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February 2, 2020—Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Series/Theme: World Turned Upside Down—The Weak Are Strong

Sermon Text/Theme: Daniel 3:13-27—But Even If He Doesn't...

Unless you live under a rock, I'm sure you heard the news. Last Sunday, former NBA superstar Kobe Bryant, his teenage daughter, and 7 other people were tragically killed in a helicopter crash. Over the last week, people have honored Kobe in different ways, from the Grammy Awards, to every level of basketball. But what's surprising is how many people have been affected by Kobe's death. You expect it from LA celebrities, fellow professional athletes, diehard Lakers fans, and basketball lovers. But I didn't expect it from all kinds of people, even people I doubt have ever watched basketball before!

That made me wonder "Why?" Athletes and celebrities die every day, so what was it about Kobe that hit so many hearts? I think in many ways, Kobe embodied what we perceive as "strength." He was extremely successful, incredibly wealthy, in peak physical condition, part of a fairy tale family. He was famous, well-respected, intelligent, confident, cool. "Tonight Show" host Jimmy Fallon said, "**Kobe seemed so larger than life, I honestly thought he'd live forever.**" When someone who seems so strong is revealed to be just as weak and mortal as everyone else, it shakes us, and makes us wonder, "Who really is strong?"

And in this world turned upside down, God's answer, "**The weak are strong,**" seems paradoxical. Today's Old Testament reading illustrates that for us as we meet one man who seemingly had all the strength, and three men who seemingly had no strength at all.

In 605 B.C., the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, and carried off to Babylon the best and brightest Israelite young men. The young men in our sermon text-- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—were three of those taken into exile.

In Babylon, they were trained to serve King Nebuchadnezzar, who was the most powerful ruler of the most powerful kingdom of the day. He was ruthless and cruel, backed by a powerful army to conquer and plunder wherever he wished.

Later, after the three young men had become officials, Nebuchadnezzar pulled a power move and commissioned the building of a 90-foot tall gold statue and commanded all his officials to worship it. Whoever refused would "**immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.**"

As officials of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were invited to this red-carpet idol-worship party. But as followers of God, who commanded, "**You shall have no other gods,**" they disobeyed the powerful king's order. When Nebuchadnezzar heard, he flew into a rage. But not wanting to roast three quality officials, he gave them a second chance to bow down. But if they still refused, he wouldn't hesitate to incinerate them.

Who was strong, and who was weak? Outwardly, it looked obvious. What could these three men do? Either obey the king or die. Nebuchadnezzar seemed to have all the power, and made sure they knew it, mocking, "**Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?**"

Ever felt like that before? Maybe you feel like that right now? Caught between a rock and a hard place and feeling completely powerless to do anything about it? In moments like that, where do you find strength?

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trusted in God for strength. With Nebuchadnezzar's boastful taunt that his power to destroy them was greater than God's power to rescue them still hanging in the air, they calmly responded, ***"O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O King."***

Even though outwardly it seemed like Nebuchadnezzar was holding all the cards, these three men trusted that God had a better hand. Nebuchadnezzar wanted to know what god could save them. They responded, "Ours, the one true God can, and he will!"

We can respond the same way! Whatever makes you feel weak, powerless, and defeated, God has the strength to rescue you from it. God is strong enough to rescue you from loneliness and give you companionship; to rescue you from disease and give you healing; to rescue you from depression and give you joy; to rescue you from guilt, and give you peace; to rescue you from broken relationships and give you love; to rescue you from financial struggles, and give you stability. Nothing is impossible with God! Whatever makes you feel weak, God has the strength to rescue you from it!

But what if he doesn't rescue you from it? If you trust that God will cure you of cancer, but the next test shows it's spread; if you trust that God will bring you love, but the next three dates are train wrecks; if you trust that God will get you a promotion, but you get passed over; if you trust that God will get you into your dream school, but they deny you; if you trust that God will mend your broken marriage, but you still get divorced; if you trust that God will free you from addiction, but you still feel chained—then what?

It's pretty easy to look to God for our strength when there's visible evidence that he's taking care of the problem. But what about when there isn't any evidence? It's easy to trust in God's love and protection when we feel outwardly strong. But it's also easy to lose trust when we feel outwardly weak, and nothing seems to be changing. If God doesn't make everything work out how we think they should, if things look outwardly weak instead of strong, can we still trust? Can we still rely on God to be our strength?

