

The Kings of the King
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
May 8, 2022-AM Service
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Daniel 2:1-13

This week is the second sermon in our exile series. All sermons in this series will be based on Bible passages coming out of the Babylonian exile. All these texts show us something about how God would have us live in times when God's people are in a position of weakness rather than strength. Last week we read a part of Jeremiah's letter to the early exiles, and in that letter he suggested a kind of posture the exiles should adopt. They shouldn't assimilate and just become like the Babylonians. Neither should they become sectarian and separate themselves completely. Instead they should engage the city, pray for the city, and work for the prosperity of the city even while maintaining a distinct identity as God's people. So last week Jeremiah gave general instructions about how to live. Today we will see that sort of exile life lived out in Daniel. Jeremiah gave principles; Daniel will show us those principles in action.

"In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams, and his mind was troubled and he could not sleep." Our story starts with this picture of a young king whose mind is troubled by restless dreams. These dreams are really getting to him. Not only is he having trouble sleeping, these dreams torment him all day long. Nebuchadnezzar sits in court and he's supposed to be attending to matters of state, but he can barely concentrate, partly because he's so sleepy and partly because his mind keeps going back to the dream. It's made him edgy. He's always on the edge of furious. He's so worked up that he calls in the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers and demands that they help him. But he doesn't just want them to interpret his dream, he wants them to tell the dream itself. And, in a sign of just how angry and unsettled he is he says, "If you don't tell me my dream, I'll have you cut to pieces." The enchanters and sorcerers all say, "Wait, What!? We can't tell you your dream! Only the gods can!" Nebuchadnezzar is unmoved. He orders that all the advisors be executed—including Daniel.

So this dream has really got the king worked up! You get the sense that he's becoming unhinged. Why is he so unsettled by this dream? What is it about this dream that puts him in this state? Let's hear the dream. Here's Daniel in verse 27 beginning to tell the king what he dreamed.

Why is Nebuchadnezzar so worked up about the dream? Why does this dream make him sleepless and angry and anxious? To answer that question, you have to understand that this dream has two dimensions. There is a historical dimension to this dream. When Daniel interprets the dream he gives a historical interpretation. He gives an interpretation which predicts all the things that will happen in the years leading up to the birth of Christ. He tells Nebuchadnezzar how his dream represents a succession of empires leading up to the coming of the rock which turns into a mountain.

That's one dimension of the dream, but it's not the part that unsettles the king. There is also a personal, spiritual dimension to the dream. That's the part that torments Nebuchadnezzar. There's something in the dream that unsettles his soul. This dream has a message about human weakness. Human weakness is a central theme of this passage. Both Daniel and the enchanters tell the king that they are not strong enough or smart enough to do what he asks. And it's this message about human weakness that unsettles the king. When God sent him this vision of the

statue, which looked strong from the chest up, but at its foundation was weak and close to collapse, it touched a nerve. It awakened his insecurity.

Remember, this is the second year of his reign. Nebuchadnezzar had ascended to a position of enormous responsibility. He was literally the most powerful man in the world. And he's discovered what all people in these kinds of positions discover—from a distance these big institutions and the people who lead them look strong and smart and in control. But when you get inside them you realize that these institutions, like all institutions, are flawed and frail and the people who lead them are flawed and frail. Nebuchadnezzar has the dream about the statue that shows a strong, shining face, but has feet of clay; a statue that looks strong, but is weak at its foundation, a statue that collapses and becomes like chaff blown away in the summer breeze, and he wakes up in a sweat because he thinks, "That's me." It's like the dream whispers in his ear, "You have no idea what you're doing! You're in over your head. And it's all going to collapse." The king projects an image of control and power, but his response to the dream shows that just under the surface there's part of him that's scared. That's why he can't sleep.

This personal, spiritual dimension of Nebuchadnezzar's dream is not confined to the king. The whole world is full of people dreaming some version of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The world is full of people who are walking around and acting like they are competent and in control, people who talk as if they know the answers, but even as they put on a strong front and the confident words come out of their mouths, some version of Nebuchadnezzar's dream is whispering in their ear. "You don't understand anything, and everything is this close to falling apart."

You could argue that our whole society is having a Nebuchadnezzar moment. Our whole society is being tormented by a 21st century version of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. There is definitely a sense that a culture that once seemed so strong and certain and grounded is suddenly fragile. 30 years ago, after the Berlin wall fell and Mikael Gorbachev opened up Russia, everyone thought that western democracy had triumphed! Dictators were done! America was leading the world and western style democracy would take hold in every place. The world would enter a new season of freedom and prosperity and at the head of it all would be America. In 1992 a scholar named Frances Fukuyama wrote a book called *The End of History*. It was widely read and people hailed it as a keen vision of the future. Fukuyama said that democracy would triumph and humans would enter a new phase of freedom and cooperation. But like the enchanters and magicians in our story, Fukuyama has proved spectacularly wrong. In 1992 democracy and western culture seemed strong and immovable. Kind of like the top half of Nebuchadnezzar's statue. But now? Now the whole society is full of people as restless and angry as Nebuchadnezzar after his dream. Everything seems up for grabs. Institutions we thought would go on forever suddenly seem wobbly.

