

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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Daniel 4

Advent's Sobering Preparation

- 1. Illustrated in King Nebuchadnezzar**
- 2. Practiced by Christians during Advent**

**Hymns: "Come To Us Emmanuel"
20 – 14 – 21**

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Have you ever had a sobering experience? Perhaps it came when you witnessed a car accident. Maybe you saw a reckless or inattentive driver swerve and lose control, careening off the road or into another vehicle. Perhaps you were even in an accident. Such an experience has a sobering effect on a person's attitude toward driving.

Maybe a sobering experience came when you were using a dangerous tool – a circular saw, a bark chipper, or some farm equipment. Perhaps you were a little inattentive or careless and were almost badly injured in the process. Perhaps an incident happened with one of your children at home – a fall, an accident, or some mishap. Experiences like that make an impact on us. When we have seen firsthand the seriousness and danger of something, it changes our attitude.

As we continue our spiritual walk during this season of Advent, we focus on a sobering experience that was directly sent from the Lord. This experience was intended to sober an individual and focus their perspective properly. It is a perfect reading for us to focus on today, because it is very similar to how we prepare at Advent. So today, let's consider the theme "**Advent's Sobering Preparation.**" We'll first of all look at the Old Testament reading and see

this illustrated in the life of King Nebuchadnezzar. And then we'll learn how this same sobering preparation is proper for us as Christians during Advent.

1. Illustrated in King Nebuchadnezzar

Who was this Old Testament king with the long, strange name? King Nebuchadnezzar was not a king of Israel. He was a Gentile king in Babylon. How did he enter the picture in the Old Testament?

If you know your Old Testament history, you know that God had become fed up with his idolatrous, unfaithful people. Long after they forsook him for other gods which were false, he took action and allowed them to be deported and exiled almost 1000 miles away to the country of Babylon. About the year 600 B.C., the king whom God allowed to invade, conquer, and exile his people was King Nebuchadnezzar. At that time Daniel was a bright up-and-coming teenager. Nebuchadnezzar began deporting people to his land, and he took the bright, young ones away to use them in service to his government. Daniel was one of these. Nebuchadnezzar even changed Daniel's name to one that honored his false god. Yet Daniel continued to trust in his God and he rose to prominence in the Babylonian government under this heathen king.

We heard Nebuchadnezzar's boasts in our reading, and – humanly speaking – he certainly had much to boast about. He was the most gifted and ambitious ruler of his time. He had led Babylon's armies to a string of impressive victories. His empire reached from its capital near the head of the Persian Gulf all the way to Asia Minor (present day Turkey). In the north his kingdom extended to Armenia and Syria. At its height it even included Egypt. He literally could think to himself, "I think I'll go conquer that city today."

His own city was rather amazing as well. The capital city of Babylon was divided into a number of rectangles by wide roads named after the gods of Babylon. The wide boulevard

running down the center of the city was 1000 yards long. A system of canals regulated the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers for irrigation. The royal palace and courtyards covered hundreds of thousands of square feet. Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of two huge walls that surrounded the city, each more than twenty feet thick. When his wife said that she was homesick for Persia, he brought Persia to her. He built the hanging gardens of Babylon, which for the record were one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

To top it all off, he was the conqueror and deporter of the Lord God's people of Israel. The nation who had taken over the Promised Land with miraculous victories by the hand of their powerful God at the helm was now just another one of his vassals.

We heard how he felt about all the wonders and accomplishments he had done: *"Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"*

God did not allow this heathen king to continue in his pride, but sent him a sobering experience. It began with a dream Nebuchadnezzar had. He saw a great and mighty tree spreading its branches and extending up to what seemed to be the heavens themselves. It was visible to the entire earth, produced fruit for many animals, and shelter as well. Daniel later correctly interpreted that Nebuchadnezzar himself was this great tree. Then a messenger appeared who commanded that the tree should be stripped of its branches and fruit and cut down to a stump, but the stump would be allowed to remain. Daniel correctly interpreted that this signaled the downfall of the king. Then, a voice in the dream explained more, calling the tree a man: *"Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him."* "Times" can indicate a set time that God would

allow, or it's also possible to translate this as "seven years."

Then Daniel gave Nebuchadnezzar some advice: *"O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."* Nebuchadnezzar might yet avoid the sobering experience that could come upon him!

