

# Speaking Truth to Power

May 2, 2021

Daniel 4:19-27

As a church, we are studying the book of Daniel. We are in the middle of chapter 4, Daniel chapter 4. It is the story of the second dream of King Nebuchadnezzar. The king has had another troubling dream. He needed someone who could help him make sense of it. He needed someone connected to the God who sent him the troubling dream. Just as before, none of his other, ordinary advisors with connections to the gods could interpret the dream.

And then, he met with Daniel, who from the beginning of the book we have been told that the God of heaven had given him the ability to interpret dreams and visions. So, Daniel hears the dream of the king. As we read the content of the dream last week, it was easy to see why this dream was troubling to the king. A tall, lush, beautiful, helpful tree was ordered by forces from heaven to be chopped down, shredded, but the stump was to be protected. Then the tree image switches to an actual person image who is shown to live like a beast of the field, eating grass and thinking like an animal for a period of seven seasons, 7 cycles of seasons. This dream was given by this God to the king for the purpose of showing him who was actually ruling over the kingdoms of men. There, that was the dream. As I suggested last week, for us as readers of the text, it is not hard to envision who might be at the center of the dream. And in this week's text, we find out we were right, King Nebuchadnezzar is the tree turned man turned animal for seven cycles of seasons.

The problem with today's text is that Daniel quickly knows this as well...and he is going to have to deliver that bad news to the king. And if you know anything about prophets and kings, you know that delivering bad news to the king always comes with a great deal of risk to your life. Speaking truth to power is dangerous work! Follow along as we read about Daniel's time of delivering such bad news to the king. Know going in that sometimes we have to be the deliverers of bad news. It comes with the territory of representing God to sinful man. READ Daniel 4:19-27.

Main point: Sometimes, God's spokesmen must deliver bad news. But it ought always come with the invitation to repent.

It would be nice if we only ever had to deliver good news. But that would not be faithful to message of Scripture. Sometimes there must be bad news. And in truth, the good news of the gospel would not be good news except for the fact that it is predicated by bad news, in this case the wages of sin is death and we are all sinners. That is bad news. Delivering such news is not fun. But the good news that follows is actually great news, that the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord! That is incredibly good news, unless you don't think you've done anything wrong enough to deserve death. So to receive good news means you have to hear bad news before that.

It is the same here. The God of heaven, the God of Scripture, Yahweh has delivered some very bad news to king Nebuchadnezzar. And it has come through a dream interpreted by His prophet, Daniel. Daniel could have been like all the other prophets and shrugged his shoulders saying, "I don't know what it means, O king live forever!" But that would not have been being faithful to His God. He was put in that position of influence at that particular time to be in a position to deliver that piece of news to a king who needed to hear it. And the fact that it has been written down in Scripture means that God intended for us to learn from it as well.

And so, in an effort to be faithful to the message of Scripture, I am going to try to convey the message of Daniel 4. I don't know who it is who needs to hear this message, but I am confident some, many, all of us need to hear it at some level. Just know that hearing the word of God ought not always leave us feeling good about ourselves. Sometimes, God knows we need to hear bad news!  
(3 parts)

I. The bad news is that this message is meant for you. vv. 19-22

Hearing a bad message from God is not such a horrifying experience...as long as we think it is meant for someone else. Right? It only becomes overwhelmingly troublesome when we find out that it was intended for us.

Within our tradition, there is strong support for preaching strong sermons. Right? We like bold, strong preaching...except when we think that it is directed toward us. Then we call it “meddling.” We as the people of God do not care so much for “meddling preaching.” But as a side note, this is actually a very good reason why preaching was designed to be local, by your pastor, spoken into your context. When a preacher somewhere else delivers a message and you just listen to it or watch it on your phone, it is too easy to assume it is meant for someone else. But when your pastor stands before you, who knows you and looks at you directly, it is harder to assume he is talking to someone else. You can still do it and many do, but it is harder. Hard messages are best delivered locally, by people who know and love you. Daniel shows us the way.

v.19- Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, “Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you.” Belteshazzar answered and said, “My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies!

