

## **Advent 1: Fire**

Daniel 3

November 30, 2025

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

### Intro to Advent

We're doing something new this year in Advent. (*I know, you say, we're always doing something new...which is true*). I'm not sure anyone, anywhere has ever done Advent like this. Let me explain: we are reading stories given to us by what's called the Narrative Lectionary (a "lectionary" is the list that tells us what Scripture we read each Sunday); it gives us four stories—from Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and John. As the worship planning team read these stories, we noticed that each one clearly emphasizes one of the four elements: fire in Daniel, air in Ezekiel, water in Isaiah, and earth in John. We began to wonder... what can the elements teach us about waiting for Christ in Advent?

Can you imagine the whole creation waiting with eager longing for the coming of Christ? Rocks and hills waiting; waterways and clouds and jet stream waiting; the stars and the earth's molten core waiting. Yes, the coming of Christ is for you—but the earth also rejoices when Christ is born. We sing, "Joy to the World, the Lord is come... let heaven and nature sing!"

The more we paid attention to the four elements, the more we noticed that these elements show up all across the Bible. Fire, air, water, and earth have all been employed by God to reveal God's love and power and show us a creation that longs for fulfillment.

So, each week in Advent, we invite you to focus on one of the four elements. See in that element's a theological quality. Let the earth teach you to wait with eager longing for Christ's coming at Christmas.

Today, we begin with fire.

### *(Dramatic Reading of Daniel 3)*

Last week we read Jeremiah's letter to the exiles, and at the door after worship several of you greeted me and whispered ... "you know, some of us feel like we're living in exile right now." I thought "yes!" God's word is never limited to the time and place it is written. Whenever your world—the world you thought you knew—comes crashing down around you and you experience disorientation and re-orientation, that *is* exile.

The spirituality of the Hebrew Scriptures is *exilic spirituality*. When the world falls apart, and you have to make a way, this book is for you. God meets us in exile.

Today's Scripture, on this 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, this "fire" Sunday, is also a story set in exile. In Daniel's worldview, the evil empire is in charge. The prevailing values and norms are unfamiliar. The job of the Hebrews in Daniel—the job of anyone in exile—is to stay alive; to navigate this strange world as best you can; to be resourceful, creative; to resist strategically; and every once in a while, you get a chance to stick it to the empire.

In Daniel 3, 3 Hebrew men (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego), who are trying to figure out how to fit in in Babylonian captivity. Can they eat the food? Can they wear foreign clothes? Are there things that they're expected to do here in exile that they simply cannot do—can't do because something in their inner conscience just won't allow it? Put another way, how do we hear the voice of God telling us what to do in a world where the norms of the culture are not holy?

Do we assimilate to the empire? Or resist?

These questions come to a head when King Nebuchadnezzar (can we just all say "Nebuchadnezzar"?) builds a huge statue—probably of himself. He makes everyone—literally everyone in the whole world—worship this statue. It is the definition of egotistical, imperial power. I'm going to make you do what I want, because, of course, real power is forcing people to do your will. When it comes time to worship the gold statue, everyone shows up... except these Hebrews.

Maybe they're hoping no one notices. But someone notices. They tell the king.

The king flies into a terrifying rage that is also comical. My friend Brennan Breed says—you know when someone lacks real power when they get mad. People with real power don't get angry. This king is raging. But when the three men are dragged before him, the scripture seems to say they are cool as cucumbers. They say:

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you... <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>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."

Let's just see what happens, bro. We're not worshiping your statue or you. Put us in the fire and we'll just see if our God—aka the real God—shows up.

What incredible courage. To stand up for your convictions. To listen to that voice inside that knows that sometimes you have to do what is hard in order to be true to what's right. Shad, Mesh, and Abe are hauled to the furnace. It's so hot by this point, that it incinerates the guards who are called to throw them in. But throw them in, they still do. Into the fire.

The king peers into this white-hot heat. And what does he see? The 3 men, chillin'. And not only 3! "I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt, and

the fourth looks like a god.” God is doing something miraculous in the fire. God is preserving the lives of those who did the right thing.

The fire has no power over these men; their hair isn’t singed, their clothes are not scorched, they don’t even smell like fire. Nebuchadnezzar calls them to come out; he declares that no one in his kingdom will say anything against the Hebrew God, for no other God can deliver people like this.

God will deliver you when you stand up and do what is right. What does that look like in your life this Advent season. None of you are being asked to worship huge statues, are you? Actually, now that I think about it, there’s a pretty big statue carved into a mountainside only a few miles from here. It’s a statue to white supremacy. Those of you who are older were all asked to worship it. To obey that illegitimate expression of power. Perhaps some of you can share your stories of resistance. What else might the immoral power structure be asking you to consent to, against your God-given conscience? Masked agents abducting your neighbors? The ruin of our public health system and its replacement with quackery? Tax cuts for the richest people, paid for by taking healthcare away from those of us who can least afford it? All while the most powerful person in the world gilds the people’s house with gold?

No, there’s no 80 foot golden statue to worship. But power always wants you to compel you into consent. Something inside of you has to remain alive and awake. Some inner compass. An inner light, there has to be some inner fire in you that tells you, in the moment, “here is my line. I will not do that, no matter what.”

The powerful always have some kind of fiery furnace—a physical embodiment of the rage of the ruler who can’t will you to comply. But this story says that our God is the one who holds ultimate power. It is God who determines right and wrong. If your inner fire is lit by God, no fiery furnace can touch you.

It is God’s fire to which we align our lives. God’s love is this fire. It is fire that not destroy, it is the fire burns everything out of us that is not aligned with this holy love.

In this season of Advent, will you draw close to God’s holy fire, to the fire of God’s love? Getting close to God’s fire feels like coming in out of the cold; your skin can feel like its burning; it can feel uncomfortable, until you begin to radiate from within.

Drawing close to the fire of love isn’t easy, it isn’t comfortable. Like pine cones that only open in the heat of a forest fire, we may need the crucible of the Holy Spirit’s renewing energy to force us out of old habits and open us more fully to the live of love.

But when this fire is kindled in us, our hearts are like those of the two disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus—our hearts “burn within us.” The fire burns away falsehood and delusion and leaves us with a longing for mercy and grace.

When God's fire burns in us, we will be like the women and men who met the Spirit at Pentecost, whose lives were led by God's Spirit of inclusivity and radical welcome.

When God's fire burns in us, we will be like the burning bush, on fire but never consumed. When the fire of love burns in you, the whole world—the whole creation flickers with divine indwelling.

Beloveds, when Christ comes, Christ says, "you are the light of the world." You are the fire, you are the heat, the warmth, the energy, the love that nourishes others.

We wait for you, O Christ, to bring the fire.