

Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon,³⁰ he said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”

³¹ *The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. ³² You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.”*

³³ *Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.*

³⁴ *At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.*

His dominion is an eternal dominion;

his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

³⁵ *All the peoples of the earth
are regarded as nothing.*

He does as he pleases

with the powers of heaven

and the peoples of the earth.

No one can hold back his hand

or say to him: “What have you done?”

³⁶ *At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. ³⁷ Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble. (Daniel 4:29-37)*

Prepare Your Heart to Receive your King

Who’s coming for the holidays this year? How do you prepare for them? Cleaning? Shopping? Setting up beds or clearing out guest rooms or blowing up air mattresses? There are so many things to do if your parents or your in-laws or your siblings and their kids are coming that it might just make you sigh in despair. And the more you care about the opinion of the people who are coming, the more stressed you’re going to be about having everything ready before your doorbell rings. Advent is a season of preparation. Every year, we talk about Israel preparing for Jesus to come. We talk about preparing for Christ to return. But on a practical level, what we really talk about all through this season is preparing our hearts to receive him. He is the greatest guest that you will ever receive. But he’s not going to sit in your living room or use your guest room or eat your holiday meal. **Prepare your heart to receive your King.**

I.

I’ll be honest, every year when I say that, I wrestle with it. Do we really do this? Do we really prepare for Jesus during Advent? And what would that mean, anyway? The ancient Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar shows us what it means. **Prepare your heart to receive your King. Humble yourself before your God.**

Nebuchadnezzar was unprepared. He was wealthy and powerful. He ruled in Babylon – in modern day Iraq – at the height of the Babylonian Empire’s power. In addition to Iraq, he ruled Egypt and Israel and parts of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. He built palaces and his famous hanging gardens which were one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. One night, he went for a stroll on the roof of the palace – which was like a deck or balcony – and he looked out over Babylon and said to himself, **“Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”**

I think we can understand how a man of his accomplishments might feel a little proud of himself. But God never understands that – that is, God never excuses it. To God, the king was guilty of the sin of pride. And so God took him down a notch. He caused him to lose his mind and his kingdom. In his day, mentally ill

people weren't treated as sick people. They were feared and driven away. Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon, lived in the woods and let himself go completely so that his hair grew long and wild and his nails became like claws. And he ate grass or whatever he could forage with his fingers. In an instant, all that he was, all that he had accomplished was gone. Now, we don't know how long this lasted. The Aramaic word which our Bibles translate as "times" means a set period. For seven set periods, for a time that was exactly what God had determined, Nebuchadnezzar was insane and running wild. All to teach him a lesson about pride.

You've heard me talk about the sin of pride many times. That's because it keeps coming up in the Bible. Why does God spend so much time on this one sin? There are so many other sins he could talk about. What is it that makes pride so wrong? I mean, our society generally thinks pride is a good thing. A long time ago, I was talking with a lady about this subject. And I said that humility has always been considered the Christian virtue. She answered me, "I've always thought that's what's wrong with Christianity." Many people today would probably agree with her.

Yet God is emphatic in condemning pride. Why? Because pride puts us in the place of God. Nebuchadnezzar thought: "I have built this city." "I have made this by my power and for my glory." From his perspective, that made sense. Even before he became king, he led the armies of Babylon to one victory after another. The kingdom was enjoying a golden age and he was the genius behind their power and prosperity. But what Nebuchadnezzar forgot is that no one becomes a king or a ruler or even a member of the local school board without God's permission. He forgot that God made us and he gives us the gifts and abilities we have. Nebuchadnezzar completely ignored the fact that we only have success in our lives when God grants it. History is full of brilliant, gifted people who failed – people who were lots smarter and lots more talented than any one of us, people who by all rights should have succeeded. But they didn't because God didn't will it. Nebuchadnezzar did not make the city of Babylon great. God did. Nebuchadnezzar did not make himself king. God did. Nebuchadnezzar was not the genius behind his country's success and prosperity. God was. When the king put himself in God's place, he fell under God's judgment.

How often don't we fall into the sin of Nebuchadnezzar? Think about your own history. What accomplishments are you most proud of? What successes do you think set you above other people? Or, to put it another way, do you shake your head at people who make stupid decisions and throw away their opportunities? Those people may be acting stupidly, but when you look down on them, aren't you're saying that you would never be that stupid? Again and again, like Nebuchadnezzar we think that we should get credit for the things we've accomplished – for success at our jobs, for the beautiful homes we've made, for the kids we've raised, and the list goes on and on. We forget, again and again, that God gave us the abilities we have and God has blessed our efforts. Success is a gift of his grace, not a triumph we accomplish.

Now, I'm not saying that we shouldn't work hard or use all the gifts that God gave us to the best of our ability. I'm not even saying that we shouldn't enjoy being good at things. Those gifts come from God. I would hope that people who are good at playing the piano would enjoy it. I would hope that when Christians work hard at a job and do it well, they would feel a sense of accomplishment. But in the very instant that sense of accomplishment enters our sinful hearts, the sinner inside leaps up and says, "Look what I did!" Suddenly, every one of us is miniature Nebuchadnezzar glorying in our accomplishments and forgetting all about God.

