

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Daniel 4:19-37; Acts 3:19-26; Matthew 3:1-12

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

I don't know about you, but I'm a dreamer. No, I don't mean a pie-in-the-sky, head-in-the-clouds dreamer, but rather that, if I manage to fall into a deep sleep, I have some crazy, intense dreams, sometimes so much so that I talk in my sleep and toss and turn all over the bed. More than a few times when I've awoken I've had to wonder if what I dreamt really happened. More than a few times I've been talking to Tricia about something that I thought really happened and she'll look at me with confusion and say, “What are you talking about?”

Perhaps a few of you know what I'm talking about. Perhaps you've had dreams like that. If you have, you know what Nebuchadnezzar felt like in the beginning of our first lesson. He'd been frightened by a dream, a dream so real he couldn't get it out of his mind, the second such dream he'd experienced. He was desperate to know what it meant, and so Daniel, a captive from Israel who had been promoted in the king's government because of his wisdom, faithfulness, and honesty, was asked to interpret it. It was a logical choice. Daniel had amazingly interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's first dream. Perhaps the LORD would enable to do the same now.

Interpreting dreams was dangerous work in ancient times. Men who told kings what they didn't want to hear averaged a rather short lifespan, and Daniel knew that. Daniel had already landed in the fiery furnace once for His faith, and he was surely not eager to face such a trial again. The king could see Daniel's concern and so he reassured him, ***“Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you.”***

Daniel interpreted the dream, and which of you would like to deliver such news to the most powerful man in the world? No doubt, our knees would be knocking so hard they'd leave bruises to the bone. Captive servants of a foreign faith and humble means just don't tell kings they're going to live like a beast of the field, they're going to eat grass like an ox. That's exactly the kind of thing that made interpreting dreams a dangerous profession. Yet the Most High had spoken. Daniel was accountable to a higher king, a King most of the world did not fear but a King to be feared and loved above all nonetheless, and so Daniel had no choice but to speak the words given him.

Babylon had risen to power and conquered Israel for one reason and one reason alone: the LORD allowed them to do so. Sure, a lot of military planning went into it. Yes, a lot of resources had been tapped and much machinery produced. Of course, the whole endeavor was rather impressive from a human perspective, but the underlying fact remained: had the LORD not nodded to the task, had the LORD's will not been to humble Israel by the hand of the Babylonians, all that effort would have ended in defeat. It wouldn't have been the first time a tiny nation with the LORD defeated a big nation without Him. Nebuchadnezzar needed to learn that. And by God's hand, the same hand that had exalted him, he would be sufficiently humbled to understand it.

We are all by nature Nebuchadnezzars. We like to have our backs patted, our deeds—at least the good ones—recorded and announced. That’s why Jesus tells us to pray in the closet, to give without our left hand knowing what our right hand is doing, to fast without putting on a show, to turn the other cheek when pride might tell us to land the other punch. **“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven,”** Jesus warns (Matthew 6:1).

And the sermon has stayed the same, from Daniel’s time to John the Baptist’s to the Apostles’ to ours, because people haven’t changed, and **pride still goes before the fall** (Proverbs 16:18). It’s pride that keeps us from admitting our wrong. It’s pride that holds on to our sins rather than receive forgiveness, whether from the one we’ve wronged or from God. It’s pride that tells us we’re not so bad, we’re not so sick, we’re not so desperate as to need to be rescued. It’s pride that points us to the sins of another to take our minds off of our own, to make our transgressions seem small in comparison. Pride is what convinces us we can fix things when they just can’t be fixed, that we can get ourselves back into God’s good favors when no such thing is possible on our own. It was pride that kept the Pharisees out of the water and in their self-righteousness. Don’t let it do the same to you, because Peter isn’t joking, and John the Baptist isn’t playing games. **“Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out.” “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** Don’t listen to pride in such moments. No, toss off your sins as you confess them and jump into the muddy waters of the Jordan, the waters of your Baptism, and drown it.

Nebuchadnezzar lived like a beast to learn humility. Our humble Savior was born among the beasts to teach it and to save us from our pride. Nebuchadnezzar ate the grass of the field like an ox to learn repentance. John the Baptist wore camel’s hair and ate locusts as he preached the same. The road to heaven is a narrow one, and big heads just don’t fit through its gates, but, thankfully, the coming Christ Child’s head was pierced with thorns to deflate yours, and He was lifted up on the cross that you might be brought down a notch under it, not to hurt your self-esteem, but to bring you your salvation, because heaven, like all that we have in this life, isn’t the work of our hands. It’s the gift of God. Nebuchadnezzar realized this in the end. May God in His love lead us to do the same.

We’ve got a few families that have livestock in our parish, but I don’t think they need any more. You don’t have to live like a beast of the field and eat grass like an ox to learn humility. No, you need only lift up your heads, not in pride, but in the humility of faith, and look at your crucified Christ, the King whom Daniel served even when this world’s most powerful king stood before him, because He is the One who ransoms captives, with whose second coming your redemption is drawing nigh. One can’t see Him humbly born in the hay and proclaimed by the humble prophet who lived in the wilderness and ate locusts without being reminded what it is to be a Christian: it is to walk in His sandals, to make all that He has done yours and to make all that you do His. **“Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out.” “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”** The road to heaven is a narrow one, but the Baptist’s finger points the way, and in Jesus’ sandals you can’t get lost. And that’s no dream. That’s a promise. Amen.