

Never Get Burned

Daniel 3:1-30

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At 6:30 a.m on September 13, 1814 a fleet of the Royal Navy under command of Rear Admiral Cockburn opened fire on Fort McHenry, the primary defense of Baltimore harbor. The bombardment was one part of a well-organized British battle plan that had begun the day before when troops were landed on North Point and had moved toward the city.

The British land forces had advanced the day before, but not as successfully as they had expected. They took heavy casualties and their commander, Major General Robert Ross, was killed. They had expected the American troops to flee, as they had done the month before when the British attacked and burned Washington.

But Baltimore had prepared for this attack. They had trained fighters, dug trenches, blockaded their harbor, and built forts. They had their own plan of defense that accurately anticipated the British movements. They expected forces to land at North Point and successfully drew them inland away from their supplies where the British were surprised to encounter thousands of troops in well-built defenses. The British soon realized that they could not win the land battle without a naval bombardment, but the fleet first had to get past Fort McHenry.

The British assumed that the Fort would surrender under the force of the bombardment. But it did not.

By afternoon, the fleet stopped its attack and tried moving closer to the fort, but soon came under attack from the cannons of the fort and withdrew to their original position, where they reopened fire.

In the night some ships attempted to get past the fort, but were discovered and 1,200 British were killed or captured.

The defenders of Fort McHenry withstood twenty-five hours of rockets, bombs, and cannonballs, all while it rained heavily. Four men were killed and twenty-four were wounded.

At dawn's early light, Major George Armistead ordered that a huge American flag created for just such a moment by local seamstress Mary Pickersgill be raised as a sign of defiance. The musicians of the fort played "Yankee Doodle" as the flag was raised.

Not only did the sight inspire Francis Scott Key to compose our national anthem, but the flag signaled to the British navy that their attack had failed.

And with the successful defense of Baltimore, the tide turned in the War of 1812. It is possible that had the fort surrendered and the British taken Baltimore, that they could have built upon a string of successes to defeat the young American republic, bringing an end to our experiment in democracy.

On Sunday, July 2 of this year I visited Fort McHenry during a break in activities of the United Church of Christ General Synod. As I explored the fort and learned details of that fateful dawn, my spirit swelled with patriotic respect. These brave people had withstood an overwhelming attack and saved the cause of liberty.

I needed this dose of patriotism. The week before, I visited Washington, D.C. on my way to Synod. I went to D. C. to see friends, but also took the time to walk among the memorial and monuments and visit the museums. I was hoping for encouragement and inspiration from the ideals of our democracy, but the visit only increased my sadness.

As I read the great words of Lincoln and Jefferson and King, honored the sacrifices of our veterans, and contemplated the hard work of ordinary people in the growth of our national ideals, the contrast with the news of the day and current political situation of the United States made me very sad.

It was only at Fort McHenry that my ideals were inspired, as I experienced this story of brave people withstanding an assault upon democracy.

The stories in the Book of Daniel are about how to live in a compromised even terrorizing political system and to remain a person of integrity. They are stories of resistance. As one commentator said, these stories “call people to active, nonviolent resistance to the symbols of worldly power and its religious expressions.”

Scholars believe that the Book of Daniel was written in the second century Before the Common Era and so tells what would by then have been old legends in order to provide assurance for a new context.

The book was likely written during the reign of the Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes after the abomination of desolation when he consecrated the Temple in Jerusalem to the worship of Zeus and banned the Jewish faith. This resulted in the Maccabean revolt.

At a time when people were dying for their faith resisting an evil empire, the author of this book drew upon stories set in the past, during the exile of the Jews in Babylon, another time when faithful resistance was called for. We'll explore another of these stories next week, when we look at Daniel in the lion's den, so I'll have more to say about the historical context and its implications.

The basic theme of these stories is that God will triumph, no matter how dark and dismal current circumstances are.

By the second century Before the Common Era, the Jews were already well-acquainted with foreign occupation, resistance of evil, and the difficult work of surviving and maintaining their cultural and religious identity.

Obviously, that Jewish history did not end with the time of the Bible, as Jews have now spent millennia repeating this story, often drawing parallels to these stories of ancient biblical heroes.

We Christians have also drawn upon these stories as sources of encouragement in dire circumstances. This week I learned about the Christmas Eve liturgy in the Armenian Church when this story is read by three young boys. A website of the Armenian Church explained:

We read this story as an anticipation of Christ's resurrection from the dead and the presence of the living Son of God in our midst assuring us of God's healing and life-restoring presence for all eternity. Just as the faithful boys are not burned by the heat of the furnace, those who know and trust Christ will be saved from the flames of hell.

And so we read this story as God's promise of deliverance in the midst of darkness. But of course, we cannot naively read this story. Life isn't quite that simple.

Jews died in the fiery furnaces of the Holocaust. No fourth man appeared to rescue them and bring down the murderous tyrant.

Even the Fort McHenry story is more complicated. Exhibits at the Fort point out that the invading British had declared they would end slave and liberate enslaved persons. So, were the defenders of the fort the defenders of liberty or not? It's so complicated.

I believe this story in Daniel is aspirational. It makes no guarantees; sometimes we will not survive the fire

Instead its purpose is to encourage us. Sometimes we will survive the fire. Sometimes if we resist as people of integrity and courage, the enemy will be defeated and good with triumph.