

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: June 5, 2016
Sermon Title: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego:
A Scout Sunday Sermon
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 2:51-52

Luke 2:51-52

Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

I love that verse: "His mother treasured all those things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, in favor with God and man . . . pleasing to God, to everyone around him."

That comes from just around when Jesus was becoming a teenager, and he was already showing signs of individuality, of personal strength, of integrity, of being his own man. Jesus, still a kid, a youngster, not old enough to shave, not old enough to vote, but he was already standing out from the crowd. And his mother, Mary, could see there was something special, the things he did, the things he said, the way he treated people—she saw all that and "treasured all those things in her heart." Right before her eyes Jesus was "growing in wisdom and stature, people admired him, liked him, were impressed by him.

What made me think of this was that two weeks ago we held an Honor Court here in Church on a Sunday afternoon for three teenagers who achieved the highest honor in Boy Scouts, the Eagle Award; three young men, including our own Jackson Stearns, plus Sam and Reed, three young men with all those characteristics that we treasure: they "put their shoulder to the wheel," their "nose to the grindstone," they "kept their eye on the prize", they mastered stick-to-itiveness and follow-through, they showed gumption, character, guts. Three young men who started out in Scouting at age 11 and didn't fall by the wayside, no matter the pressures, the temptations, the options; three young men who did not settle for half measures or

mediocrity; three young men whose moms and dads “treasured all those things in their hearts.” Three young men who “grew in wisdom and stature pleasing to God and to all around.”

I decided right then and there we needed to have Scout Sunday to honor our scouts and our scout leaders because something good is happening there, really good.

Our troop has been so good for so long maybe I take it for granted. And it's never good to take something good for granted. So here we are. And the message I gave when those three young men became Eagles was based on the Biblical story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Three young men from the Bible, the Book of Daniel, who should never be forgotten. The backstory is this: Twenty-six hundred years ago, in the ancient Middle East, Iraq conquered Israel, laid waste to the whole nation, and dragged the Jewish people off into slavery.

Iraq was called Babylon in those days, and the Babylonian king took some of the young Jewish men and tried to turn them into Babylonians. They were given Babylonian food to eat, Babylonian booze to drink, Babylonian gods to worship, Babylonian names. All those Jewish teenagers had to do was to give up being Jewish, break the Jewish laws, quit Jewish tradition, turn their backs on their nation, their culture, their religion. And the promise was if you do this, you'll be popular, you'll be cool, you'll be one of us.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were three young men who refused. Along with their friend Daniel, they refused to give up their individuality, their principles, their faith, their values, what they believed in, what they stood for.

Now, here's an interesting thing. The Babylonians admired them! They liked that those three young men stood up for themselves, stuck to their principles, held true to their values. Just as the Bible said, “They grew in wisdom and stature, pleasing to God *and* pleasing to others, even the enemy! Their behavior turned out to be a blessing for themselves, for the Babylonians, and for Israel.

I don't have time today, but I could show you how the behavior of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego matched up almost perfectly with the Boy Scout Law. Boy Scouts promise to live 12 qualities: “A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.” And I could easily make the argument that those three young men of Israel used at least nine of those qualities to guide their life to success. But . . . there's always a “but” in a good story . . . But a few years

later, the ancient Iraqis started to persecute the Jews again. They built a gigantic gold statue, 90 feet tall, 9 feet wide, and ordered everybody, each day, to bow down and worship this monstrosity. Especially the Jews. They wanted the Jews to bow down, to break their own rules, to quit their religion, to become like everybody else. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused. They refused to do what everyone else was doing just because everyone else was doing it. They refused to weaken themselves, cheapen themselves, defile themselves.

You probably know the rest of the story. The king had a special "fiery furnace" built. It was so hot that it killed the soldiers guarding it. After refusing one more time, the three young men were tossed into the fiery furnace. But when the king looked into the furnace, he was amazed! He saw the three young men walking around with a fourth man! Who was that? What's going on? An angel, perhaps? Or God? Or the Son of God? Some "divine presence" protecting them? Now the king was really shaken. He ordered the three young men to be brought out of the furnace to be set free, to be rewarded and promoted and emulated. Why? Because, the king said, those three young men had guts. They had character, they had principles, they had beliefs, they had the courage of their convictions.

