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[www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org](http://www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org)

## **The Great Calm**

**Daniel 3: 8-18; Romans 8: 36-38**

In the wee hours of the morning, June 6, 1944, on the cusp of the momentous event known as D-Day, a communications outpost in England wired a message to French resistance fighters preparing for the Allied invasion. "Are you ready?" was the question. "Yes," came the answer, "but if not . . ." Yes, but if not . . .

Knowing their Scripture, the British radio operators understood exactly what the resistance fighters meant: they were alluding to the story of three brilliant young Jews exiled in Babylon who had been appointed to places of leadership by King Nebuchadnezzar.

But their high office soon brought them into a crisis of conscience, when King Nebuchadnezzar erected a towering gold-plated statue and required all officials to worship this image.

Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego refused to comply.

The king in a furious rage responded, "Bow down to me or face death in the fiery furnace.

Will your God save you in there?" Their extraordinary answer has been preserved throughout the ages: "We do not know. We do not know whether God will deliver us from death or not. We think God can.

*But if not*, we still won't bow down to your image.

We believe that God will save us. *But if not*, still we will worship our God."

I feel deeply privileged to speak to you, this particular group of graduating high school seniors.

I know that your faith is genuine and that you have endeavored hard to develop

a vibrant relationship with God. I have baptized many of you, and it has been my high privilege to do so.

I know that you are strong enough to handle the truth. So I am going to give it to you straight.

As you begin your adult lives, you need to know, *the nature of life is uncertain*.

The future is always shrouded in uncertainty, and no one can remove this element of uncertainty from your existence or from anybody else's. There are wise decisions that you can make, ways to structure your lives in order to limit the amount of chaos that enters your lives, but part of what makes life life and part of what makes faith faith is the ineradicable element of the unknown.

"Are you ready?" those French resistance fighters were asked. They answered. "Yes." And they meant it – but they were wise enough to know that once the great event began, they had no idea what might happen,

which is why General Dwight Eisenhower, who masterminded the whole project, observed,

"Once the battle truly gets started, all our plans are useless."

Uncertainty lies at the very heart of our existence.

Now, you will surely meet people who believe that their faith will protect them from all uncertainty.

You will meet those who say, "If you will just believe like I believe, just follow the prescription that is laid out before you, the formula will give you refuge from the ravages of the unknown."

That is not belief, my young friends. That is blasphemy. That is faith misconstrued as an act of magic, faith as an attempt to manipulate the mystery of God.

As appealing and simple as that approach to faith might appear, in the long run, it will not work.

Do not be beguiled by it. Your faith does not provide inoculation against evildoers or the tragic.

Misery happens to everyone. Jesus was telling it like it is when he said that the rain falls on the just and the unjust. Yet, even though you cannot manage the uncertainty that besets life,

there is a coping mechanism that gives us the strength to deal with it: it is called "The Great Calm."

If faith always allowed you to receive just what you wanted, it would be wonderful, but it wouldn't be faith. If faith automatically protected you from suffering, it would be wonderful, but it wouldn't be faith. At the heart of faith is the element of the unknown.

The soldiers do not know how the battle will go. Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego do not know if their God will deliver them. They are the victims of an unjust law, yet they do not know if their courage will lead to deliverance or death. They believe that God will save them, *but if not*, still they will serve Him. They act with a confidence that is rooted in what I call "The Great Calm." Let me offer a few observations here. It is important to note that up to this point you have traveled a path that most of your peers have traveled with you. Now you begin the process of making choices that will take your life down its own particular path. You might be going to the same school as your friends, might even be living in the same dorm, but you will find yourself making choices that express your individuality and differentiate your life from all others. You are going to experience some devastating events that will cause you to look to the heavens and ask in sorrow, "My God, why did you let this happen?" You are also going to experience some extraordinary and unforeseen blessings, and you are going to ask in wonder, "My God, why did you let *this* happen?" You will experience every stage between abandonment and exhilaration. The question you must ask is, With whom will you walk? With fellow believers and with God? Or will you try to walk through life alone?

I don't know when this truth will hit you, but it will hit you. For me it was in the shower stall, two or three days into my first week of college. *I suddenly realized that the life I had always known was gone forever.* I realized that my relationship with my parents would never be the same, my relationship with my friends would never be the same. My entire existence cried out for reorganization. At an intellectual level I guess I knew graduation was going to bring this transition, but at a deeper level, I had not processed that truth's implications. I experienced a great sadness. At some point or another you, too, will realize that you will have to reorganize your existence. As for me, I felt incredibly alone. I realized that my only real resource was to lean upon the strength of my relationship with God and to draw upon the strength of the great calm that God provided.

Let me try to communicate exactly the nature of the reality to which I refer. I remember one of my favorite days spent with many of you, during one of our packed summers. We went down to Six Flags, spent the day riding roller coasters, then went to a Braves game, which of course went into extra innings before Javy Lopez won it with a tenth-inning homer against the Mets. We finally reached a hotel and crashed well after midnight. What a great day! But those roller coasters at Six Flags provide a good paradigm of what I am talking about. When you get on the Great American Scream Machine, which goes up nice and slow, then DROPS precipitously, and careens this way and that – you scream – ya'll especially screamed, -- ya'll are a pretty loud bunch . But even amidst your screaming you were drawing upon the strength of a great calm. What do I mean? I mean that even as you screamed in terror, you trusted that the Georgia Tech engineer who designed that roller coaster knew enough about what he was doing to bring you back to where you started, safe and sound. If we didn't have that confidence in the designer, no one would get on a roller coaster, for the ride would be pure horror, marked by paralyzing anxiety. What makes the ride fun is that at the center of our being there is a fundamental trust in the designer.

