

## **"Dust creature dignitaries and the dignity of smaller powers"**

**(based on Daniel 4)**

**by Jeff Taylor**

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Having served two 3-year terms, my time on the Preaching Team is coming to a close. This will be my last sermon as a member of that group of very special people who's regular fellowship I will miss tremendously. I am grateful to have been called to this task by my church, and happy now to be released from this responsibility.

I've always tried to say yes when asked to serve the church but I have given the occasional holy "no." And when I have been asked I know I wasn't always the first to be asked; that others before me had said no. As one who has had a turn or two doing the asking, both in our congregation and now for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, I know that many who serve better than I can imagine anyone else could have served were not the first to be asked. In a democratically-minded faith community we ask people to serve, we don't demand it. That flexibility allows the Spirit to redirect us to newly-developing gifts we didn't quite see at first.

Sometimes we ask the whole community who to ask to serve (as we do with the preaching team), but the more usual case is that we elect official askers called a Gift Discernment Committee which presents us with options that we normally find quite appealing. Anyway, how wrong can things go? When we democratic thinkers entrust one another with power it is always understood as temporal, temporary, and collaborative - with systems that give leaders expert council and limit the power of leaders to act unilaterally.

But in the ancient world that was not the pattern. Often leaders were seen to have been chosen by the gods, or by birth-right, or both. To this day the coat of arms even of the first great modern democracy - the constitutional monarchy of Great Britain and Canada - bares this inscription in the French of the Norman kings "Dieu et mon droit" - literally, "God and my right" - ie., by God's choosing and by my birth-right I am the legitimate king. It was not uncommon for ancient kings to be thought of as "sons of god" - some of the first-century emperors of Rome who persecuted Jesus' followers had such delusions - hence the emphasis from some of the gospels that Jesus is the true "Son of God."

But the exercise of power in human communities, ancient or contemporary, is not always to be viewed with suspicion. In modern democracies many and probably most of our chosen leaders work long hours with considerable skill and integrity. And it is in fact intrinsically human to assume some power in our relationships with each other.

We are born the most incompetent to care for ourselves of all newborn creatures, and therefore the most in need of being shown how to be the creature we were born to be. We have to be taught how to be human. Being taught and teaching in turn is an especially human thing to do. As fish are born

expecting water, people are born expecting culture. That is, we are born expecting to be shown how to be human, to be led. We are led into our own humanity. Leadership is a natural and necessary human behaviour.

This might be the most maddening thing about being an absolute ruler: the lack of anyone to give you leadership. Kings of old had to make life and death decisions for others without the benefit of insight that the rest of us get from constant creative and challenging interactions with one another. Sure, kings can hire smart people (or stupid ones) to advise them; or they can just take them as slaves as Nebuchadnezzar did the intellectual elite of Judah. But are those advisors willing to tell the king anything other than what he wants to hear? Will they correct the king? Who will presume to lead the supreme leader? You and I will find friends with the courage to challenge us far more readily than any ancient king would have. Imagine facing the level of constant stress and danger a king faced without normal support from peers because you have no peers. An ancient king's amygdala must have been on fire for an unhealthfully large percentage of his lifetime, resulting in some pretty poor decisions.

Such was the fate of George III of England, according to the makers of the film, "The Madness of King George." Demoralized by a constitution that placed parliament above God's anointed and humiliated at having lost the American colonies, the king experiences a sudden onset of irrational behaviour and hallucinations. Medicine being what it was in the 1780s, his doctors are of little use.

But the Prime Minister, eager to keep the derelict Prince of Wales from becoming regent in his deranged father's place, employs a minister and self-styled proto-psychologist to cure the king. The minister-doctor's diagnosis was that the king's mind had been sickened by unchecked power, depriving him of the normal corrective influence of others that helps keep humans balanced. The king had succumbed to megalomania - a delusion about who he is in relation to the rest of us. Any of this bring any current world leaders to mind?

The cure, the minister determines, is to treat the king as one would any other mortal. When he misbehaves, he is reproved, disciplined, and even forcibly restrained. The normal custom that no one may look the king in the eye is abandoned: "I have you in my eye, sir!" scolds the doctor as he engages the king in a staring contest.

In the end the king and his ego are subdued and he returns to his senses. Responding to a courtier who encourages, "You seem more yourself, your majesty" the king reflects, "Yes, I seem more myself. I have always known who I am. But I had forgotten for a time how to seem to be who I am." The king realizes his illness was social: he had forgotten his rightful place among his fellow dust creatures: yes, as a king over his people; but also as a mortal beneath his God, obligated to show a good example to his people.

This seems to parallel the experience of our old friend king Nebuchadnezzar who also lost himself in un-seemly behaviour as he became obsessed with the grandeur of his resurgent kingdom - Babylon. His reign had been like a glorious tree for all the world to see and he was feared and envied by

everyone in the known world. But those who watched him from heaven knew this tree needed to be cut back to size.

