

### ***Numbered, Weighed, and Divided***

In the name of him before whom one day all flesh will stand in judgment, dear friends in Christ: Last Wednesday evening in this continuing series of Lenten devotions, we heard about the humbling of Nebuchadnezzar, the pagan King raised up by God and given dominion, power, and earthly glory beyond what any human had ever before experienced. The Lord gave him this honor and power because it was part of his divine plan to use Nebuchadnezzar as an instrument of his judgment against his unfaithful people living in the land of Judah. We saw too that these judgments were progressive. They began with warnings, as the prophets called God's people to repentance. When that failed to produce any measurable response, the Lord sent the Babylonian army to subjugate his rebellious people. The first time was like a firm slap on the wrist, as the Babylonians imposed taxes and tributes and carried away several hundred Judean nobles into captivity to hold as hostages. They also took as a tribute to their god, Bel, the sacred vessels from the Lord's Temple that we heard about again this evening. Still God's people refused to repent. So the Lord sent the enemy again. This second time was like a full blown spanking. The Judean leaders were severely punished, heavier tributes were laid on the peoples' backs, and some 15 thousand Jews were taken into exile and placed in "relocation colonies" in Babylon. Today we'd call them concentration camps.

And then, at last, when the people of Judah only dug more deeply into their stubborn resistance against the Lord, he had had enough. The third time the Lord sent the Babylonian army, they wiped out what remained of the nation of Judah completely. Jerusalem was sacked and destroyed, the people were all either killed or sold into slavery, and the Holy Temple built by Solomon in which had dwelt the gracious presence of God with his people Israel was defiled and leveled to the ground.

All this was done to God's people under the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar. And as a result, because of the way most of the ancients viewed the world and what happened in it, it might have seemed that Nebuchadnezzar and his pagan gods were mightier than the Lord. That's how the Babylonians would have interpreted it, and it may have appeared that way to the Jews in exile in Babylon. And that's why it was necessary for the Lord to remind everyone involved what was really going on and who really was in charge. He did it by sending Nebuchadnezzar a disturbing dream that, when interpreted by Daniel, foretold the king's impending fall into madness. His rational human mind would be taken away and replaced with that of a beast until such time as he would acknowledge the one true God of heaven. Daniel urged the king to repent of his sins in the hope that this judgment might be put off indefinitely; but a year later, as the king looked over his glorious capital from the roof of his palace, his heart was filled with pride. "Just look at all the wonders / have accomplished." It was at that moment the judgment of God fell. It was the Lord telling him, "You have nothing that I did not give you. And you have achieved nothing apart from my will." The king lost his mind. Imagining himself to be an ox or a goat he crawled about on all fours and ate grass. He lived in the open fields, his hair grew long and matted; he was a wild man – until the Lord mercifully restored his mind to him and allowed him to acknowledge the truth: that he was subject to the one true God of heaven just like everyone else. The king made a public proclamation of this and had it sent throughout the empire – and what an encouragement it would have been for the Jews in exile to hear it. It would have confirmed for them that despite all they had suffered, the Lord God of Israel was still in charge, he was still dealing mercifully with his people, and he would fulfill his promises to bring them back to the Promised Land and make them a nation once again.

With all that in mind, the events described in this evening's reading take place some 47 years later. Nebuchadnezzar, the man who built the empire, is dead and gone. And the Babylon he built is no longer the great power it once was. Subsequent leaders, seduced by the pleasures of wealth and the privileges of rank, have let things slip. Meanwhile the nations Babylon subjugated have been chafing under the increasingly heavy load of tributes required to keep their masters in the excessive style of life to which they have become accustomed. Two of these nations in particular, the Persians and the Medes, have united under a charismatic leader named Darius (he's also known as Cyrus of Persia). He's leading an army in open revolt, and he's been urging other subjugated nations to join him in his quest to throw off the yoke of Babylonian oppression. And he's been quite successful, even to the point of laying siege to the city of Babylon itself.

