

“The Mighty Tree”

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April 7, 2019

Daniel 4:1-18,22,24-27,36-37

A number of years ago, when I was leading the youth group at Chilson Hills Church, I was in charge of planning and leading the Ash Wednesday service to kick off the season before Easter that we call Lent.

I would do this by having a lock-in all-nighter with the youth group on the weekend prior to Ash Wednesday. We would do all kinds of fun stuff and also plan and rehearse the Ash Wednesday service.

The service was always intended to be a slower pace than typical services and required them to be focused and respectful. In the service we created silent and reflective time as an opportunity for people to consider their own sin, where they fall short as human beings in their life.

I was so proud of the middle and high school students because they didn't mess around and become a distraction in the service. They always did an amazing job with every bit of their leadership.

At the end of the service we would invite people (most of them adults) to come to a kneeler and receive ashes on their forehead. They would receive these from a middle school student who said to them “It was from dust that you were created and to dust you shall return.”

Most people who attended the service reported that it was a powerful experience for them. One of the things that made it so was that it asked of them to consider where they were weak and then muster the humility to receive ashes from a 12 or 13-year-old student.

Healing, for them, was found in the space of humility.

The story we have today is from the ancient Jewish writing called the book of Daniel. It speaks of pride, sin, and humility.

Although it was written hundred's of years later, the setting was about 600 BCE in Babylon, the capital city of the great Babylonian Empire, located about 60 miles from current day Bagdad in Iraq. Babylon was the largest and most famous city in the Middle East from this era.

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Babylonian empire, had conquered

Judah, destroyed Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem (the central place of worship for the Israelites, and took many of them captive — in particular the prominent and educated Israelites.

Nebuchadnezzar forced them into service in Babylon. Daniel was among those who were taken to serve the Babylonian king. Daniel's God-given gift, which is central to this story was the gift of understanding and interpreting visions and dreams.

As you might imagine, this was a low point for the Israelites, whose central place of worship was destroyed. On top of that many of them were ripped from their homeland and forced to live in a foreign place.

Seasons like these are times of despair and agony. They are times of many tears. They are harrowing times when people reflect on their current state, their shortcomings and their loss. These are times when people consider the challenges they face and look for meaningful answers. Perhaps you have faced times like these.

Through the testing of their faith, they rediscovered their foundation in God, and looked with hope to their deliverance and freedom,

although on the practical side it was difficult to see any way out.

Are not the difficult times the ones that make us reflect as well. These are times when we are driven back to the foundations of our faith. This has happened at each national disaster our country has faced.

After 9-11 when the Twin Towers fell in New York City, the number of people attending worship services in the whole country soared. The same has happened with mass shootings, with hurricanes and fires and other disasters that people have suffered.

The challenges in life call us to dig deep and connect to what is most important, and lead us to find meaning where there is confusion and pain.

Challenging times have us search for what has the most promise of pulling us through the difficult situations we face.

Being in the company of people who have hope and faith has provided the safe and grounded space for people through the ages and across cultures to rebound and heal from catastrophic events as well as to find forgiveness and healing when faced with their own sin.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was a mighty king, but he did not acknowledge or worship the one true God, as did the Israelites. He employed those who performed magic and worshipped many gods, as it was convenient for his reign as one of the most powerful kings in the world.

Nebuchadnezzar had a cabinet of advisers who were called “magicians.” This was typical of kings in positions like his, but being part of a king’s cabinet was treacherous. Often these advisers were killed if they said things that the king didn’t like. So being an adviser was a delicate balance of speaking what they thought the king wanted to hear and speaking the truth as they understood it.

These magicians failed to interpret the dreams of King Nebuchadnezzar, and so he turned to Daniel, a servant of the God of Israel, because he recognized that Daniel had a gift beyond all others.

Daniel succeeded where Nebuchadnezzar’s magicians failed, not because of his own ability, but because he was empowered by God.

This story is of King Nebuchadnezzar’s second dream.

READ DANIEL 4:4-18, 22, 24-27, 36-37

King Nebuchadnezzar’s mighty tree is parallel to other trees found in scripture. It is like the one spoken of by the prophet Ezekiel that was identified as the powerful national tree of Israel.

It also alluded to the lofty Cedar of Lebanon, of which Ezekiel also spoke. This tree harkened back to the great “Tree Of Life” in the Garden of Eden which provided shelter for animals and birds in its great height and broad branches. From it flowed rivers that nurtured all life. Its majesty and beauty was second to none.

The tree in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream is so great that it was rooted deep placed centrally that it could be not only seen throughout the world, but provide for all the people, animals, and vegetation of the earth.

This was the mightiest of trees!

The mighty tree was then ordered to be cut down, its branches and leaves trimmed off, and its fruit scattered. The animals are also shooed away from the tree that once supported and nurtured them.

But, the stump of the tree and the root was left like a seed of hope planted for the future.

As the dream unfolded, like perhaps our dreams do, the images transformed. The tree that was a stump suddenly became a man, and this symbolized Nebuchadnezzar himself, who was headed for a fall.

Daniel broke the news to Nebuchadnezzar that he would soon live not as a provider for all people, or shelter for all life, but among the beasts in the wild.

During this season, he would have an opportunity to reflect on his life and contemplate his sinfulness, namely, the arrogance of his pride that had him view himself as “all-powerful.”

If he was able to find humility and honor the one true God as sovereign even over himself, then he might be forgiven and restored.

Nebuchadnezzar needed to learn where he stood in relationship with God.

This story shows the tension between the power of a mighty prideful earthly king and the power of God. It is prominently clear that pride will always leave one on the short side of the equation, no

matter how much power they seem to accumulate.

Pride is the sin that prevents one from being humble and truly serving others.

Pride gets in the way of one finding their purpose in life and truly thrive as a human being.

In this story, the greatest of all kings, who held more power than any in the world, was tormented. Despite the outward appearance of “glory,” his power and pride blocked his full expression of what it meant to be human. This led him in a bad direction.

How many of us, when we dig deep to reflect on our sin, know that we are being led in a bad direction?

Sometimes, like Nebuchadnezzar, we need to be chopped down in order to find humility and experience a rebirth.

Nebuchadnezzar’s dream highlights wisdom from the book of Proverbs, chapter 16 in the ancient Hebrew scriptures, that says

“Pride comes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

What a “fall” means here is lapsing into sin or giving in to temptation

which leads to moral decline or ruin.

Later in the story, Nebuchadnezzar did humble himself and acknowledged God as lord over all, even himself, and indeed there was new life that sprouted from the stump.

When he found humility before God, his sin was forgiven and he was able to fulfill his greater purpose in the world and truly serve others.

What sense of pride is hindering you from serving God and serving others?

Now is the time to get still, to get real, to get honest with yourself. It doesn't need to be prompted by an emergency, or disaster. The opportunity is right here, right now and it begins with a simple question that you can take to God in prayer,

“How has pride or sin kept you from serving others?”