Does that sound at all like you? I know it sounds like me. The natural inclination of the human heart is to worship ourselves. That idol worship is no different from bowing down to an idol of wood and stone. It's a sin against the very first commandment. It means that we all deserve God's punishment in hell. Only when we know that truth are we prepared to hear about Jesus. As long as we believe that we're good and capable people, as long as we're convinced that we are the source of our own success – as long as we worship ourselves, Jesus will never be more to us than a good example. Only when we understand that we are guilty of the sin of idol worship when we put ourselves in God's place, only when we realize that for that sin we should go to hell, do we see Jesus for what he really is: our Savior from sin.

Jesus alone lived a life of perfect humility. If anybody ever had a right to boast about who he is and what he could do, it was Jesus. He won every argument he was ever in. He did miracles that amaze us just to think about. He was God come in the flesh and he could do whatever he wanted to. But he was in the flesh – he was a real human being and he lived under God's law as one of us. So he lived in perfect humility. He trusted in God and gave him all glory for all the he did. Jesus did all that for us because we can't. Then he died

for us. He died because we worship ourselves. He suffered the death and hell our sin deserves and he wiped it all away. Then he rose and declared that we are forgiven.

II.

God did all that because he loves us. God loved King Nebuchadnezzar, too. Now, it might not sound that way. After all, who wants to lose their mind and run around like a wild animal? But this story is all about love. Obviously, when God restored the king, that was an act of pure love. But even the madness itself was an act of God's grace. How? God was reaching out to King Nebuchadnezzar, drawing him to repent of his sin and to trust in his Savior. **Prepare your heart to receive your king. Acknowledge his love and faithfulness.**

The text that we have before today from the book of Daniel is part of a decree that Nebuchadnezzar himself issued calling on the people of his kingdom to praise the true God. That's why it shifts from talking about "the king" and "he" to saying "I" and "my." So this reading ends with strong words of praise from the king for God. He acknowledges that the only reason that he is king is because God made him king and God could take the kingdom away and give it to someone else if he chose. Nebuchadnezzar recognizes that the restoration of his sanity and the increase in his power afterward are all things that God did for him. Nebuchadnezzar has learned his lesson.

So does that mean that he became a Christian and instituted worship of the true God throughout the kingdom or at least at his court? Sadly, it does not seem like Nebuchadnezzar ever became a believer. Now we do have to be careful here, because only God knows what was in his heart. But if we study the whole book of Daniel, it seems that the king came to regard the God of Israel as a real and powerful God, perhaps even the greatest of all gods. But it does not seem like he ever stopped worshipping idols. It does not seem that he ever saw God as the only true God or as his Savior from sin. Will he be in heaven? I don't know, because his confession is so unclear. If not, it won't be because God didn't reach out to him.

We are different. We have all made a good confession of Christ as our Savior. We all acknowledge that the God of the Bible is the only true God. And as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, we all understand that the heart of this holiday is God coming down to this earth to rescue us from our sin. So in that sense, God has already done for us what he was laboring to do for Nebuchadnezzar. He's already made us believers. So he already dwells in our hearts by faith.

So when we talk about preparing our hearts for him, we're not talking about preparing to come to faith. The truth is, we can't prepare to come to faith. Only God can lead a sinner to faith. Unbelievers will always do everything they can to resist what God is doing. Instead, we're talking about preparing to hear the gospel. We're talking about our ongoing encounter with Christ in his word and the effect that has on our lives. The truth is, we meet Christ every time we come and hear the gospel.

How shall we meet him? By recognizing who he is and what he's done for us. We recognize he has acted in love for us. True love always puts the needs of the person we love first. God put our needs first when he sent his Son to be born in Bethlehem and to die at Calvary. God put our needs first when he spent thousands of years preparing for the day Christ would be born and controlling history, even through kings like Nebuchadnezzar, so that at just the right moment, our Savior would enter this world. God put our needs first when he asked his Son to suffer and die and then rise for us.

We are ready to meet Jesus in church, in our Bibles, in our devotions at home when we remember that God is faithful – that he keeps all his promises. For thousands of years, starting already in the Garden of Eden, God promised to send a Savior for us. He kept that promise. Jesus came. Before he left, he promised to be with us to the very end of the age. He promised to protect us and to keep our faith alive and to take us home to heaven when we die. He promised to raise us from the dead and give us eternal life with him. Just as he kept all those Christmas promises, he will keep every promise that he has made for this life and the life to come.

We are already believers. We don't need to come to faith. But we do need to renew and strengthen our faith. We need to come to hear. We need Jesus to come to us in his gospel. We prepare our hearts to meet him when we remember to be humble before our God and Savior. We prepare our hearts to meet him when we remember that we are going to hear about love and faithfulness here today. That message is how Jesus comes to us. That message is how he strengthens us until we get home. Jesus is coming this holiday season. Prepare your hearts to meet him. Amen.