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did. Their response to Nebuchadnezzar's threat is pretty incredible. They acknowledged their strong trust that God could rescue them from the flames. But what they said next displays an even greater faith. They continued, ***"But even if he does not...we will not...worship the image of gold you've set up."*** Even if God let them get roasted in the blazing furnace, they still wouldn't disobey God. How could they have that kind of unshakable trust?

Because their trust wasn't dependent on an outwardly happy outcome, or visible strength. Their trust was dependent on...God. They trusted that God would rescue them from Nebuchadnezzar's hands, whether he rescued them from the flames of the furnace, or whether he rescued them through the flames of the furnace and brought their souls to his side in Heaven.

We can have that same kind of faith and trust in God if we understand where true strength is found. Think of it this way. All of the temporary things this world equates with "strength"—health, wealth, success, family, love, praise and respect, life—those worldly strengths are kind of like walls people build up around themselves and depend on for strength and safety. We have to admit, we also sometimes put our trust in those kinds of walls for strength and safety.

But all it takes is one heart attack; one accident; one downsizing; one poor decision; one bad investment, one broken heart--and those walls we depend on for "strength" come toppling down, leaving us weak and vulnerable. Imagine if Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had trusted in the walls of their physical lives, or

their official positions. They would have rushed to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's idol to avoid losing the things they viewed as their strength.

But instead of trusting in the easily broken walls of earthly strength, they put their trust in a refuge. In ancient times, kingdoms would build fortresses in the middle of their cities, with the biggest, thickest, strongest, most impenetrable stones. That way, even if the enemy broke through the walls, the people could hide in the refuge, which was so strong the enemy couldn't break in.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trusted in the God of whom King David wrote, ***"The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is...my stronghold."*** The three men trusted that even if every wall of earthly strength crumbled, including their lives, nothing could touch them if they were safe in the refuge of God.

We can have that same confidence and trust! Even when we feel completely weak and helpless, we are completely strong and safe, because God is our refuge! And when you're safe in your refuge, literally nothing can tear you away.

Even if God doesn't cure your cancer or break your addiction... even if God doesn't send you a spouse... even if God doesn't multiply your bank account...even if the person you think should be president doesn't end up in the Oval Office, or if someone you think shouldn't be does...even if every source of earthly strength feel crumbles at your feet—you are completely strong. Because you have a refuge, a fortress, a stronghold that is always there; always strong; always loving; always protecting; always providing. Whatever makes you afraid, or weak, or broken, it can't take away God.

Not that Nebuchadnezzar didn't try his hardest. Enraged at their repeated disobedience, he orders his strongest soldiers to tie them up and escort them to the flames. He heats the furnace way beyond necessity, so hot that it even killed the soldiers who brought them. And dressed in as much flame-attracting clothing as possible, the three young men fell into the flames.

But Nebuchadnezzar's best attempts to destroy them couldn't touch God's power to save them. As the king and his court stared into the flames, Nebuchadnezzar gasped, ***"Look! I see four men walking around in the fire...and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."***

Not only had God saved them, their refuge was so secure that not even a hair was singed, nor did they smell like fire. You can't even sit around a campfire without that happening!

What's interesting is that God didn't prevent them from facing the flames. He lets them get tossed into the furnace. But while they're in the flames, he keeps them completely safe and protected. And what a witness that gave of God's strength! The King who mocked that no god could rescue them from him now praises God and declares them ***"servants of the Most High God."***

Sometimes God lets us face the flames of earthly weakness. But he keeps us safe through it, and uses it as a witness! How often do people see Christians persevering through suffering and ask, "How do you do it?" And God's people get to witness about where their strength is found. "The Lord is my fortress...my stronghold...my strength."

I can't see Kobe Bryant's heart to know if he was a believer. But I've seen multiple interviews where he praised and credited God for his success, and perseverance through difficult times. He supposedly had a strong connection to his church, and even went to church and received communion the morning he died. If Kobe

Bryant had faith that Jesus was his Savior, then even if all his outward strength crashed with that helicopter in Calabasas, his Refuge didn't.

In earthly weakness, pain, or suffering, trust that God can rescue you from it. But even if he doesn't, trust that God will rescue you from it! Even if every wall collapses down, your Refuge never will. Sealed safely within your Refuge, even the weak are infinitely strong.