Notice again the reference to Daniel’s Babylonian name. It is not easy to understand exactly why this comment of explanation is given again (repeated from v.8), it seems to be connected to the overall message of the book that you can force things on people, but you cannot change who they are. You can give them a different name, but Daniel is still Daniel. His loyalty to His God is greater than his loyalty to his king.

Then we see that Daniel is dismayed or grieved, or shocked. I suspect this was not so much by the content of the dream, but that this was decreed by God to happen and he was going to have to deliver the bad news to the very king who had entrusted him with so much. Daniel had been elevated above all of his peers. He was the chief consultant to the king. He had been put in charge of the whole province where the king resided. The king had shown a great deal of trust in him. But now he was in a position of having to deliver bad news to him. Certainly he knew of the king’s anger. Certainly he knew of the king’s power. Certainly he knew what happened to those who defied the king or stood in the way of his plans. We have already seen evidence of all that with the fiery furnace. But now came word from God that He had seen enough. King

Nebuchadnezzar was going to suffer for the decisions he had made. He needed to learn a lesson, a horrifically painful lesson. And Daniel had to tell him the news. Yes, Daniel was distraught.

Thankfully, the king made the situation a bit easier. He invited Daniel to speak out. He need not be afraid to tell the king the truth. The king trusted him. Daniel responds with his wish that the interpretation of the dream be meant for the king's worst enemies and not for him. In other words, he did not relish the thought of delivering this news. He would rather the news be directed toward someone else. But the truth was that it was directed toward King Nebuchadnezzar!

20 The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, 21 whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived— 22 it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth.

There it is, confirmation that the dream was about king Nebuchadnezzar. As we could see instinctively based on the first dream with the statue whose head was gold, the king was the tall, beautiful, useful tree for all. The king was truly a great king, whose kingdom extended throughout the world. So far, so good. There is nothing wrong with having a kingdom which extends to the whole earth...as long as you treat people well and it all doesn't go to your head. That is the problem with power and importance. It leads to pride and treating people with dishonor. The more the power, the greater the likelihood that people will be mistreated and the leader will be filled with pride. It comes with the territory. But simply the fact that the king was a growing, strong tree that offered good things to the people and whose kingdom was spread everywhere is not necessarily a bad thing.

II. The bad news is that God has noticed your life and is ready to respond accordingly. vv. 23-26

23 And because the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, ‘Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, in the tender grass of the field, and let him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven periods of time pass over him,’

Now we come to the troubling part of the dream. The watcher, the holy one who has come down from heaven has given the order to chop down the tree and let the leader be like the beasts of the field. This is not good news for the tree or the one who is represented by the tree.

24 this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, 25 that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.

Now it is personal, now it is meddling, now it is the worst possible news for the king. The decree has come down from God that the king will be removed from his position as king, even from his ability to live as a human being. King Nebuchadnezzar will live like the cattle in the field, eating grass, sleeping outside, thinking like a beast rather than a man. In short, he will lose his mind. He will be extremely mentally challenged, physically challenged to the point that his life will be with the animals rather than the people. This will last 7 periods, or 7 seasons, or 7 years of seasons. So, the all-powerful God of heaven has looked at the situation and declared that His response to who the king is and what he has done will be to strip him from power, from even rational thinking for a set period of time. Can you see how this answers the question, “Who actually is the greatest ruler on earth? Who is sovereign over all? Is it the greatest king of the day? Or, is there One who is even more powerful than him? And the answer is that there is a God in heaven who is sovereign over all. And He will prove that by taking the greatest, most powerful king on earth and stripping him of everything, yes everything, only to restore him when the set period is over. When this can be declared before it takes place, it proves this God is sovereign over all. This king and all other kings would finally know for

sure who is sovereign over the kings and kingdoms on earth. When you can raise up on command, chop down on command, then raise up again on command, you have shown you have control.

