

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

April 3, 2016

“King ‘Nezzar: The Biggest and The Baddest”

Bad Dudes of the Bible, part 1

Daniel 4:19-27

OK, I’ll say it: I love snow, but not this much! I understand that God is in charge of all creation and that he makes all things beautiful in their time, but still, I am guessing there are some of you who are disappointed by the weather outside. Or maybe something else in life has got you down. Whatever the case, I want to remind you, as I often do, that you are not alone. We come together to worship God. The church is the Body of Christ. We are created to be in relationships – with God and with each other. You are in the right place this morning.

I invite you to pray with me before we look into God’s word together. Feel free to hold your hands with your palms open as we pray, showing God you are ready to receive his blessing this morning.

Thank you, Almighty Father, for the blessings of this day. You created us, you gave us life, and you give us the choice every day to worship you and live for you. We ask you to send us your Holy Spirit this morning, to teach us and admonish us as we ask ourselves how we can better serve you. All this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Have you ever been intimidated by someone? Maybe you were bullied on the playground, or you were in a meeting with a very famous, very large person, and you felt very, very small.

I met a basketball player in college once by the name of Dan Kreft. I don’t remember much about his abilities, but I do remember one thing. He was big. He

was the tallest player on the team, over 7 feet tall. Once I made him a milkshake. True story. I was working at the soda shop in the student union, when he came up and bought a chocolate milk shake. I remember taking the five dollar bill from his hand and giving him change. I think his hand was bigger than the cash register.

But here's the thing: Dan was a nice guy. He was physically intimidating, but that was all. He wasn't mean or arrogant, unlike the man I want to talk about this morning: King Nebuchadnezzar. Have you heard of an ancient place called Babylon? King 'Nezzar made it the center of the world at one point. This map shows the extent of the Babylonian empire that he built. In his day, Nebuchadnezzar was the biggest, and he was the baddest.

King 'Nezzar was known as a ruthless conqueror. His first big victory was against the ancient power of Egypt in 605 BC. He then succeeded his father as king and proceeded to make Babylon a world power. He commissioned great works of architecture such as the Ishtar Gate and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. He conquered the tiny kingdom of Judah, destroying the temple and deporting the Israelites multiple times to go live in his great city.

Nebuchadnezzar was impulsive, hot-tempered, and a little crazy. But he had the power of an empire behind him, so he was 'at large and in charge'. He could pretty much do whatever he wanted. For instance, he brought in Hebrew boys, teenagers, the same age as our confirmation students today, and basically tried to brainwash them. He fed them his food, taught them his language and his religion, and tried to get them to forget who they were. He even changed their names. But the Hebrew boys resisted, staying true to God. You can read some of these stories in the first chapters of Daniel. The boys were wise, and four of them,

Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were promoted and given high posts in the kingdom.

After he promoted them, 'Nezzar tried to kill them, not once, but twice; first, after he had a terrible dream, and the second time, when the boys refused to bow down and worship a ninety-foot tall statue he had built for himself. Both times, God came through for the Hebrews, but it seemed that ol' King Nebby didn't get the point.

Which is how we come to the story today. God had a lesson in store for Nebuchadnezzar that he wasn't going to like. But I believe this lesson wasn't just for the king alone. I believe this lesson is for all of us. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. This message appears over and over again in the Bible. For instance, James 4:6, which is today's memory verse.

King Nebuchadnezzar was fascinated with dreams. He employed a group of wise men, including Daniel, to interpret them. Babylonians knew that dreams were powerful. They thought they could indicate the future, the status of his kingdom, and convey messages from the gods.

This particular dream that Daniel interpreted for him was a particularly nasty one. The short version is: "You will go crazy." Daniel went on to explain that Nebuchadnezzar was a great king, like a tree that provided shelter to all the animals. It was true: his kingdom was one of the largest the world had ever known. But old 'Nezzar did not acknowledge that God gave him everything. He was big, he was bad, and he was proud. And the bigger they are, the harder they fall, right?

Nebuchadnezzar should have seen this coming. Think about what he did earlier. He forced exiles into his kingdom and tried to convert them to his culture.

But the boys submitted to God, not the king. God exalted them. Later, Nebuchanezzar built a statue to exalt himself. Instead, through the fiery furnace, God humbled him.

Finally, God commanded that for a time, Nebuchadnezzar would lose his mind. He would live naked in the wild, grow his hair and nails long, and take baths in the rain. He would be driven out of his kingdom “until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.” (Daniel 4:25) All this came to pass, and ‘Nezzar learned the hard way that God is truly the one ‘at large and in charge.’

There is a line in this passage that grabs my attention. It is the final verse in the section we read aloud. Daniel advised the king (4:27): “Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.” ‘Nezzar didn’t take that advice, and he had to learn humility the hard way.

I believe many of us desire to be great, but at what cost? If we try to be great by putting down others, our greatness is short-lived, and instead we build up jealousy and resentment. There has to be a better way.

Confirmation students, I want to ask you a question: do you want to be great? Do you want to have success and respect? I believe you do. I believe we all do.

