

Homily

The Three Holy Youths

Sunday of the Forefathers, December 17, 2000

St. Andrew Orthodox Church - Riverside, Ca.

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Introduction. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen. Today is that most glorious Sunday of the Forefathers, one of two pre-Nativity Sundays that commemorate the righteous who lived before the coming of our Savior and prepared His way. On this Sunday we commemorate especially the Holy Prophet Daniel, and last year at this time I preached to you on the Prophet Daniel as a model for contemporary Christian man. This morning I have fixed my gaze upon those noble companions of the Holy Prophet Daniel, those youths who defied youth and the fiery furnace in their fidelity to God. These youths made no excuses to avoid hoping in, clinging to, and loving God above all.

The Three Holy Youths. These noble young men were named Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael. They are often today known more commonly by their Babylonian pagan names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These three youths were taken away in exile into Babylon when King Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem around 587 BC. Their story is recorded in chapter 3 of Daniel's prophecy. What took place is this. King Nebuchadnezzar had conquered much of the inhabited earth. He grew delusional with pride and vainglory, and decided that he would have a golden image 90 feet high set up in a public area in his kingdom. Upon its erection Nebuchadnezzar sent out an order throughout his kingdom that every one of his subjects was required to fall down and worship the golden image. Now this led the Lord's people to fall into great disfavor with Nebuchadnezzar because the faithful would never do such a blasphemous and idolatrous thing. As a result the Jews were accused before Nebuchadnezzar, and especially targeted in the accusation were these three young men Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael. They were singled out because they were objects of envy because they held influential administrative posts in Nebuchadnezzar's government.

Now the three holy youths were brought before an enraged King Nebuchadnezzar when it was clear that they had no intention whatsoever of conforming their religious conviction to political correctness. Standing face to face Nebuchadnezzar asked if it was true that they refused his edict, did not worship his gods or bow before his image, and threatened them with being cast into the blazing furnace of fire. He ended his tirade against them by stating, “And what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?” (Dan. 3:15). King Nebuchadnezzar did not know what he was asking.

Courageously the three holy youths asserted to the King that there was no necessity for them to answer him, and that their God was able to rescue them if He so pleased, but that under any circumstance and whether the Lord wished to rescue them or not they would never worship his gods (which are no gods) nor bow before his image (which was a vain idol). Furious Nebuchadnezzar had all three cast into the burning furnace of fire. The furnace was so hot (since Nebuchadnezzar had it heated seven times hotter than usual) that the flames from the top of the furnace shot 49 cubits into the air and those who were responsible for throwing the youths in were themselves slain by the flame even though they were strong and valiant warriors.

What happened next left King Nebuchadnezzar dumbfounded and truly astonished. Expecting that they would immediately be consumed by the fire Nebuchadnezzar was mystified to see the three youths walking around calmly in the midst of the flame, and there was a fourth with them who appeared as a son of the gods in brilliance! Drawing near the opening of the furnace Nebuchadnezzar called to the three youths, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, you servants of the Most High God (Nebuchadnezzar had it right now!), come out!” Walking out of the flame the three holy youths neither were harmed, nor did their clothes even smell of smoke, nor had any of their hairs been singed. As a result of this great deliverance King Nebuchadnezzar promoted the three youths in his administration and issued a public decree honoring the One True God and forbidding any in his kingdom from speaking against the Lord on pain of execution by dismemberment! (Dan. 3:29).

Lessons from the Lives of the Three Holy Youths.