And not only is society being tormented by a modern version of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, it seems like everyone is in a Nebuchadnezzar mood. Everyone is stomping around like the angry king. Everyone is on edge. Everyone is outraged. A lot of people are borderline unhinged. We're shouting at our leaders, shouting at each other, "Show us the meaning of my dream! Explain to me what is happening because it feels as though it's all going to fall apart!"

Not only is our culture is being tormented by a modern version of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, as God's people, we are called to a modern version of Daniel's mission. We are called to be dream interpreters. We are called to interpret the restless dreams of our culture. We are called to interpret the restless dreams of our neighbors who toss and turn at night as they try to make

sense of their world. We are called to point them away from the idol of human power, with its golden face and its clay feet, and point them towards the rock of ages.

And if you want to know how to do that, if you want to know how to calm people down and interpret their dreams, you should watch Daniel in verse 14. As I see it, there are 3 things Daniel does here that can inform us as we speak to the restless dreams of our culture.

First, Daniel prays. Here's a fundamental difference between Nebuchadnezzar's approach to life, and Daniel's approach to life. Nebuchadnezzar meets the world with strength. He wants appear as though he's always in control, like he's strong enough and smart enough to do all the things. Daniel starts his day on his knees. Daniel knows he is weak. Nebuchadnezzar hides his weakness; Daniel leads with it. Daniel knows that this task is too big for him. So he prays, "Lord, I can't interpret this dream. I can't make sense of this. No one can. But you can Lord. So I put myself in your hands."

We are all inadequate to the tasks of our life. It's not just the big troubles of the world which are too big for us to figure out, we can't even figure out our kitchen table problems: How to raise our children. How to come alongside a depressed friend. How to make sense of our own hearts. If you start every day meeting these troubles by trying to psych yourself up, by pretending that you are in control, but thinking these problems can be overcome if you just work a little harder, it will crush you. You will be a mess of pride and shame and anger. You will stomp around like Nebuchadnezzar. But if you start on your knees, knowing where your hope and strength comes from, you'll be planted on the rock. When we begin with prayer, our weakness doesn't panic us, because we remember that we are weak but he is strong. If we are going to speak wisdom to the restless dreams of our culture it will come out of a humility rooted in prayer.

Second, Daniel relies on the people of God. Daniel roots himself in the church. Verse 17: "Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery." He goes to his friends and says, help me! Pray with me! On his own, his faith isn't strong enough to keep going, he needs the support of others. It's yet another way in which the Bible reminds us that the life of faith is meant to be done in community. We need the company of faithful believers to pray for us and with us when we are down.

So Daniel uses prayer, he relies on community; Daniel also uses knowledge. In chapter one, we learn that Daniel has had a thorough liberal arts education. In chapter one, verse 4 we hear that Daniel had been thoroughly instructed in the language and the literature of the Babylonians. In order to address the culture and its confused dreams you've got to understand that culture, you've got to speak its language. You see Daniel exercise his cultural learning in verse 15. "When Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact." Daniel uses his cultural knowledge and political skill—all things he had studied—to diffuse the situation.

You also see that when Paul addressed the people of Athens. The Athenians were also having restless dreams, only those dreams were expressed in all the statues of gods and goddesses placed all over their city. It was an expression of their religious hunger, their religious restlessness. Paul addresses it by proclaiming the truth of Jesus, but as he does so he quotes the Greek poets and philosophers. His deep study helped him address his Athenian audience on their terms. That doesn't mean everyone has to go to college or read the Greek poets, but all of us in our own way are called to learn the contours of our society, to understand the spirit of our age, to listen discerningly to our neighbor's stories.

So prayer and community and knowledge—all these things that Daniel shows in his work with Nebuchadnezzar, but of course we have one thing that Daniel didn't have. When it comes to interpreting the dreams of kings we have one big advantage over Daniel. We have seen the rock. We have seen the stones the builders rejected that became the cornerstone. We have seen that rock. His name is Jesus. And we belong to him.

There are two little details in this story that I love. I love that little detail about how the rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It reminds me the way Jesus came into the world. He was not cut by human hands. He was born of a virgin. Daniel couldn't have possibly known what he was saying, but that detail of the dream was pointing to Jesus. I also love that the enchanters tell Nebuchadnezzar, "only the gods can tell you your dream and they do not live among humans." They too said so much more than they knew because in Jesus, God came to live with us. The words became flesh. The rock became a person. He walked with us. He died for us. He was raised up for us. We have seen the rock.

We have seen the Lord of history. He's our companion, our master, our most intimate conversation partner. Our friend. And by the power of his Spirit, his kingdom is growing and it's becoming a mountain that will fill the earth with peace and joy. That's a story worth sharing with all the people out there who are unsettled by their restless dreams.

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