**Homily for May 26, 2024 Song of the Three Young Men, vs. 29-34 “Simply Glorious”** Glory to you, Lord God of our fathers; you are worthy of praise; glory to you. Glory to you for the radiance of your holy Name; we will praise you and highly exalt you forever. Glory to you in the splendor of your temple; on the throne of your majesty, glory to you. Glory to you, seated between the cherubim; we will praise you and highly exalt you forever. Glory to you, beholding the depths; in the high vault of heaven, glory to you. Glory to you, Almighty Father; we will praise you and highly exalt you forever.

On this Memorial Day weekend we share the tale of three soldiers; young gladiators for God named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. If you have heard of them at all, it was probably in Sunday School…these are the guys who survived the flaming fiery furnace referenced in the book of Daniel. But not *every* book of Daniel, because this tale is from a collection of writings that did not ‘make the cut’ into our Protestant Bible, and are referred to as *apocryphal*, the hidden or extra writings. As such, they are not binding upon us like the regular scripture is; but let’s be honest with one another today, and confess that the regular teachings aren’t terribly well lived out by most of us, anyway. Arguing whether or not this is ‘really scriptural’, whether we are actually beholden to following its advice, kind of misses the mark, since most of us are not following most of the teaching with devotion and rigor. We are hardly soldiers of God in that respect, friends; we do not take orders well, we expect exceptions to be made for us and ours; and we disregard the teachings of our General pretty much every day. Look around our world; more chaos than comraderie, more selfishness than esprit de corps, more greed than grace by a wide margin.

Why, Pastor Dave? Why challenge and criticize and bring everybody down on this day of national honoring? I do apologize; truly, I am sorry to have gotten so peevish within the first paragraph. But when I share with you the rest of this fantastic story, maybe things will be okay again. Because this tiny portion is the opening salvo of the third act of a movie in three acts, and we have skipped the entire first hour and a half of the film! I am sorry we are feeling attacked, but hopefully with some context provided, we will soldier up and understand what is at stake.

The movie begins, as it were, after Daniel and his three platoon members have stood up to the unjust requests of Nebuchadnezzar, the local dictator, and are being subjected to a serious trial by fire, forced into the furnace which, as we shall see, is being given a perverse amount of special attention this day. But the immediate and agonizing death does *not* occur; instead, we hear these words: *And they walked about in the midst of the flames, singing hymns to God and blessing the Lord. Then Azariah* (we call him Abednego; Azariah is his original Hebrew name) *stood and offered this prayer; in the midst of the fire he opened his mouth and said: “Blessed art thou, O Lord, God of our fathers, and worthy of praise; and thy name is glorified forever. Great opening, right? But then he gets right down to the brass tacks: For thou art just in all that thou hast done to us, and all thy works are true and thy ways right, and all thy judgments are truth. Thou hast executed true judgments in all that thou hast brought upon us and upon Jerusalem, the holy city of our fathers, for in truth and justice thou hast brought all this upon us because of our sins.*

Ppffhh, casting directors. Who hired another whinging Hebrew, beating his breast, assuming that everything bad that happens to his people is a direct consequence of their choices? What a concept, eh? We moderns are so soaked in grace, friends, that we probably can’t even identify with this guy, this soldier, who frames cause and effect with emotionless precision. But hear him out: *For we have sinfully and lawlessly departed from thee, and have sinned in all things and have not obeyed thy commandments; we have not observed them or done them, as thou hast commanded us that Life might go well for us.* This two-thousand-year-old confessional prayer sounds pathetically current. And now, having outlined the cause, he describes his understanding of the effect: *So all that thou hast brought upon us, and all that thou hast done to us, thou hast done in true judgment. Thou hast given us into the hands of lawless enemies, most hateful rebels, and to an unjust king, the most wicked in all the world. And now, we cannot even open our mouths; shame and disgrace have befallen thy servants and worshipers.*

On this Memorial Day weekend, when we honor those who fought and bled and died so that our country could prevail, I have a serious question. What would it take, I wonder, for Americans to feel shame and disgrace over our local, national, and global choices? What would it take for us grace-dipped, entitled, exceptional ones to have Abednego’s level of honest self-reflection? I know I am wading into troubled waters, but he's not finished, and neither are we. Having assessed the cause and the effect, he throws himself on the mercy of the Divine tribunal: *For thy name’s sake do not give us up utterly, and do not break thy covenant, and do not withdraw thy mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham thy beloved, and for the sake of Isaac thy servant, and for the sake of Jacob, thy holy one.* And he hits his target square and true: we may be quite despicable, but God is not. We may not be trustworthy, but God is. We may be selfish and arrogant and greedy and depraved, even, but this is not the nature of our God. Don’t be like us, he says. Don’t get so enraged that you throw living people into a flaming, super-heated furnace. Be better than us, O Lord!