But we see people all the time, like Nebuchadnezzar, putting down others to get what they want. Cheating, stealing, lying, saying whatever someone else wants to hear just to take advantage of them. The spirit of selfishness is alive in us all. What is to prevent God from taking everything we have away, if we don’t acknowledge him as the source of everything?

There is a better way. It is the way that Jesus teaches us. It is the way Daniel was trying to get through the thick head of the king. In order to be great, you must learn to be a servant. Fortune 500 companies are starting to learn this. They don't want hostile, cutthroat leaders who step in and crush everyone in their way. Servant leadership is a valuable quality, both in our faith and in our world in general. Humility makes us great, and that's true in the kingdom of heaven, as well as on earth.

Jesus knew all about servant leadership. Listen to his very words:

Matthew 19:30 "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

Matthew 20:27 "Whoever wants to be first must be your slave."

Luke 9:48 "For he who is the least among you all-he is the greatest."

Do you know whom Jesus lifted as the example of the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Children. Jesus said in Matthew 18:4, "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus saw his disciples arguing for who would be the greatest. Who would be the biggest and the best? Everyone was trying to "one-up" each other. Jesus had to show them that wasn't the best way. That wasn't God's way. He got down on his hands and knees and washed their stinky feet. He died a painful death on the cross in obedience to God. He humbled himself in so many ways, it is impossible for us to see Jesus as anything but the ultimate example of selflessness.

Honestly, confirmands, we want the best for you. We want you to have good lives, many friends, healthy families, and good jobs. We want you to be happy, successful, and content. You might be rich and famous, but if fame comes

at the cost of your friends, your family, your integrity, and your soul, then it's not worth it.

King Nebuchadnezzar controlled most of the known world in his day. He was rich, powerful, and famous, at the expense of others. Was it worth it, to be humbled by God in such an awful way? I don't think so.

I believe all sin has its roots in pride. We make bad choices when we focus on what we want. Even depression is an inwardly focused emotion. It is the height of selfishness to think, "Nobody loves me. Nobody cares about me. My life is awful."

Five times in the gospels, Jesus says you have to lose your life to save it. (Matthew 10:39, Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, and John 12:25.) Four times he says, if you want to follow me, you have to take up your cross. (Matthew 10:38, 16:24, Mark 8:34, and Luke 9:23.) If you were here the last few weeks, we talked about what the cross was. The ultimate device of humiliation and shame. Jesus wasn't saying that we should die like he died, or be shamed like he was. He is saying that we need to put away every selfish desire and nail our pride to the cross. We need to be willing to get dirty, get on our hands and knees, and serve others. We need to be obedient to what God wants in our lives, not what we want.

As we were working through our confirmation lessons, we taught our class that the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ is free, but you have to accept it. You have to give up control of your own life and say, "I can't save myself." You have to believe in God's purposes for your life, and submit to him. Live for him. None of us can do this on our own. We need help. We need Jesus. And we need the church, the Body of Christ.

I have to tell you today, these membership vows are a double-edged sword. We hold each other to certain expectations in the church – we promise to support each other by our prayer, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness. And that means we all hold each other accountable, young and old, new and experienced. That’s the beauty of the church. We submit to each other, like Paul says in Philippians 2:3-4 - “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” In the church there are no divisions. We are all one in Christ (Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11). We are warned not to think of ourselves as something when we are nothing. (Galatians 6:3)

Confirmation is not a destination. Church membership is not an end goal. None of us have arrived. Just because we say a few words on a Sunday does not give us a free pass to live our lives however we want. Instead, this is a watershed moment when each of us has to choose Christ.

Honestly, even your membership in this church is temporary, unless you choose to live in Bellaire as an adult. But in the next few years, you have every right and responsibility to live for Christ in the community of this church. You can claim the things you love, and you can speak up for the things you wish to change. All of us, as members of the Body of Christ, have that responsibility.

We know the majority of your generation is not choosing Christ. They are choosing the ways of King Nebuchadnezzar. But you four have admitted to me and your mentors that you choose the eternal life Jesus offers you. You want to live for him and be a part of this church. You have said these words:

“I want to join the Methodist Church because I love that everyone is allowed to receive communion. We welcome new people.”

“I want to join the church because I love the people in it. I hope to help youth get a better understanding of Jesus and Christianity. I have learned because someone took the time to explain it to me.”

“I am joining this church because I want to grow in my relationship with God, surrounded by people whom I know and consider my friends, people who have known me since birth. I want to continue to be a part of it.”

“I want to join the church because of the loving people that attend here. I feel it is the right place to praise Jesus.”

So we believe you. You aren't choosing the way of Nebuchadnezzar. You are choosing Jesus. And because you have made that choice, we believe that Jesus has amazing things in store for you, just as he has for all of us.

Memory verse

James 4:6 (NIV) “But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.’”

Reflection questions

1. Can you name someone famous who was very humble? Haughty?
2. Do you see yourself as proud or humble? Would others agree with you?
3. Is it possible to mistake low self-esteem for humility? How?
4. How does Christ want us to think about ourselves? What examples did he give us to show this?