

Trust in the Midst of Fear
Daniel 2:1-24
June 16, 2024 West Valley Presbyterian Church

SLIDE 1

Take a look at this picture. What is it? Is this the stuff of nightmares? Does it look especially terrifying to you? // Probably not. But Nebuchadnezzar would most likely have found this picture to be terrifying. Nebuchadnezzar had a nightmare, of a statue made of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay, which was destroyed by a rock not cut by human hands. It shook him to his very core. He was terrified. And, being the king, he saw to it that everyone around him was terrified too.

Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from the book of Daniel, chapter 2, vv1-24.

SLIDES 2-22

2 In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. ² So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers^[a] to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, ³ he said to them, "I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means."^[b]

⁴ Then the astrologers answered the king,^[c] "May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

⁵ The king replied to the astrologers, "This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. ⁶ But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me."

⁷ Once more they replied, "Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

⁸ Then the king answered, "I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided: ⁹ If you do not tell me the dream, there is only one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me."

¹⁰ The astrologers answered the king, "There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. ¹¹ What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans."

¹² This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. ¹³ So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death, and men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death.

¹⁴When 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. ¹⁵He asked the king's officer, "Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. ¹⁶At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him.

¹⁷Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ¹⁸He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. ¹⁹During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven ²⁰and said:

"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;
wisdom and power are his.

²¹He changes times and seasons;
he deposes kings and raises up others.

He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.

²²He reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him.

²³I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors:
You have given me wisdom and power,
you have made known to me what we asked of you,
you have made known to us the dream of the king.

²⁴Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him."

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

Why do you suppose Nebuchadnezzar demanded that his wise men tell him what he had dreamed, as well as what the dream meant? We all know that none of us can possibly do that. We don't live in other people's brains. Centuries earlier, when the Pharaoh of Egypt had that dream about the seven cows and the seven heads of grain, he told his wise men what the dream was. And when they couldn't interpret it, he didn't threaten to kill them all. So why is Nebuchadnezzar being so unreasonable?

Partly, it's because he wants quality control. He says, v.9, "Tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me." If the gods can tell his wise men what the dream was, then that's a guarantee that the wise men's interpretation is correct. That's how he can tell that the wise men aren't just conspiring to tell him "misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change" as the earlier part of verse 9 says?

But Nebuchadnezzar mostly wants everyone to be terrified along with him. Early on, in v. 5, Nebuchadnezzar says, “This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut in pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble.” Do you think that threat helped the wise men to think clearly? I doubt it! Nebuchadnezzar wanted company in his fear! He could have paused for a few minutes, to think about what he was afraid of, and whether that fear is reasonable. But he didn’t. He gave in to his fear and made it much worse by amplifying it among everyone around him.

His ordering the execution of all the wise men in Babylon was not an idle threat. Nebuchadnezzar did have absolute authority over everyone in Babylon. We are told in v. 13 that the decree was issued to put all the wise men to death, and in v. 14, that Arioch, the commander of the king’s guard, were sent to go look for Daniel and his friends and put them to death. Arioch doesn’t question the order, even though he likes Daniel enough to talk with him and explain what’s going on.

The irony of this is, the dream that Nebuchadnezzar had, was a gift! From God! God showed him, in dream language, the future of Babylon. He could have chosen to thank God for this gift, and make plans for the future accordingly. But he doesn’t. He panicked. And panic doesn’t lead to careful thought or wise decisions.

It’s a good thing that Daniel was there at the court also! How did he respond to the panic all around him? He responded wisely. When Arioch, the commander of the guard, comes to him to put him to death in accordance with Nebuchadnezzar’s command, he doesn’t beg for mercy. He speaks calmly to Arioch, whom he probably knows. With wisdom and tact, he asks what’s going on. Once he hears about the king’s command to put all the wise men to death, he acts bravely and temperately. He goes in – by himself – to talk with the king; and that took guts, since he was supposed to have been dead already. And he speaks with wisdom and tact to Nebuchadnezzar also. He doesn’t say that the king’s request is impossible. He just asks for time, so that he can interpret the dream.