Imagine with me his level of desperation…captive among the Babylonians, who have utterly destroyed the original Temple, cut off from and forbidden to worship Yahweh, he makes his plea: *At this time there is no prince, or prophet, or leader, no burnt offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense, no place to make an offering before thee or to find mercy.* Here we are in this torture chamber and only you, our God, only you can help us. Here is his offer: *Yet, with a contrite heart and a humble spirit may we be accepted, as though it were with burnt offerings of rams and bulls, and with tens of thousands of fat lambs.* That’s gutsy, referring to mountains of roasted flesh, considering where he and his comrades actually are! And then, calmly, he concludes: *May our sacrifice be honored in thy sight this day, and may we wholly follow thee, for there will be no shame for those who trust in thee. And now, with all our heart, we follow thee, we revere thee and seek thy face. Do not put us to shame, but deal with us in thy forbearance and in thy abundant mercy. Deliver us in accordance with thy marvelous works, and give glory to thy name, O Lord!*

That is the end of Act One…a good moviemaker would put a pause here for a potty break and a popcorn fill-up. But since we have picnics and parades to attend, I am going right on to Act Two, where the filmmaker reveals the truly gruesome outcomes that could yet happen if Abednego and Yahweh do not come to terms, and soon. Listen! *Now Nebuchadnezzar’s servants who threw them in did not cease feeding the furnace fires with naphtha, pitch, tow, and dry brush. And the flame streamed out above the furnace forty-nine cubits.* For those of us who aren’t Bible Math majors, we are talking about a pillar of fire rising above the furnace to a height of eighty-eight feet. *And it broke through and burned those of the Chaldeans whom it caught around the furnace. But the angel of the Lord came down into the furnace to be with Azariah and his companions, and drove the fiery flame out of the furnace* (nearly a hundred feet up, evidently), *and made the midst of the furnace like a moist whistling wind, so that the fire did not touch them at all, or hurt or trouble them.*

A moist, whistling wind? Like, laying in your hammock in the shade and being caressed by the gentle breeze? I don’t know about you, but me, if *that* happened, I would be beyond appreciative and stunned and grateful…imagine it! And finally, we come to the portion of text for this morning: *Then the three, as with one mouth, praised and glorified and blessed God in the furnace, saying: “Blessed art thou, O Lord, God of our fathers, to be praised and highly exalted forever; and blessed is thy glorious, holy name, to be highly praised and highly exalted forever; blessed art thou in the temple of thy holy glory, to be extolled and highly glorified forever. Blessed art thou, who sittest upon cherubim and lookest upon the deeps, to be praised and highly exalted forever. Blessed art thou upon the throne of thy kingdom, to be extolled and highly exalted forever. Blessed art thou in the firmament of heaven, to be sung and glorified forever.* They go on like this for dozens and dozens of verses, thinking up every possible gratefulness that they can, and then…the movie just ends. Like our real lives, we don’t know how it all turns out, except that this time, mercy was shown. This time, redemption was offered. This time, they not only survived, but they were also redeemed.

This Memorial Day weekend, when we honor the blood and sacrifice of men and women who died on behalf of our country and its goals, I find myself preaching this stern sermon in order that their sacrifice will not be unnoticed or in vain. The America we now live in is not the one they died for. The values they espoused and the integrity of living they practiced have been spit upon by our subsequent choices. Today, if we have the courage, we can glance into the mirror of another nation in another time who went their own egoic way, who ignored the teaching that had nourished and sustained them, who let the chips fall where they would and who nearly ceased to be. I don’t know if we can move beyond outrage to courage, but we better sort that out. We may or may not be better than those ancient ones, more worthy, more *special*, but God is all of that. Our restoration, and the upholding of honor that this day inspires, both of these have the same answer. We need to learn to take orders again. Amen.