

HOWe THINGS ARE...

March 2011

“Wait, who? Say it again slower”, she says.

“The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego”, I repeat.

Enthusiastic nods from a couple people. Blank stare from the woman who asked. Not everyone is paying attention, but I’ve definitely engaged at least one person.

“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. There’s a king who builds this statue and whenever music plays everybody is supposed to bow down to the statue, right? Except Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego won’t do it. People tell the king about it. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego get hauled in front of the king. The king tells them, ‘bow down to the statue or be thrown into a furnace’. They say, ‘Look, we’re not going to bow down to your statue. Our God is able to save us from the furnace – and here’s the part I love – but *even if he does not*, we’re not going to bow down”.

“Wow”, she says. “and what happens next?”. Her enthusiasm has got even the people who weren’t paying attention a few minutes ago interested.

Several people are talking at once, eager to finish the Bible story, but several others shush them saying I should finish.

“So the king throws them in the furnace.”, I continue. She’s looking distraught. “and people around ask the king, ‘hey didn’t you throw in three people, because there’s four people in there”’. She’s got wide eyes. And a couple people who know the story are looking ready to bounce out of their chairs. “They take them out of the furnace. Nothing is burned except the ropes they were tied with”.

“Where is this story?”, she demands to know, pencil poised to write down the answer.

“Daniel. It’s a good book. The handwriting on the wall, the lions’ den.”

Every now and again I forget until I’m telling people who have no knowledge of the Bible that it’s a really, really good book. There are not just good stories, there are really good stories in there.

Unrelated to working with Wycliffe (except the part about the Bible goes straight to the core of people, people should definitely have access to a Bible they can understand, the whole Bible), I get to teach a women’s Bible study in the county jail through my North Carolina church’s jail ministry. It can be so much fun. (It can also feel like teaching Sunday school to very large four year olds some days, but we’re focusing on the good parts just now).

Like the time I led them through the story of David and Bathsheba. New story to a lot of people and they were vocal in their disapproval of David. When he sends the note back with Uriah telling Joab to have him killed, there were 30 seriously angry women. And then they were fighting mad when the baby dies and David goes in to comfort Bathsheba. Talking over one another: “He knows why the baby died and he didn’t even tell her why”. “Yeah, right, he’s going to ‘comfort’ her. Like he cares. You know what he wants”. Then we read Psalm 51. People aren’t buying his confession. There’s scoffing. “He’s sorry he got caught.” Some other harsher words for and about him. It’s the uncensored reaction from people who aren’t real worried about the correct Sunday school answers. I’m reminded that they’re right. David doesn’t deserve forgiveness or another chance any more than any of us. That’s the point isn’t it? That God extends forgiveness and mercy when we don’t deserve mercy and nobody else would extend forgiveness. Except when we read the story, knowing it so well, it loses the rawness that makes it compelling. I wonder how many things have become so familiar, I miss their real-ness?

An IT specialist in Africa was attending a meeting of mother-tongue translators who had come from working in an area wracked by war. During their time together, he asked them to list the most difficult challenges they faced. The men compiled a long list of the difficulties and obstacles they faced doing translation work in a war zone.

Then, each African translator was asked to vote for his top seven obstacles. When the votes were tallied, the civil war came near the top of the list – but it was second. The number one hindrance on their joint list was the lack of computer support!

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