What does he do next? He gathers up his friends, tells them what’s going on, and urges them all to plead with God for mercy. “Please, God, you sent that dream to Nebuchadnezzar, please, please tell us what the dream was, so that we can interpret it and not be executed.” They all pray hard together. And during the night, God answers, as only he can; since he sent the dream, he knows what it was, and reveals it to Daniel along with its interpretation. And Daniel uses the gift God has given them to save all their lives.

Nebuchadnezzar responded to the gift of a dream with fear, which he spread to everyone else around him. Daniel responded to the gift of a dream with gratitude. He praises God forever and ever for revealing the deep and hidden things that only God can see, since light dwells within him. He thanks God for answering what all four of them, together, had asked.

Daniel’s prayer of gratitude is especially appropriate because he praises God for changing times and seasons, for deposing kings and raising up others. That was exactly what Nebuchadnezzar’s dream was about: the rising and falling of empires throughout history, and how God has the ultimate rule over everything. Sooner or later, God will bring all human empires down, because he will reign over us directly.

We aren't Nebuchadnezzar. We aren't rulers of empires, we don't have the power of life or death over millions of people. But in at least one way, we are **like** Nebuchadnezzar: we like to think that we're in control of our future. And it's true that the things we do now, affect our future. Climate change is a good example, and so is what we choose to do in war. But though we affect our futures, we don't control them. When we do something, we don't really know what all the future effects are going to be. There are just too many variables for us to plan for everything.

As a trivial example, consider gardening. When Rob and I lived in Sonora, I had about a quarter of an acre of raised beds, surrounded by a 7 foot fence because of the herds of deer that lived in the area. One year I decided to plant about 50 onion sets in one of the raised beds. We had ideal soil. We had automatic irrigation. The deer couldn't jump the fence. I had every reason to expect super-tasty fresh onions in a few months. But one morning, I woke up to find all the onions were gone, with raccoon footprints up and down the raised bed. Those raccoons had climbed over the 7 foot fence during the night, and had eaten every single one of them. I hadn't planned for that, because I didn't know that raccoons LOVE onions. There were just too many variables to plan for everything!

And if we can't even predict something simple - like whether raccoons will eat our crops before we do - then how can we presume to know how anything is going to turn out? We can't. But fortunately for us, God is infinite; God is all knowing; God is all powerful; and he holds our future in his hands. We don't know what our future holds. But we do know that God holds it. And we can trust God.

So the next time we face a difficult decision, or an impossible situation, let's follow Daniel's example. Let's not act like Nebuchadnezzar and spread fear all around. That will just make things worse. We should do what Daniel did. We should gather up a few of our friends and family, and sit down and pray. Family problems? Financial problems? Concern about war, or the state of the earth, or the price of electricity? Gather some friends and pray about it, rather than panicking about it. Whatever it is - pray, don't panic. Pray for whatever is concerning you, whether it's a big thing or a little thing. After all, wisdom and power lie with God, both in the present and in the future.

Let's pray.

Praise be to your name, O God, forever and ever; wisdom and power are yours. You are beyond time, beyond climate, beyond our disagreements and worries. You are the source of wisdom and knowledge. You see all things, you know all things, you are the source of all things. We praise you, we worship you, we glorify you.

Thank you that, through Jesus, we can approach you at any time, and ask for, or about, anything that concerns us - anything at all. Thank you that your Holy Spirit intercedes for us as we come before you in prayer. When we face difficulties, when we don't know what the future holds for us, we ask that you would hear our prayers, which we offer up to you now in silence. ///

Thank you that you make known to us what we most need to know – that you love us and are always with us. Help us always to trust you in the midst of whatever fear we might feel. For it is in the name of Jesus, who saves us, that we pray. Amen.