However, he didn't. One year later Nebuchadnezzar boastfully said the words that we recounted before about his "great Babylon" and his "mighty power and glory." And a voice came from heaven, saying to him, *"This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. 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."*

And so it was. Nebuchadnezzar underwent a pitiful change:

- His mind was changed from that of a man to that of an animal.
- He lived away from people and with the animals, eating grass.
- His personal hygiene and grooming stopped, and his long nails and wild hair showed it.
- He didn't seek shelter at night, but was exposed to the outdoor dew.

Today we'd call this a form of mental illness that God allowed him to have. It was a sad transformation for a mighty king. Perhaps some of you here today have had family members affected by mental illness. Maybe you have seen some of these things happen.

Praise God that the intended lessons were learned by Nebuchadnezzar! *"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. 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?' 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. 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."

King Nebuchadnezzar humbly acknowledged the true God and publicly praised him!

2. Practiced by Christians during Advent

As we read before, these events were intended to be a sign to others. In fact, this part of the book of Daniel is written in Aramaic, the official language of the Babylonian Empire. Gentiles also are supposed to learn from this Gentile king. Therefore, you and I are supposed to learn from this Gentile king.

Our first thoughts after hearing the lessons that this king learned might be, "I'm glad I don't need to learn those lessons! I haven't conquered lands or risen to political power. I haven't built a fabulous city or constructed a wonder of the world."

On the contrary, I think the lessons of this reading need to be learned by every Christian, especially at this time of Advent. The story's been told of a frog and two ducks who lived in a swampy area together. They were the best of friends. But one season they noticed that their swamp was drying up. As time went on, it dried up more and more, and it was evident that they would not be able to live there much longer. What would they do? A plan was devised where the ducks would hold a stick at the ends in their beaks and the frog would clamp his mouth on the stick in the middle. The ducks would flap for all they were worth and carry the

frog to a new swampy area where they could live. And that is what they did. As they rose up out of the swampy area, a hunter noticed them and said, "That's the most amazing thing I've ever seen. I wonder who thought of that?" To which the frog said, "I did." (and down he went!)

Pride can be a devilish, damning trap.

Scripture tells us:

- *"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud" (Proverbs 16:18,19).*
- *"What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Corinthians 4:7).*
- *"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:1).*

Such pride can surface in a number of ways:

- It might surface as you walk through your fine home(s), taking overblown pride in your comfort and ease in your spacious, modern dwelling, or in a stroll through your garage with its vehicles, toys, and tools.
- It might surface as you walk through your place of work and see things that God has allowed you to accomplish.
- It might surface in your attitude toward the charitable acts you have done for your community or for the needy.
- It can even surface in church and in your feeling of your spiritual standing with God. You might find great comfort in the fact that I have been a weekly churchgoer. I have led a relatively moral life. I have been a generous giver of offerings. I have volunteered more hours than many others around me. I

have been a longtime, even a lifelong, Christian.

- Pride might even cause us to think that our salvation is caused by earning part of what we get. It might cause us to take great comfort and pride in our own good works instead of the grace of God.

At these times in your life, you need to learn a sobering lesson. John the Baptist came with a sobering message in our Gospel reading today. He echoed the words of Isaiah 40, preaching that obstacles needed to be removed and valleys raised to prepare the way for the King of kings to be welcomed. Repentance is in order. **Pride must be knocked out of the way, along with the misguided hope that we can earn our favor with God. We must acknowledge the Ruler of it all and the Giver of all good gifts, and we must accept his ways and actions.**

The beauty of this is that when our hearts have been emptied of sinful pride and have nothing in them to boast about, all that is left is what God has done for you and put in your heart. All that's left is the Savior whom he sent to suffer and die for your sins of pride. All that's left is what Jesus has done in serving as your Savior. All that's left is his perfect life in your place as your substitute, which he has given you. All that's left is what God has made you in baptism – His holy, precious, adopted son or daughter. **It's ironic that when we have emptied ourselves of the pride of our accomplishments, we have a higher status than we ever could have achieved on our own! We are an heir of heaven. We are going to reign with Christ in his heavenly kingdom. We are a child of God.**

How can you do these things that we have learned about during Advent? Perhaps you could:

- Pick a special Advent book or devotional to read regularly this month.

- Get that Advent wreath out if you haven't done so already with the family.
- Plan to watch "The Nativity Story" movie again this year.
- Take some time to turn off your cell phone and daily reflect on the grace of God privately. Spend more time in prayer.

All these lessons today come to us through the sobering experience that God graciously allowed to come into a Gentile king's life. May these thoughts of Scripture cause us to prepare for Christ's coming in repentance and faith, the same things that Nebuchadnezzar needed long ago. And as we do this, may the Lord grant us a meaningful Advent season as we prepare our hearts! Amen.