Officially, the king of Babylon is a man named Nabunaid. He is believed to be a grandson of Nebuchadnezzar. However, after reigning for only a few years, Nabunaid went into semi-retirement at the oasis at Tayma. There he's been taking life easy and devoting himself to the sensuous worship of the Babylonian moon god. In his absence, he's appointed his eldest son, Belshazzar, to be his co-regent; but for all practical intents, Belshazzar is king. The running of the empire is up to him. And right now he's got a war on his hands: his city is surrounded by hostile Medes and Persians who are rebelling against his rule.

Fortunately for Belshazzar, the walls of Babylon are thought to be impregnable. According to ancient accounts, the walls were 80 feet high and wide enough at the top that a chariot drawn by two horses abreast could drive on it. There were reinforced towers at regular intervals that helped strengthen the fortifications. Furthermore, the city had several years' worth of food stores; and because the Euphrates River flowed right through the city passing under its massive walls, they never had to worry about running out of water. Babylon was virtually siege proof. All the king had to do was wait the siege out. Eventually the attackers would have to give up and leave.

And leave they did. That's the occasion of the king's feast described in this evening's text. They're celebrating a victory. The Persian siege was breaking up and going home. At least, that's the way it would have appeared to the defenders of Babylon. What actually was happening was that the Persians were withdrawing in order to meet a Babylonian army under the command of Nabunaid that was marching on the city to rescue it and save the empire; but it's uncertain whether Belshazzar would have been aware of this. All he knew for certain was that the siege was being lifted. And that would have been good reason to celebrate.

Why in the midst of this celebrating the king decides specifically to insult the Lord God is not immediately clear from the text. We can take some educated guesses though. We know that the king knew of his illustrious great-grandfather's humiliation – how Nebuchadnezzar had been forced to confess the superiority of the Lord to all other gods. We can also surmise that the Jews in exile were hoping for a Persian victory. You see, the prophet Isaiah, some 180 years earlier, had foretold the coming of a king named Cyrus who would restore the nation of Judah after a period of exile. Well, here they were in exile; and here was a Persian named Cyrus knocking on the gate of Babylon. It looked like the prophecy was being fulfilled. If the king knew of this prophecy, and events indicate that he did, then his sending for the sacred vessels from the Lord's house that were being stored in the temple of his god, Bel, in what was kind of a divine trophy case, was a deliberate attempt to mock the Word of God spoken by the prophet and thumb his nose at the Lord God of Israel whose prophesy, it seemed, had failed. And friends, it's never a good idea to thumb your nose at the Lord.

That's what Belshazzar finds out. As he sits in semi-drunken stupor, guzzling wine from what was probably one of the golden bowls used to collect the blood of sacrificial lambs, he sees a floating hand appear. It begins to write a mysterious message on the plastered wall that's illumined by the lamp. The king is struck with terror. He begins to tremble. Actually the Aramaic at this point is a little more graphic, suggesting that the king loses bowel and bladder control. In any case, the king can't decipher the message. So he sends for his wide array of wise men. He offers great rewards to the man who can solve the mystery; but they too are baffled.

It's not hard to understand why: the message MENE MENE TEKEL and PARSIN is made up of what were the names of coins then in circulation. It would be like us reading a message that said "A Dime, a Dime, a Nickel, and a Penny". It wouldn't make any sense. So now the whole crowd is perplexed and fearful. I guess you could say the party's over. The ominous word spreads throughout the palace, eventually coming to a woman who is most likely the king's grandmother. She remembers how in the days of Nebuchadnezzar the Jewish exile named Daniel interpreted dreams with divine insight. She relates this to the king, who has Daniel sent for at once.

If we assume that Daniel was 15 years old or so when taken into captivity, he'd be 80 by now. And I don't know if it's just that he's got crotchety in his old age or if he has no respect for Belshazzar, but his irritation with the king is evident by the way he addresses him. "I don't want your gifts. Give them to someone else. But I will tell you what the message says, and with great pleasure I will tell you what it means. Your forefather, Nebuchadnezzar, learned the hard way that the Lord God of Israel controls what happens in this world. He's the one who raises kings and empires, and he's the one who brings them to an end. You thought it would be funny to mock him by using his sacred vessels for your party. It turns out the joke's on you.

