

Kings Don't Learn; Do We?

The Sermon

And, though there was no record of it, I think that King Nebuchadnezzar followed through on his promise to “help” the Judeans. Although I don't really think that King Nebuchadnezzar – I'll call him “the King”, because Nebuchadnezzar is a mouthful – was quite loving his neighbour or his enemy. That king was trying to help others in the only way he knew how: mutilating anyone who disagreed with *him*.

My name is Leif and I will be delivering your sermon today, drawing upon the study that the Junior Youth have made of the Book of Daniel.

Anyway, this king made some quite silly moves. After conquering Judea, he did something smart, if rather immoral: He had all Judean intellectuals kidnapped and brought to Babylon. This had two effects: Judea had fewer smart people -- making revolution quite a bit harder -- and also brought more intellectuals to Babylon, cementing Babylonian technological superiority.

However, later, the king got angry with his intellectuals. The king had a dream and asked them to interpret it. But when they asked him to tell them the dream, the king told them that, being clairvoyant, they should know what he dreamt of. They didn't, so despite knowing his intellectuals' value, he *ordered them all killed*. Needless to say, that would be a *bad move*.

So Daniel interpreted that king's dream. And that king's dream was trying to tell him something. The dream was saying, “You may be the most powerful king in all of Mesopotamia, but it will amount to nothing.” What did the king remember? He remembered, “I am the most powerful king in all of Mesopotamia!” Then he built himself a giant golden statue.

Now, this seems quite foolish. Daniel, a young Judan intellectual, had a solution for this: Show everyone how foolish it was! By getting the king so worked up over the statue mentioned in the scripture reading (and a bit of divine intervention), Daniel highlighted the ridiculous nature of the King's literal self-idolization. Later, when Daniel got himself lioned because he was praying, the king also was made to look a bit daft.

Although this all may seem absolutely ludicrous, there are powerful people in the modern world -- contemporary kings, if you will -- who act quite similarly to Nebuchadnezzar. I probably don't need to remind you of any examples.

This is a major theme of the first half of the Book of Daniel: Kings Never Learn. Not from themselves, not from each other. The king had the power of God proven to him. He immediately praised God, though there was no immediate morality shift: The only difference was that the king was now being violent towards those he perceived as enemies of God; he was, however, still being violent. Then, he got distracted -- and maybe a tad drunk? -- with his own power. After he had this power proven insignificant AGAIN, the king wasted no time in glorifying and praising the Lord. It didn't last. His successor, Belshazzar, needed another miracle to get him in check, and Belshazzar's successor, Darius (finally a Babylonian king with a name under four syllables!) needed ANOTHER exposition of daftness, courtesy of Daniel, to get the king saying, yet again, “Oh, clearly your god is the highest god of all. I glorify the Lord your God”, yadda yadda yadda. [aside] Just between you and me, I don't believe a word of what those kings say is at all sincere.[/aside]

Interestingly enough, the kings mainly say things along the lines of “I praise the lord **your** god”, or “Anyone who does not worship the god of **Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego**”. The king thinks of Him as *their* god, not *his* god. The king had not fully devoted himself to God mentally; he still thought of Him as “The God of those folks”, instead of “The God I am praising”.

Even if the King's devotion and repentance were insincere, it was enough. Daniel lived, his friends lived, and all the magicians, sorcerers, soothsayers, astrologers, chaldeans, et. al. also lived.

Now, this is all well and good for Daniel. But how do we use this in the modern world? Daniel and his friends were simply holding out to avoid compromising their integrity and faith by adopting the violence of the system they were in. No mean feat, but for that, an empty repentance from the king is enough; anything more is the king's job. So often, however, our situation is that we feel a calling not only to protect our own faith and integrity, but to shift our contemporary kings from empty repentance to actually doing what needs to get done.

One way we do this is not dissimilar to Daniel's methods. We have stories that label our contemporary kings as fallible (**FAA-lib-le**), quite like the book of Daniel itself. The book of Daniel, see, was written in the intertestamental period, during the Books of the Maccabees. We don't know how embellished the stories were -- Daniel may actually have been several people, whose actions were tied into a single story -- but we do know that it was proposing nonviolence in a period of violence. While the Israelites were abolishing the Sabbath, the book of Daniel preached nonviolent conflict resolution and holding true to your values.

Because we are not being oppressed, we can do something Daniel couldn't dream of doing. We can protest! Protests as I see them are halfway between passive resistance and more... active forms of resistance. There was one instance a week ago where a group of clergy joined a blockade of a road to stop the Trans-Mountain Pipeline from being built through Indigenous territories. They refused to leave after law enforcement ordered them to, thus making their blockade technically a riot.

Also, after Stephen Harper changed the definition of terrorism to include acts which intentionally damage the Canadian economy, that blockade was also an act of terrorism. I just have to say, it's one of the most peaceful riots, the least violent group of terrorists I've ever seen. All they were doing was standing (or sitting) in the streets praying.

Like Daniel's acts of passive resistance, this “riot” served partially to draw attention to how ridiculous the situation was. The “terrorists” were trying to stop the pipeline being built, but unlike Daniel, they also wanted to call attention to themselves. This is important because, as we live in a democratic society, people noticing you will cause change.

So far I've been talking about what to do if we are Daniel. This is because I like talking about Daniel. We all want to be Daniel. Daniel is the youthful protestor. He is the underdog. He's the closest thing the Bible has to a superhero. (In Daniel 14, considered “apocrypha” by the Catholic church and non-canon by the Protestant church, Daniel finds a secret door used to make an idol look like he is eating, and embarrassed all the priests.) What I haven't talked about is, what does the Bible tell us to do when we're the King? Obviously, don't kill everyone, but what else?

One important thing is to be ready for the word of God, even if it comes from unexpected places. The king expected to receive a message through a dream. He did not expect to find God speaking through Daniel, who was a captive, a student, a nobody. But, as they say, God works

in mysterious and unexpected ways. The message came from one of the King's inferiors, one so inferior that the king didn't even know he existed.

It is also important to keep an open mind. Or, if you hear the voice of God -- regardless of who He speaks through -- Listen to it! And after you listen, act on it. The king didn't really act on God's word. He sure paid Him lip service, but that's really all he did. Going through the motions is better than not moving at all, sure, but it is important to think, and actually do what God asks you to do, rather than just saying, "gee, isn't God great?" Change what you think and do. Also, just because you are tearing people limb from limb and laying their houses in ruins in the name of the Lord, doesn't mean it's OK, or even that it's what God wants.

So, remember. When you are Daniel, show how daft the king is. Pipe up. Be a nuisance. Never abandon your values. Allow everyone else to see how silly the situation is, so they can help you change it. Try to save the intellectual elite of Babylon while you do it.

When you are the king, pay attention to your inferiors. Know that the word of God will come from wherever you least expect. When you hear the word of God, keep an open mind and listen. Once you know what you must do, do it. Change yourself, and change your actions. Don't mutilate all the non-Christians.

Peace be with you.