26 And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules.

Once you finally know and confess that the God of heaven is ruling over all, the stump protected from harm will once again grow into a mighty tree. Your kingdom will be restored to you. I actually find this the most fascinating aspect of the dream. The mighty king loses his mind and thus his kingdom. Then after 7 years he will have his mind restored AND WILL REGAIN HIS KINGDOM! You would think the people would have moved on to a new king, an assistant who took over, a foreign king who seized the opportunity. Instead, God will show who is really King by restoring him to power. This act seals the deal. The truth is now clear. But that will only take place because the king will finally know and acknowledge that he is not really in charge, there is One sovereign over him.

Again, would you want to deliver this news to the all-powerful, most egotistical man of his day? What might happen to you? Can you see why pride is such an issue with God? How prideful are you? What must God declare to you for you to swallow your pride and acknowledge that He is sovereign over you? The truth is that we are ALL prideful. We ALL have an inflated view of ourselves. And yes, some of us have an inflated view of what we OUGHT to be like, thus thinking very lowly of ourselves. But it is still pride, whether in who we are or in who we should be. It is still pride. What must God do to rid you of your pride? That is the question before us this morning. And that question is before YOU, not the person next to you.

### III. Your only hope is to change before it is too late. v. 27

There, you've heard the bad news. Now for a bit of good news: as long as you still have breath, you have an opportunity to repent and change your ways. I find it fascinating that Daniel has just articulated "a decree from the Most High

God,” and yet he offers a way out. In other words, the decree is set in stone, but the circumstances which led to the decree might just change.

27 Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.”

Daniel offers the king hope. The message, the decree, the dream has been sent to him before it actually takes place. Since there is still time, there is opportunity for change. If the king truly receives the message of the dream and the interpretation from Daniel, he will change his ways. He will quit the sins that have been brought to his attention. He will replace those sins with good things, things that God deems righteous or good. In particular, he will quit oppressing the poor, the captured and instead show such people mercy. If he does, God might just relent and lengthen the days of his prosperity. He might. The decree is set, but it could change if the circumstances leading to the decree changed. That’s the good news.

Okay, are you ready? I’m pretty confident that we who are gathered here do not see ourselves as oppressing people. Right? You don’t see yourself in a position of power and have no ill feelings toward the oppressed, the poor, the helpless. Right?

But that is not the standard for this passage. The standard of this passage is not oppression or the lack of oppression. The standard is mercy rather than oppression. Do you have mercy for the oppressed, the helpless, the poor? That is the question. Are you an advocate for the oppressed or are you silent?

Who are the oppressed? I’m not sure who the oppressed are around you but might I suggest the poor (they are around all of us), the immigrant, the incarcerated, the elderly, the not yet born, the exploited children, the disabled, those of other races, those who live in crime saturated neighborhoods. The oppressed are all around us. Do you have mercy for them? Or do you want to keep them out, away, locked up, out of sight and mind?

That is one of the major reasons why we at Hillcrest emphasize our students experiencing places like inner city New Orleans. The work we can accomplish there is not really all that much. But the change in our world view that comes from living among and serving people who are oppressed is priceless. Seeing the child with the fancy jersey is not impactful...until you recognize that he has worn the same shirt every day this week! It might be the only presentable shirt that he owns. Hearing them tell about relatives and friends who have been shot or fathers who have deserted them, that changes us. It ought to give us hearts of compassion. Such experiences are designed to change us more than them!

And if there is one thing our society needs it is more mercy. We in Hillcrest need to be more merciful. We in rural Nebraska need to be more merciful. The truth is that we have way too much pride, just like Nebuchadnezzar. We can see it in our attitude toward the oppressed. Yes, this message, intended for King Nebuchadnezzar, ought to be for us a wake-up call: get rid of your pride and become more merciful!

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will assume each passage of Scripture is meant to change US, not the other guy.
- 2) We will check our hearts for mercy.
- 3) We will repent and change our ways while there is still time.
- 4) We will speak the Word of God boldly, even when it presents bad news.