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“The truth will set you free” (John 8:31).

*Daniel 3:14-20. 91-92, 95; John 8:31-42*

Today’s readings contain two of the more familiar phrases from the Bible. In the fourth Gospel, Jesus says, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” In the Book of Daniel, everyone who has ever been to Bible Camp will recognize the tongue-twister names “Nebuchadnezzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego” from the tale of the three youths cast into the white-hot furnace for refusing to worship a golden statue.

The young Judahites defied the King of Babylon during the exile, enduring their baptism of fire rather than submit to idolatry. They survive, of course, and are seen walking in the furnace with a fourth figure who looks like “a son of God.” Though captives and victims of torture, these heroes achieve real freedom and triumph because of their faith and courage under trial. This popular tale, like the story of Susannah, was part of the apocalyptic literature of encouragement and consolation circulated during the later Maccabean period when Jews were persecuted under Antiochus Epiphanes.

The Gospel text continues Jesus' debates with his fellow Jews over their rejection of his claims of divine sonship. They are in effect rejecting the truth. Jesus defines freedom as a characteristic of the children of the household versus those who are slaves. His opponents take offense because they are children of Abraham. Jesus tells them that if they were true children of Abraham, they would accept him because he has been sent by God. Jesus will soon face his own baptism of fire for these claims.

The connection between truth and freedom is crucial. Having the truth and being true to oneself or to one's principles gives a person integrity that not even imprisonment or torture can destroy. In fact, many modern-day heroes like Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Russian opposition figure and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny are freer imprisoned than their powerful oppressors because they possess the truth.

As we approach Holy Week, we will witness Jesus giving up his freedom to submit to arrest, torture and death. Yet, even fixed to a cross, totally immobile and suffering torture designed to break his spirit, Jesus will complete his mission during the final, most productive hours of his earthly life. His example is the text of encouragement and consolation that reminds all those who now face passive diminishment and confinement due to aging and illness that they can still accomplish as much by surrendering to God as they ever could when they were active, deliberate and free. The grace of the moment is always right now.

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