

*“Falling Upward: After the Fire”*  
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA  
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 10, 2018  
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*Daniel 6: 16-23*

<sup>16</sup> Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, “May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!” <sup>17</sup> A stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, so that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. <sup>18</sup> Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no food was brought to him, and sleep fled from him.

<sup>19</sup> Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. <sup>20</sup> When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, “O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?” <sup>21</sup> Daniel then said to the king, “O king, live forever! <sup>22</sup> My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and, also before you, O king, I have done no wrong.” <sup>23</sup> Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So, Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

*1 Corinthians 12: 12-26*

<sup>12</sup> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be?

<sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many members, yet one body. <sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; <sup>24</sup> whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

## *Falling Upward: The Rockiness of Life*

Nicki Salcedo spoke to the Decatur Rotary this week.  
Her bio states that she's a speaker, writer, and catalyst,  
an Atlanta native and graduate of Stanford University.  
She's married with 4 children and a resident of Decatur.  
Nicki Salcedo's romantic suspense novel *All Beautiful Things*  
earned her the Maggie Award of Excellence  
and a Golden Heart nomination.

Nicki thinks everyone should write and loves connecting with readers.  
Best of all, she does some of her writing and thinking  
across the street at the Dancing Goats coffee house.  
When I met her and introduced myself as your pastor, she said,  
"Oh, your church has the Toy Park and sells Christmas Trees!"  
Yes, we do.

Ms. Salcedo was introduced to the Rotary by the reading of her professional bio.  
So, she began her speech by pointing out  
that when you hear your bio read to an audience,  
you decide whether it feels like a eulogy (your life is complete; *fini*)  
or a launching pad (your life is taking off; new beginnings).  
She observed that one's bio  
does not mention the hardships, failures,  
or mistakes experienced, endured and overcome along the way to  
now.

She encouraged listeners to be optimistic and hopeful when life gets bumpy.  
People who feel unwanted get that way because  
(a) they may view their imperfections as failure,  
and (b) they are feeling unappreciated or invisible.  
Respect and give thanks to the folks you encounter daily  
because, just like your own, their stories and lives matter.  
Everybody has a story, a bio, a life worthy of sharing and expressing out loud.  
The way she spoke about respecting and recognizing people  
whom we usually just pass by or dismiss for their supposed  
imperfections

reminded me of the Apostle Paul, who said to the Church:  
*“The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,  
and those members of the body that we think less honorable  
we clothe with greater honor,  
and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect;  
whereas our more respectable members do not need this.”* (1 Cor. 12: 22-24)

Nicki Salcedo equated living in the now to the writing process:

Writing is difficult and filled with imperfections,  
messy to create, and hard to clean up. Writing is the act of revision.  
Writers need to allow themselves the freedom to make mistakes.  
She said, *“Happiness requires navigating through the happy and sad experiences.  
Enjoy the rockiness of life.”*

### ***Falling Upward: Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land***

The Book of Daniel is filled with magnificent stories.

In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah,  
King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

*“The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power,  
as well as some of the vessels of the house of God.”*

A boy named Daniel was captured and carried away to Babylon.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon ordered that four young men from Israel  
be brought into his court

and instructed in the ways of Babylonian teachings and wisdom.

They were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the tribe of Judah.

*“The palace master gave them other names:*

*Daniel he called Belteshazzar,*

*Hananiah he called Shadrach,*

*Mishael he called Meshach,*

*and Azariah he called Abednego.”*

One night, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had vivid dreams  
that, try as he might, he did not understand.

None of his enchanters, priests, or advisors understood the dreams.

In his frustration and rage the king threatened them all with death,  
yet Daniel bravely asked for a hearing of the dream.

That night God spoke to Daniel and told him the dream's true meaning.

The next morning Daniel told the king what God was seeking to communicate.

He bore witness to the king about the one true God.  
The king spared the advisors lives and rewarded Daniel richly.