- 1. We ought to love God's will more than any earthly circumstances.** The three holy youths are a model to each of us of true Christians. They were truly wedded to the Lord. They fulfilled the calling of the Holy Gospel we read this morning. These young men were first and foremost faithful to the Lord. They hoped in Him, believed in Him, trusted in Him, and loved Him more than they hoped in, believed in, trusted in, or loved anything else. This is true Christianity. "All else is adultery and promiscuity" (St. Nicolai Velimorovich). Just as in earthly marriage the husband and wife are to be more devoted to and in love with each other than with any other man or woman so it is with the true antitype of earthly marriage: the spiritual marriage of the soul to Christ. These youths made no excuses, and there were certainly plenty at hand. They had great confidence in God's power to deliver but they were absolutely content to receive from the Lord's hands ANYTHING He wished to give them. What they loved was God's will, not some outward earthly arrangement. They trusted the Lord's promises, and so should we. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).
- 2. We ought to trust that in our greatest trials Christ is nearest to us.** Look at when the Lord manifested His divine presence miraculously to the three young men. It was not until they had fallen into the midst of the flames. The Lord gave them the opportunity to prove their love for Him and fidelity to Him, and then, having shown it forth, the Lord appeared and sweetened their trial with the dew of His divine presence. We ought not fear our trials because these are the times when the greatest interaction and union between our souls and Christ takes place! We must patiently wait for the Lord to show Himself. We must endure the trial and expect to be refreshed by the nearness of Christ. This is how the spiritual life works. In the midst of trial wait patiently and look for Christ to show Himself to your soul.
- 3. We ought to recognize that nothing, absolutely nothing, can stop our prayer and worship.** Do you know what the three holy youths were doing in the flaming furnace? Protestant Old Testaments do not tell you, because the longer version of St. Daniel's prophecy has been expunged. The Orthodox Old Testament records what happened for our edification, and if you have a copy of the Apocrypha you can read it in the book entitled, "The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men." First, St. Azariah offered a most beautiful prayer. He began this prayer by

blessing God's Name and saying, "For thou art just in all that thou hast done to us" (v. 2). What an example of humility! How many of us would begin our prayer at the height of our trial by accusing God of injustice? "How can you let this happen to me God?" we might say. Not the holy youth Azariah. He knew that he did not exist in relationship to God merely as an individual but as a part of the people of God. His sufferings he believed were because of sin and he didn't set himself apart from the people. Yet even in the midst of the burning fire, and even though the punishment was just, Azariah offered up his prayer to the Lord! The Holy Prophet Jonah offered his prayer from the belly of the whale in the heart of the sea and he was heard! Following the prayer the three holy youths began to chant a beautiful hymn of praise to the Lord. This beautiful hymn is sung each day in Lenten Orthros. King Nebuchadnezzar attempted to lead these pious young men into false worship, but nothing, not even the blazing furnace, could stop them from praising God. That which is most valuable to any human being, that which does us the greatest good by far of anything we possess, is prayer and worship for these things deify man. And the three holy youths teach us that these most valuable possessions can never be taken away from us if we do not wish to relinquish them. No one can harm us except ourselves.

- 4. We ought to see how the Lord Jesus Christ appears when two or three unite together in prayer in His Name.** The three holy youths in the fiery furnace has always been a Nativity image in the Church since the youths ability to withstand the fire foreshadowed the Holy Virgin's ability to contain the fire of the Godhead in her pure womb. The three youths also manifest what takes place in us when we make our communion in faith. The fiery furnace in which is the Son of God is the Holy Chalice. As flames shot forth 49 cubits into the air from the Babylonian furnace so flames shoot forth from this chalice all the way to the heavens. As some were slain by the flames of the fire when they approached it in sin in Babylon so those who approach this chalice without fear of God, faith and love, or in presumption and disobedience improperly prepared kill their own precious souls. As Christ Himself was united to the three holy youths and saved them in the Babylonian furnace so here in the furnace of the chalice does Christ really and truly unite Himself to us and save us. So we ought all together to stand in awe during the administration of this holy chalice. Let no one sit down who does not need to because of weakness of body. To sit down during communion is to betray a selfish and ignorant spirit. Those who sit down do not know what is happening to their brothers and sisters at the chalice. Those who receive communion and sit down think to themselves "I have mine" and this infantile thinking is unworthy. As the three holy youths knew so well, we stand together. Christ is in our midst. We stand before the holy flame. Our brothers and sisters are being deified and preserved in the fire and do we sit? do we talk? Do we fiddle? Say the Jesus Prayer and allow your heart to soar into the heavens in thanksgiving for the most precious gift of the Holy Eucharist.

To the Fourth in the Furnace Who appeared as a "son of the gods", the true and Only-Begotten Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, and to His Unoriginate Father and to the All-holy, good, and life-giving Spirit be all glory and praise forever. Amen.