You are going to meet people who have no inner calm, who are paralyzed by anxiety, who cannot enjoy the gift of their lives, because they have no invisible means of support. They can't enjoy their existence because they live in the constant fear that their lives are going to veer off the rails. May you know in the depth of your being that behind life's every wild turn, every dip and doodle, the God of peace is there to provide strength to your soul.

Paul certainly lived a tumultuous, roller coaster life.

Yet he could say with absolute conviction:

"I am persuaded that nothing, not death, not life, not angels, not principalities and powers, not height, not depth, not things present nor things to come -- can separate me from the love of God found in Christ Jesus our Lord." That is a man who knows the reality of a great calm!

You are a group that has been characterized by a quest for high achievement,

And I believe that you will continue to do so.

But know this: *the higher your aspirations for achievement, the greater the surety that you will experience failure, frustration and doubt.*

Albert Einstein, as brilliant a mind as ever came through the human community, was convinced that God had placed an imprint of order upon the universe.

But Einstein could not identify this universal pattern after years of intense effort; he finally said to a friend and colleague, "I am giving up."

But the certitude in the center of his being that God had fashioned an intelligible universe would not let him abandon his quest.

The very next day an insight flashed into his mind: the energy of the universe is equal to its mass when multiplied by double the speed of light.

$E = mc^2!$

There are going to be times in your journeys, in the great quests of your life, when you feel utterly lost, frustrated, overwhelmed and useless.

You will be tempted to give up your quest. In such moments,

draw upon the power of the great calm and find that God's grace will be sufficient for you.

God did not create you for frustration. God did not create you for destruction.

God created you that you might know blessing, that you might know joy.

In your darkest hour, draw from the strength of the great calm.

One of my darkest hours occurred in this church when ya'll were just little children.

It was near the end of the 1992 presidential election, and I received a call from a campaign official for Bill Clinton, saying that Mr. Clinton wanted to come worship at St. John's on Sunday.

Could he do that? I said sure.

Then he said, "He would also like to sing in the choir."

I said, "No, we have rules about that; he would have to come to choir practice."

Somehow, my responses circulated through the congregation, indeed, swept through the state, and, as hard as this might be for you to believe, people were not shy about sharing their opinions with me.

Many people, including some in this church, did not believe that Mr. Clinton *should* be allowed to worship in our church and I responded, "A presidential candidate nearing the end of a campaign ought to be in church. His soul needs spiritual succor. And anyone can come to St. John's whether he is a presidential candidate or the most recently-released inmate from the federal penitentiary."

Others said, "Well, if he going to be the next president of the United States, he ought to be able to sing in the choir." I said, "No, everybody has to follow the rules. Besides, we don't have a place for a saxophone."

It was a very very long day. Somewhere in the midst of it I bowed my head in my office and prayed,  
"Lord, I think your Spirit has guided me rightly.

Anyone can worship with us, but no one is allowed to turn our worship into a showcase.

But even I find my views completely out of touch with those around me,

and even if subsequent events prove me wrong, still will I serve you.

I believe I am right, *but if not*, still will I serve you."

With that prayer, even amidst the bruising phone calls, I felt a great calm.

Shortly thereafter, a campaign official called and said, "Mr. Clinton has decided that he needs to be in Ohio instead of North Carolina. So he won't be coming. So sorry."

But here's the thing: I preached on this text from Daniel,

and a week or so later I received a letter, a letter different from many of the other letters I received.

This letter was from a woman who wrote,

"My husband was in Presbyterian Hospital with a very serious heart condition.

Sensing that I needed to be in church, I slipped across to your congregation to hear you preach on the theme, 'But if not.'

Dr. Kremer, you will never know what that Scripture now means to me.

I hope that God can cure my husband. I believe that God can cure my husband,

But if not, I have come to accept whatever happens.

My faith is no longer contingent on whether or not I receive that for which I pray.

I feel a great calm.

If my husband gets well, I will be ecstatic.

But if not, still will I love and serve my Lord."

That's the kind of faith we are called to practice.

You may recall that after Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace, King Nebuchadnezzar sent an official to look in on them and found they were walking about unharmed. However, there were not three men in the furnace but four.

The three young Jews were rescued from the flames, but the presence of the fourth was never explained. Nevertheless, the theological implications are clear:

in the crisis moments of their lives, *these young men were not alone*.

So, too, as you leave from this place and go into the world,

as you encounter the inevitable crisis moments of your lives,

may you know that you are never alone.

The vibrancy and vitality of God's presence and power are with you.

Even in your deepest, darkest moment of anxiety, may you draw upon the strength of God's great calm.

And may the God of peace be with you always. May you go forth in the knowledge

that nothing can separate you from the love of God as found in Jesus Christ your Lord.

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High School Senior Sunday