Later King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon made a golden statute for all to worship.  
Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow to any god but the Lord.  
These three men were thrown into a fiery furnace.  
Their bravery during terror and faith during trauma gave witness to God.  
When the king gazed into the furnace to see three men  
    he saw a fourth figure in there as well.  
He ordered that they be freed from the fire;  
    he discovered that they were unharmed.  
Not one hair was singed.  
So, it was that the king himself gave witness to all who would listen  
    that an angel of God had walked among them and saved their lives.

They say that one day Saint Peter was on the watch at Heaven's Door  
    adjusting the "All Means All Are Welcome Here" sign.  
St. Peter was pleased with the new welcome mat that read:  
    "Warning: This place is covered in dog and cat hair."  
He looked down through the clouds  
    and saw that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon  
        had tossed Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego into a fiery furnace.  
Saint Peter was all in a tizzy by the time he found God.  
"Lord! Lord! Nebuchadnezzar has thrown your servants into a fiery furnace!"  
"Oh, my, that is terrible! I better call Jesus and send Him there pronto."  
So, God speed dialed Jesus. When Jesus picked up God began to say,  
    "My Child, did you hear that King Nebuchadnezzar  
        threw Shadrach, Meschach, and ---"  
That is as far as he got.  
"When the [Lord] gazed into the furnace to see three men,  
    [God] saw a fourth figure in there as well."  
Jesus looked up and said, "Relax, Ancient One. I got this. I am already here."

### *Falling Upward: In the Lions' Den*

In time, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon passed on  
    and his son Belshazzar was made king.  
Later at a celebratory feast a mysterious hand appeared in the air,  
    writing a message on the wall that said, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin."  
No one knew what these words meant,

until God spoke through Daniel to testify and interpret their meaning.  
That very night Belshazzar was killed, and Darius the Mede was made king.  
The bible says that an excellent spirit was in Daniel,  
and his work pleased King Darius.  
Jealous leaders sought to trap Daniel,  
and they spoke ill of him to King Darius  
until the king had Daniel thrown into a lions' den.  
God sent an angel to shut the lions' mouths and Daniel was saved.  
Darius was so thankful – and we can be sure that Daniel was, too –  
of what he witnessed that the king released Daniel  
and for good measure tossed into the lion's den the jealous leaders.

### *Falling Upward: Spirituality in the Second Half of Life*

Richard Rohr speaks of the two halves of our spiritual life.  
In his book, *Falling Upward*,  
he identifies the first half of our spiritual life  
as when we are formed and forming;  
the second half begins after trials and tragedies,  
trauma and temptations push and pull us  
into reforming, renewing, restoring, rewriting our script and  
story.

The first half includes what God provides what we need to survive.  
The second half begins as God guides us forward to thrive.

“The message of *Falling Upward* is straightforward and bracing:  
the spiritual life is not static.

You will come to a crisis in your life, and after the crisis, if you are open to it,  
you will enter a space of spiritual refreshment, peace and compassion  
that you could not have imagined before.” (*Christian Century*)

As Rohr says, “*The first half of life is discovering the script,  
and the second half [of life] is actually writing it and owning it.*”

“The spiritual life has two stages.

In the first half of life, you are devoted to establishing yourself;  
you focus on making a career and on finding friends and a partner;  
you are crafting your identity.

Spiritually, people in the first half of life  
are often drawn to order, to religious routine.

We are developing habits  
and letting ourselves be shaped by the norms and practices

of our family and community." (Christian Century)

Then—a crisis.

"Some kind of falling," Rohr says, is necessary for continued spiritual development. "Normally a job, fortune, or reputation has to be lost, a death has to be suffered, a house has to be flooded, or a disease has to be endured."

The crisis can be devastating. The crisis undoes you.

The flood doesn't just flood your house—it washes out your spiritual life.

What you thought you knew about living the spiritual life no longer suffices for the life you are living.

Now, my friends, please know this.

There is Good News!

First, God has not abandoned you, even if you are sure that God has.

"All the books of the Bible seem to agree that *somehow God is with us and we are not alone.*"

Second, "We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right."

