Puritan fathers of the church had gone too far with their fire and brimstone.

However, he felt that in his day, it had gone too far the other way. That mid-19th century preachers were too soft on sin and the wrath of God.

The turn or burn phrase means that people should repent from sin or face eternal damnation in a fiery hell. It has never struck me as a very faithful or effective strategy for bringing people to faith.

Here's what the AI overview said: "The emphasis on "burning" can overshadow other aspects of faith, such as grace, and may not be as effective a tool for conversion as other approaches."

AI does sometimes get things right.

But turn and burn nonetheless lives on.

Ok, so this passage isn't really mostly about that. But this image of the three friends and the shadowy fourth figure in the searing flames has stuck with me. Fire is this week's Advent theme.

Our themes during Advent will connect to the four classic elements of nature – fire, wind, water, and earth. Each theme invites us to think about how the different elements show up in our faith story.

Fire is often a sign of God's presence. In the Old Testament, God showed up in a pillar of fire to guide Israel in the wilderness.

God appeared to Moses in a bush that burned, but wasn't consumed by fire.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit appeared in tongues of fire.

In the prophets, fire is a refiner's fire. It's the fire of God's judgement that burns away the dross in us and leaves behind the pure metal.

In other places, fire represents God's destruction of evil.

In the gospels, especially Matthew, Gehenna is translated as hell. Christians have often been fixated on the fires of hell. But they may not be what we think they are.

I'll come back to that, but first let's say a bit more about this story. The first 6 chapters of Daniel are set during the Babylonian exile. But its author and date of actual writing are disputed.

What seems more likely is that it is a compilation of stories told during the exile. They were meant to encourage people remain faithful to God and trust that God would bring them through their own fiery furnace of exile.

But the book likely reached its final form centuries later under the rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Antiochus was the ruler of the Seleucids who ruled over Judah in the second century BC.

He persecuted the Jews, and was famously known for attacking the Temple and slaughtering a pig on the altar.

The second half of the book of Daniel is filled with apocalyptic visions of God's defeat of Judah's enemies. Antiochus is likely one of the enemies depicted in the visions.

Essentially, the book creates layers of enemies for Judah...the first layer is Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar. The second layer is Antiochus and the Seleucids.

But then the later visions in the book get taken up by the author of Revelation, and there the symbol of evil is the Roman Empire.

Regardless of what era Daniel's readers are living in, the story is a call to faithfulness in the midst of whatever fiery furnace we might be facing.

While fire in scripture is often a sign of the presence of God, when we start getting into the apocalyptic writings of Daniel and Revelation and other New Testament books, fire represents something different.

In Daniel, Revelation, and the shorter apocalypses in the New Testament, fire is God's way of purging evil. We've got lakes of fire and unquenchable fires and hell of fire.

As I said earlier, what is translated as hell in the gospels is Gehenna. Gehenna was a real place just outside of Jerusalem where trash and dead animals and waste of all sorts were dumped.

It was essentially a gigantic compost pile that smoldered for years...essentially an eternal fire. The stench would have been awful. Jesus used Gehenna as a metaphor for life outside the reign of God.

Many Christians have interpreted those passages as a concept of Hell as a place where evildoers and unbelievers go after they die. It's what's behind the turn or burn phrase.

I don't actually believe that. I'll concede that whatever happens after we die is completely up to God, but eternal damnation doesn't seem to me very consistent with the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

What I do believe is that hell is what happens on earth when we don't live by the values of the reign of God. God's judgment falls on us in the here and now when we live by a set of values that are opposed to the sort of world God intended.

We don't need to wait until death to see what the fires of hell look like. We read about those fires in the newspaper everyday...we see them play out on whatever streaming news we watch.

We see them when relationships in families, organizations, and communities go up in flames when we chase after the promises of power, wealth, superiority, or whatever other false god we choose.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego wound up in the fiery furnace, not because of anything they did but because they lived under the thumb of a jealous and ruthless ruler in a world that looked nothing like the world God desired.

Ultimately, Babylon...and the Seleucids...and Rome...and every powerful empire will come to its own flaming end.

Rather than worrying about some future hell, what if we are in our own fiery furnace right now?

What if the hate and greed and self-centeredness we see are stoking those flames? What if the megalomania of too many of the world's leaders now put them in company with Nebuchadnezzar?

What if our own sins have us trapped in the flames of the dire consequences of those sins?

What if we're experiencing the flames of sickness, of grief, of anxiety and despair?

In all those situations, we have this image. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abenego, walking around unscathed in the fiery furnace. But they were not alone.

The story points to this 4th figure in the flames. When Nebuchadnezzar sees that and sees that the three friends emerge unscathed, he knows.

He knows that that was the God of the Jews and that that God is indeed a powerful and saving God.

Whatever god Nebuchadnezzar's tower was for, it was a god who led him to wish death for his opponents.

Yahweh on the other hand was a God of life.

Whatever fiery furnace we find ourselves in, this image reminds us that we do not enter alone.

Jesus entered the fiery furnace of human suffering...he entered the fiery furnace of persecution and oppression...he entered the fiery furnace brought about by human sin...all on our behalf. And in his resurrection, he triumphed over it.

We await the day that Jesus' victory stomps out the flames and hotspots for good and all.

But in the meantime, we can trust that Jesus is here in the fiery furnace that is the world today. We can trust that Jesus is with us in whatever personal fiery furnace we're in.

We can rely on Jesus for the strength to remain faithful when the false gods of our culture demand allegiance. We can rely on a God who is about life and not a false god that leads to a stunted life...and even death.

We can trust that Jesus will lead us through those fiery furnaces. We can trust that Jesus is putting out the flames and a little bit at a time, Jesus is bringing the world God intended into being.

And ultimately, we can trust that at the end of all things, Jesus will put the flames out for good.