Now it's easy to think of the patriarchal monarchies of past as always having been expressions of the worst parts of human nature, recognizing as we so easily now do the inherent gender discrimination and violence of patriarchy itself; as well as the illogical assumption that sons are well-suited to be leaders just because their fathers held the post.

But these old kings weren't all the same. Nebuchadnezzar for example wasn't building an empire of uncivilized barbarians: he was restoring the grandeur of the great Babylon of old - that of the ancient king Hammurabi, giver of one of the earliest great legal codes in human history; king of one of the great Mesopotamian cultures that gave us agriculture, permanent cities, writing, law, the wheel, and the sixty minute hour. Hammurabi's Babylon had been a place of great human cultural advancement. It was the Babylon from which Abraham came.

It had been subsumed for a millennia as other cultures of Mesopotamia and beyond rose and fell. But now under Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon with its great Ishtar gate (which you can see inside the Pergamon museum in Berlin), with its multicultural literati creating great literature and art of all kinds - this Babylon rose again to cultural and political greatness. It was in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon that the Torah, Moses' law, was finally codified more or less as we know it today by Jewish slave-scholars like Daniel and his three fire-resistant friends. Not the worst king or kingdom to be found in that era.

But the delusion that one mortal can live above the flaws shared by all others found another victim in Nebuchadnezzar who took leave of his senses and behaved like far less than a man until his ego had been purged and he returned to his senses: that is, his sense of who he is and who he must seem to be to his people.

Now, none of what we find in Daniel 4 or in a film about King George or anywhere in this sermon should be taken as modern expertise on mental health: neither the film-makers, the authors of Daniel, nor I have such expertise. But this story is a warning to us about what happens to us and to all the people counting on us when we lose, or never develop in the first place, a proper sense of ourselves within the community of our fellow humans. When we cannot access or simply refuse to access the corrective interaction with other people, we risk losing our grasp on our own humanity, becoming something less than the person we could be. It is in our nature to lead and be led by others. Darwinian scientists say so, behavioural neuroscientists say so, some film-makers say so, the book of Daniel says so, and I say so.

So I ask: who are you and who are you choosing to seem to be among your people?

I am not asking about the colour of your parachute, or what animal you are on the enneagram, or what your Meyer-Briggs letters are. I am not asking about your genetic traits or your nurture profile. Yes,

these are worth considering. But at this moment I am asking: who are you at your core as it has developed to this point, and who are you choosing to be to the rest of us?

Where do you need to offer leadership where you haven't yet? Where is leadership needed that you could offer? Let us humus, humanize, humble ourselves.

Where are you in need of leadership from others and who are you seeking it from? How have you prepared yourself for the moment when someone will offer correction? How sensitively set is the trigger to your amygdala: do you allow yourself to imagine you are being attacked with every word of caution offered you? Or have you worked hard to prepare to hear criticism as helpful concern, possibly transformatively so? Let us humble ourselves.

Where have you chosen to associate with the super smart, the handsome, the cool, the well-known, rather than those who most need your help? Have you forgotten about the "watchers," both those axe-wielding ones in heaven, and those at your feet watching for an example to follow? Let us humble ourselves.

Where have you assumed dominion in your relationships with friends, family, colleagues, the church? Does your way of dominating look brash and arrogant, or does it express itself in constant but disingenuous "service" to others, so that they "have to" appreciate you? Where have you used some part of your brokenness passive-aggressively to extort a tortured friendship from someone, rather than just trusting them to find you entirely likeable as you are?

If I may offer a personal example: I know I have been struggling for some time now with feeling that I don't know how to fit in with friends for whom I used to play the role of entertainer-encourager-talker. Now that I am less impressed with what I have to say, I say less. But then I feel like I am being of no use to others in a conversation. Of course this is ridiculous: people will like me whether I am witty or not. But do you see the underlying dominion that I have been exerting in which I must always be indispensable? And of course, that excess of ego traps me. The antidote is to just sit in the presence of friends with nothing special to offer; to trust that presence itself can be of special value. Let us humble ourselves.

Have you assumed that you can will your body to perform healthfully? How's that working out for you? You have no such power - you are deluded - perhaps because you don't spend enough time being corrected by those older or sicker than you. Let us humble ourselves.

Where have you chosen to conquer enemies rather than to understand adversaries? Let us humble ourselves.

Where have you forgotten how to be and seem to be who you are before your people and before your God? I mean, what does the Lord really require of you anyway?

My dear fellow humans, you are not a super hero: from the humus of our mother the earth we have come, and to the humus we will go again. In the time between let us be who we are as of now in one

another's presence, trusting we will seem to be as others need us to be. After all, where two or three are gathered . . .

Let us humble ourselves.