That may be cold comfort during the crisis—

when your house has flooded, who wants to think about spiritual growth?

...Later you will notice.

You will wonder how you possibly could have come to where you are without that flood.

Falls precede growth.

Like it or not, this is the way of change and growth.

As James Baldwin said, "*Not everything that is faced can be changed.*"

*But nothing can be changed until it is faced.*"

Facing the terrors and traumas and tragedies

help us to recognize the presence of God and God's community in our past, our present, and a hope-filled future.

Spiritual growth, what Rohr calls the second half of life, doesn't necessarily happen.

You may stay stuck if you so choose.

You can refuse the second half.

So many folks prefer the so-called safety of surviving versus the offering of thriving.

If you welcome the second half of life, this is what you will find:

you learn to hear "a deeper voice of God" than you heard before.

The voice, the presence of God, says Rohr,

“will sound an awful lot like the voices of risk, of trust, of surrender,  
of soul, of ‘common sense,’ of destiny, of love,  
of an intimate stranger,  
of your deepest self.”

You can hear this voice in the second half of life  
precisely because of all the work you [do] in the first half;  
your very self is now a container strong enough  
to hold the call of the intimate stranger.

You find that you can let go of things—pain, judgments,  
even the need to make judgments.

You may find that you are reading a lot of poetry;  
you may find that you are reading the mystics,  
who seemed opaque to you before.

There is a gravitas in this second half of life, writes Rohr,  
“...held up by a much deeper lightness.”

Enjoy the rockiness, said Nicki Salcedo.

The movement toward true happiness requires both sad and happy times.

Life is difficult and filled with imperfections,  
messy to create, and hard to clean up.

Living is the act of revision, restoration, resurrection.

Allow yourself the freedom to make mistakes.

Claim for yourself the comforting faith that God is nigh to restore you.

### *Falling Upward: Thriving in the Now*

This is a call to presence, to be present in the now, together.

This is a plea, a prayer, a prophetic alert, a petition for showing up for one  
another,

even and especially in times of personal heartache and fiery heat,  
of communal discord and disharmony.

[Right about here is when we quit preachin’ and get to meddlin’.]

Who needs for you to stand with them in their hour of need,  
to be a source of courage and strength?

Who needs for you to be authentic, a witness, to admit your imperfections, to be  
real?

Who needs for you to listen to their nightmares and needs,  
their highest hopes and deepest dreams?

As we step up and stand tall beside one another, together,

we do well to remember, to Re-Member,  
to remember those who have gone on before us  
the Daniels, Shadrachs, Meshachs, and Abednegos,  
as well as those in our midst today  
who enlighten and empower  
our own journeys with such grace.  
Remember the folks who emerge from life's ashes like the Phoenix,  
a new Creation in Christ, offering themselves to God and the community.  
We shall stand up, together, with fortitude and faith,  
to the monsters and mayhem and meanness in our midst,  
a force of love to overcome any whose will is to separate and  
violate.  
We shall emerge from the fires and rise like a phoenix.  
We'll come out the lion's den with an incredible lightness of being.  
We shall stand up together in the face of monsters,  
because the whole people of God, united by grace,  
will never be defeated.  
We strive forward with the Ancient One, the Holy Spirit, and the Child of God  
who yoke us into a force for love and reconciliation.

*Falling Upward: Thriving into New Beginnings*

Happiness requires navigating through the happy and sad experiences.

Remember Daniel's story,  
and let God be strong for you in your weak places and moments.

Remember Shadrach's story,  
and bear witness, speaking the truth in love.

Remember Meshach's story,  
and give thanks to the Ancient One and the Son of God.

Remember Abednego's story,  
and be assured that you are never, ever alone or abandoned,  
ignored or isolated, for Jesus is here with you and so is His Church.

Remember that we are always, always re-members  
with God and one another in Christ.



*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

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Bibliography:

Christian Century, Book review of Falling Upward, by Lauren F. Winner, Aug. 16, 2011.

Richard Rohr, Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life, Jossey-Bass, 2011.