



## **feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading. (Isaiah 40:11)**

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July 16, 2013

**Dearest Church,**

The final words we have about Nebuchadnezzar are from Nebuchadnezzar himself: “Now I . . . praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” (Daniel 4:37) This past Sunday we sought to bring ourselves into agreement with these words. The events of Nebuchadnezzar’s life, which led to this proclamation, were dramatic. He had numerous encounters with the “King of heaven” before he was able to humbly utter these words.

We read of this king of Babylon in a number of Old Testament books but most comprehensively in the book of Daniel where he is one of the main characters. He comes across as persistently self-important and self-absorbed. On Sunday we focused on three stories: Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the statue (Daniel 2), the image of gold and the fiery furnace (Daniel 3), and his period of insanity (Daniel 4).

In the first episode we noted that Nebuchadnezzar’s self-importance is displayed in the fact that he unreasonably demands service (i.e. he makes a request that no king has ever made before). His demand opens the door, however, for the God of Israel, the God of Daniel, to make himself known. Nebuchadnezzar responds with wonder at Daniel’s ability not only to interpret the king’s dream, but to recount its details in the first place. We should not jump to conclusions, however. Nebuchadnezzar is clearly not converted, and certainly not cured of his self-importance, as we can tell by the two subsequent episodes.

In the next chapter (3) we read about a golden image, which Nebuchadnezzar sets up “on the plain of Dura”. The king gathers a multitude of leaders from across his empire, many languages and people groups being represented, and demands that they bow down to the golden image on pain of fiery death. Three Jews refuse and Nebuchadnezzar offers them one more opportunity to bow (which they decline) before throwing them into the furnace. Again the king’s self-importance is revealed, expressed this time as an unreasonable demand for loyalty with unreasonable consequences for disobedience. But this expression of self-importance has also, once again, created an opportunity for the God of Israel to show himself strong. The three Jews are joined in the furnace by an angelic figure, one “like a son of the gods”, and are miraculously saved from the fire. Nebuchadnezzar responds (once again) with wonder at the power of the Jewish God, even prohibiting anyone across the empire from speaking a dishonorable word against Him, but it is noteworthy that he neither institutes worship for this God nor does he particularly focus his own personal worship toward Him.

In the final episode (Daniel 4), Nebuchadnezzar has another dream. His first recourse is to ask his regular magicians and sorcerers for the interpretation (evidence that the king is not yet a convert) before asking for Daniel’s help. The dream is of a mighty tree that provides shelter and food for all the creatures of the earth. The tree is cut down but the stump is left, chained, in which state it remains for “seven periods of time”. At the end of the allotted time the chains are removed and the tree is restored to its former glory. Daniel relays the interpretation to the king: “the tree you saw . . . it is you.” Nebuchadnezzar, the mighty king of the world empire, would go insane for “seven periods of time” and behave like a wild animal. Daniel pleads with the king to change his ways: perhaps he can avoid this judgment by “practicing righteousness” and “showing mercy to the oppressed.” But the text quickly confirms that judgment would in fact come: “All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar.” But when does this judgment come? Is

it when the king is demanding unreasonable service or unreasonable loyalty? No, it is when the king is taking a stroll on his roof, talking to himself about the glorious kingdom he has established by his own might, for the glory of his personal majesty. It is at this point that Nebuchadnezzar has reached the bottom of his self-importance and self-absorption, and so it is at this point that only utter humiliation will cure him. But by God's mercy the king is in fact cured, and upon regaining his reason he utters the words quoted already above, "Now I... praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble."

When I think about Nebuchadnezzar's ridiculous pride, it is impossible for me not to think of Christ's radical humility. One man demanded service; the other became a servant. One man demanded worship; the other did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. One man meditated on his own personal greatness; the other sacrificed his own self in death for the glory of his God and Father. Both men were humiliated, but only one of these men anticipated and embraced that humiliation.

In Philippians 2 Paul appeals to Christ's humility in order to provide an example for how believers are to live. We cannot stop at an appreciation of Christ's humility; we must choose to "have this mind" in ourselves as well. And so I spent some time on Sunday asking three questions: 1) How am I like Nebuchadnezzar? 2) How am I called to be like Christ? 3) How *is it possible* to be like Christ?

In response to the first question, I can summarize by saying that; left to myself (apart from God's grace), I am naturally self-absorbed. By that I mean that my natural default is to think that everything around me relates to me in some significant way. If you are interested in hearing some of my personal confessions, you'll have to listen to the mp3 online (I'm too vain to put them in print!). At the end of my list (which is certainly incomplete), I am confronted with the reality of my brokenness and evident insecurity. How can I possibly be like humble Jesus? Only if I know in advance that God has given me worth and that I do not need to establish my own by my own efforts (something which is impossible for me to do in any case). When Adam and Eve first sinned they hid from God and sewed fig-leaves together to hide their shame. But the fig leaves were inadequate: they needed to be (and were, eventually) clothed by God himself. So how can we follow Christ's example of humility? By being clothed with Christ, by partaking in his death and resurrection, by professing faith in his perfect sacrifice and hiding in it. If we do this we will be able to say with Paul: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Romans 8:35-37) Paul could face persecutions and hardship because he knew something about "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39). We can face humiliation if only we have the same confidence.

Are we willing to humble ourselves like Christ? Are we willing to submit to the circumstances God has placed in our lives as a means to humble us? Are we confident that nothing can separate us from "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"? Our answer to the last of these questions will determine our ability to answer the first two affirmatively. Let us hid ourselves in Christ, and let us resolve to say, together with Nebuchadnezzar, "Now I... praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble", with the appropriate addendum, "those who humble themselves he is able to exalt"!

Peace & Grace,  
Ben

<http://www.christourshepherd.org/pastlet.htm> (and follow links to download MP3 audio of sermon)