Yesterday three of our kids were in the kitchen with Alida and me, and Aaron said, "Dad, what are you preaching about on Sunday?" I said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego," expecting nobody would know what I was talking about. Instantly, he got out his Blackberry and played a great reggae song called, yep, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego." They had the whole story done right and the terrific chorus:

*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego,
They had no fear at all;
Three walked into the fire, then four
They had no fear at all.*

That's guts. That's character. That's what I was thinking about when I spoke at the Eagle Scout award ceremony. Our three young men gave up every Wednesday night for seven or eight years, gave up many weekends, summer days, and they did all this while excelling at school, while striving at sports, while faithful to their faith. You don't get to be the best by doing what everyone else does. You get there by sacrifice, by making the hard choices, the right choices.

Whether in the Bible or in Scouts or in Church or just living your life, you excel when you make the right decisions. About behavior. About friends. About effort. About what you do on a Wednesday night or a Sunday

morning. About how you treat your body. About how you treat somebody else. About being your best.

I went to our Boy Scout meeting this past Wednesday and gave a quick speech. It is a great troop just as this Church is a great Church. Boy Scouts are in decline in much of America and under attack. Churches are in decline in much of America and under attack. But not here. Here, Scouts and Church are strong. There are lots of reasons, but I'm just going to zero in on one: commitment, *commitment*.

I took a quick count at Boy Scouts on Wednesday. There were about 25 kids, and there were about 15 adults. That's commitment. Last month we confirmed 40 eighth-graders, with 40 adult mentors, and most of those kids and most of those mentors made every meeting. That's commitment. In July, Alida is taking 165 teenagers to Appalachia with 66 adults. That's commitment. On Thursday I was at the hospital with a mom who had just given birth. She apologized for missing the ASP trip this year. That's commitment!

Now, take a look at this painting. Alida and I were in Florence a few weeks ago, and last year in Venice. We must have visited 100 Churches—big, small, old, famous, forgotten—they were all filled with art. The walls, the ceilings, every nook and cranny. Michelangelo, Raphael, Veronese. And I was amazed how the art deepened our Church experience. They opened our eyes, they took us deeper and deeper into our faith. On our very last day, in a small dining hall in an old monastery, I saw a religious painting so extraordinary that I decided right then to bring faith art into our Church all summer long. We have the perfect setting. Nothing else to distract the eye. Here, it's just us, God, and art.

I knew I wanted to start with Jane Ellis. Look at this stunning painting! See the woman, all by herself, early in the morning, walking up to her little country Church. What's she up to? Why? Jane imagines her choosing to start her day with a little quiet time with God, to set the tone for the rest of the day, to get centered, to remember what's important, to gain strength for whatever might come her way. She'll pray, read her Bible. And she's probably going to help out a little bit. Maybe clean up or pick up or straighten up. There's always something that needs doing.

She's there to help and be helped; to use and to be used; to touch God and to be touched by God. She's making a choice. Just like our three Eagle Scouts. Just like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Just like each person here this morning. We all made a choice. This is important. Commitment is

important. God is important. We are important. And we're not going to let what's important dwindle or fall by the wayside, It is too important!

And now, let's join together to sing our Church's own hymn, written by Timothy Dwight, "I Love Your Church, O God," No. 274.

*I love your Church, O, God,
On earth your blest abode
the people our Redeemer saved
with his own precious blood.*

*I love your Church, O God.
Whose walls before you stand,
dear as the apple of your eye,
and graven on your hand.*

*In love my tears shall fall;
in love my prayers ascend;
to serve your Church my toils be given,
till toils and cares shall end.*

*Beyond my highest joys
I prize your people's ways:
the sweet communion, solemn vows,
the hymns of love and praise.*

*Sure as your truth shall last,
to Zion shall be given
the brightest glories earth can yield,
and brighter bliss of heaven.*