

King of Kings

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Rock of our Salvation, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

Today we begin a five week focus on the Book of Daniel. This is exciting to me because I've never preached on Daniel before and it's a kind of odd , weird book. I've thought of Daniel as one of the prophets, (SLIDE) but the Hebrew Bible doesn't place Daniel alongside the other prophets like Isaiah or Ezekiel, or Jeremiah. Rather Daniel is placed with the books of history and poetry scholars refer to as "The Writings." Besides history and poetry, this book contains what scholars call "Court Stories" and the only Apocalyptic writing of the Old Testament. There are several examples of Apocalyptic writings in the New Testament, the Book of Revelation being the first to come to mind. Preacher and Evangelist Billy Graham once called Daniel the ABC of prophecy and the book of Revelation as the XYZ.

In today's reading we have one of the "Court Stories." (SLIDE) The probably fictional character, Daniel, and his friends have been taken into exile when the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. Although Nebuchadnezzar was ruthless in conquest, he was a fairly good king. He sent Daniel and his friends to the best schools so they could learn the Babylonian history and culture. They were allowed to live in the royal palace and court of the king. You might say Nebuchadnezzar was grooming Daniel to become a wise man

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in his royal court. This was the same culture that 600 or so years later produced what we call the three wise men who came to honor and worship the infant Jesus after his birth in Bethlehem.

Today's reading is our Court Story is about a troubling dream and it's interpretation. All of us dream. (SLIDE) The experts say most of us dream for about one hour out of every eight hours we sleep. Most of the dreams seem to come during that last hour of sleep when we are beginning to awaken. Throughout history people have been fascinated by dreams. The Bible advises us be skeptical about dreams. I've heard it said dreams are more indigestion than inspiration... Part of this court story that came right before the section we read includes this little tidbit of information... "Then Daniel went to his home and informed his companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ¹⁸ and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions with the rest of the wise men of Babylon might not perish. In other words, Daniel asked his family and friends to pray. (SLIDE) Before uttering a single word to the king, Daniel sought out the prayers of everyone he knew who was of faith. Daniel had no delusions that he would be able to describe the King's dream, let alone its interpretation, without divine revelation. His faith in God was that strong! So, then, what was the dream about and why is it relevant for us today?

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(SLIDE) To begin, I have to admit there's a lot of controversy regarding the actual kingdoms alluded to in the king's dream. Some say all the kingdoms, from the golden head to the feet of iron and clay have already come and gone. Others say we're still living in one or another of them. Some say the various kingdoms rise and fall in sequential order, while others believe they may have all existed simultaneously. Personally, I believe some parts of all the former kingdoms still exist today as certain aspects of each one have been preserved in our culture. The one thing from this dream and its interpretation I think is totally obvious, even to the most casual of observers, is Jesus Christ is the rock that destroys and consumes all the earthly kingdoms and His kingdom will never end. (SLIDE) There will come a day, as Saint Paul wrote, when every knee will bend and every voice will confess, Jesus Christ is Lord.

Most of you know I love Rock music. PJ and I go to lot's of concerts... I probably have as many rock music lyrics memorized as I do Bible verses. Yet, no matter how much I enjoy rock music there is only on rock that forms the foundation of my faith and life, and that rock is Jesus Christ. There's a story about when they were building the temple in Jerusalem. None of the huge stone bricks were drawn from or squared off on the site of the temple. They were brought in from rock quarries far away, probably because the site for the temple was considered too sacred and the digging and chiseling of all those stones was an

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extremely noisy and dirty business. One day a very odd stone arrived from the quarry. The builders thought it was too strange to be used in the construction, so they discarded it. After a time they were waiting for the main cornerstone to be delivered, but when it didn't arrive they sent word to the quarrymen, asking where the cornerstone was. The reply came back that it had already been cut and sent.

(SLIDE) The cornerstone was that odd stone the builders had rejected. Later, in Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels, Jesus refers to himself as that stone, rejected by the builders, that has become the head of the corner.

In our scripture reading, the rock that strikes the kingdoms of this world is Jesus Christ. In our creeds we confess Jesus will judge the living and the dead. The message is clear---God's kingdom, led by Jesus Christ, is sovereign over all earthly kingdoms. Isaiah the prophet proclaimed the same truth: "The Lord Almighty will be...a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." (Isaiah 8:14) Much of the discord in our country today comes from those who understand the sovereignty of the Lord our God and those who believe the highest power is held by the government. (SLIDE) This court story from Daniel is meant to show us which of those two kingdoms is really sovereign. The main point of this entire episode from the life and times of our hero Daniel is the confession made by King Nebuchadnezzar when he declares, "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able

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to reveal this mystery!” (SLIDE) This comes from the man who successfully conquered the known world from Babylon to Egypt. Yet, because God worked through Daniel to interpret his troublesome dream, he now recognizes the Lordship of the God of Israel.

Tales from the royal court of a king from nearly 3000 years ago are interesting, but what real value do they have for us all the way down here in the 21st century? What can we take as a lesson for us today? Daniel, like us today, lived in a secular world where the one true and living God was marginalized, or outright rejected. Yet, despite the pressures from the culture, Daniel refused to give in to the prevailing cultural values and morales. Instead, Daniel and his friends, stood firm in the face of what must have been tremendous pressure to go along and get along. We all experience that kind of peer pressure today. It’s getting harder and harder to live our Christian values in the secular society in which we live. (SLIDE) Yet, we are called to live in this world, but to not become part of it. We are the Evangelical Lutheran Church IN America, not the Evangelical Lutheran Church OF America.

I’ll close with a story that dates back to 1743. That was the year George Frederick Handel presented his masterpiece, “The Messiah,” for the first time in London. The British king was in the audience. When the orchestra played the majestic “Hallelujah Chorus,” the King was so moved that he stood. When he did,

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everybody else stood up too. (SLIDE) That's where the custom originated of standing when the Hallelujah Chorus is played. They did not stand to honor the King of England; they were honoring the King of kings who judges every king and president and prime minister. All the pundits on CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS or Fox News spend their days analyzing every move of our political leaders make and sometimes it makes for interesting entertainment, but the only verdict that matters is rendered by our Almighty and Sovereign God. We temporarily reside in this world, but our true allegiance belongs with the Kingdom that has no end. We belong to the one rock of our salvation, the rock who gave us birth into this life where we serve the King of all, Jesus Christ. (SLIDE)

May Jesus Christ be not just the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but also the King and Lord of your life as well. When society pressures you to conform, may you stand on the firm foundation of faith in Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of the Living God. May your words and your actions be seen by others so they will know there is a God not only judges, but loves them forever. Amen.