

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20

But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god.

Daniel 3:25



In the early church, when Christianity was illegal, it was dangerous for Christians to make or have images of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christians often used symbols and select scenes from the Old Testament stories to covertly signal their faith. Among the most famous of these covert symbols is Jonah and the Whale, as Jonah's three days in the belly of the beast was thought to be like Jesus' three days in the tomb. For this reason, Roman catacombs where early Christians are buried feature depictions of Jonah getting swallowed and spit up.

Another covert image comes from the famous story in our lectionary today about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, three men who were thrown into the fire for refusing to bow to a king's image. It's worth reflecting on why this became a popular early Christian motif. First, it's a story of miraculous survival, one that brings

their persecutors to faith in God. Second, the three men may have served as reminders to early Christians of the Trinity. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the three Jewish men were persecuted for doing what Christians were refusing to do: namely, worship the image of a king (in this case, the Roman emperor).

These early Christian images—drawn from the deep well of Hebrew Scripture—emphasize struggle, miraculous survival and faithfulness to God amid persecution and adversity. They explore resurrection as miraculous survival amidst encircling flames and in the belly of the beast.

Today's readings

Canticle [2] or 13 | Daniel 3:14–20,24–28
John 8:31–42

What do these stories say about the themes of enduring faith and resilience in Christianity?