"Hear then the interpretation of the inscription: Mene, which means "numbered" or "counted": God has numbered the days of your kingdom and finished it. Tekel, which means "weighed": you've been weighed in the balances and found lacking. And Peres, which means "divided": your kingdom is divided among the Medes and Persians."

I have to hand it to Belshazzar: he takes the bad news well. He even fulfills his promise to reward the one who could read the mysterious message. Daniel was made third ruler in the kingdom, after Nabunaid and Belshazzar; but he didn't get to enjoy the position very long. That night the Persians under Darius attacked the city and conquered it. It turns out that the Persian army had met the relief force of Babylonians under Nabunaid and destroyed them completely. And during the siege of Babylon, their engineers had been busy. Upstream of the city, they'd been making preparations to reroute the Euphrates River into an old channel. That night they completed their work, which allowed some of the Persians to enter the city under the wall where the river had flowed through. This advance force then flung open the gates for the main army – and thus the "unconquerable city" fell without much of a fight. Belshazzar of Babylon was put to the sword. And Darius the Mede, who was also known as Cyrus of Persia, became the king of a new empire – just as the Lord had written.

And just as he had foretold through the prophet Isaiah—Isaiah who also wrote: "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field ... the grass withers, the flower fades; but the Word of our God will stand forever."

In this series of meditations on the Book of Daniel, we've been grappling with the question of what it means to be people of faith living in a largely pagan and unbelieving world.

We've been confronting the issues that pertain to being *in* the world but not *of* it. And we've seen that for the most part, we can get along just fine. Though we have a completely different world view, we can cooperate and get along with our unbelieving neighbors and the civil government, we can vote and hold offices, we can apply our God-given talents to helping and serving all people. We can and should be known as good citizens. But we recognize that we are the citizens of two kingdoms. And when we are forced to choose between obedience to the Lord or compliance with civil authorities, then we must respectfully decline to follow the precepts of men and obey instead the Law of God. The kingdoms of men are temporal. God's kingdom, like his Word, endures forever. And it is to God's Word that we owe our allegiance.

This evening's text reminds us that God's Word is often the subject of ridicule to the unbelieving world. No doubt that's why it came in written form to Belshazzar. He had mocked the Lord's written Word when it appeared to him that the prophecy had failed, so the Word of God's judgment came to him in written form. "Let's see if you can mock this."

It's amazing too how clever and original people think they are when they do try to ridicule God's Word. You may know that this last Saturday in Washington DC some of the more vociferous so-called "New Atheists" held a big anti-religion rally. And they had all kinds of fun poking jokes at God's Word and at us poor miserable fools who are so stupid as to actually believe it. Ha ha. It's nothing new. It's been going on since Satan asked, "Did God really say?" The remarkable thing is that the Lord in his great long-suffering mercy allows it to go on. The chief example of this is when the Word made flesh was crucified for our sins. Then those who mocked spat at Jesus, "If you really are the Son of God prove it by coming down from the cross." They didn't understand that he was proving it by *not* coming down from the cross. They couldn't read the sign above his head that said "This is the King of the Jews". Oh, like Belshazzar and his wise men, they could read the words; they just couldn't understand what they meant. And so they made fun of them – and him. To them it was all just a great big joke.

And so it will continue to be – until the day God's judgment finally falls. The Lord has a plan, and he is carrying it out through all that happens on this earth. But the days of this age are definitely numbered. And in the end all flesh will stand before the Lord to be weighed and to be divided. Those who mocked God's Word, who stubbornly refused to repent and receive the gift of salvation that comes through faith in Jesus Christ will be found wanting. They will be divided forever from the gracious presence of God. And those who were called by the Gospel, who were enlightened with the gifts of the Spirit, who trusted in God's promises in Christ and clung to them despite worldly appearances and the mocking of the self-appointed wise men of their time – they will inherit eternal life in God's kingdom. This isn't my opinion. It's what God's Word says.

Therefore it is our duty to receive what God has spoken with child-like faith; and to bear witness to his truth in the midst of an unbelieving and sometimes hostile world. The Lord grant us the grace to do so, and through our witness may he bring others into the saving truth of Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***