

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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11/24/24

Sermon Title: The Failure of Worldly Wisdom

Sermon Text: Daniel 2:1-49

Dan. 2:1 ¶ In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him.

Dan. 2:2 Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king.

Dan. 2:3 And the king said to them, “I had a dream, and my spirit is troubled to know the dream.”

Dan. 2:4 Then the Chaldeans said to the king in Aramaic, “O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation.”

Dan. 2:5 The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, “The word from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins.

Dan. 2:6 But if you show the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. Therefore show me the dream and its interpretation.”

Dan. 2:7 They answered a second time and said, “Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will show its interpretation.”

Dan. 2:8 The king answered and said, “I know with certainty that you are trying to gain time, because you see that the word from me is firm—

Dan. 2:9 if you do not make the dream known to me, there is but one sentence for you. You have agreed to speak lying and corrupt words before me till the times

change. Therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can show me its interpretation.”

Dan. 2:10 The Chaldeans answered the king and said, “There is not a man on earth who can meet the king’s demand, for no great and powerful king has asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean.

Dan. 2:11 The thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh.”

Dan. 2:12 ¶ Because of this the king was angry and very furious, and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed.

Dan. 2:13 So the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them.

Dan. 2:14 Then Daniel replied with prudence and discretion to Arioch, the captain of the king’s guard, who had gone out to kill the wise men of Babylon.

Dan. 2:15 He declared to Arioch, the king’s captain, “Why is the decree of the king so urgent?” Then Arioch made the matter known to Daniel.

Dan. 2:16 And Daniel went in and requested the king to appoint him a time, that he might show the interpretation to the king.

Dan. 2:17 ¶ Then Daniel went to his house and made the matter known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions,

Dan. 2:18 and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.

Dan. 2:19 Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven.

Dan. 2:20 Daniel answered and said:

“Blessed be the name of God forever and ever,
to whom belong wisdom and might.

Dan. 2:21 He changes times and seasons;
he removes kings and sets up kings;
he gives wisdom to the wise

and knowledge to those who have understanding;

Dan. 2:22 he reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what is in the darkness,
and the light dwells with him.

Dan. 2:23 To you, O God of my fathers,
I give thanks and praise,
for you have given me wisdom and might,
and have now made known to me what we asked of you,
for you have made known to us the king's matter."

Dan. 2:24 ¶ Therefore Daniel went in to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon. He went and said thus to him: "Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; bring me in before the king, and I will show the king the interpretation."

Dan. 2:25 ¶ Then Arioch brought in Daniel before the king in haste and said thus to him: "I have found among the exiles from Judah a man who will make known to the king the interpretation."

Dan. 2:26 The king declared to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, "Are you able to make known to me the dream that I have seen and its interpretation?"

Dan. 2:27 Daniel answered the king and said, "No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked,

Dan. 2:28 but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed are these:

Dan. 2:29 To you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be.

Dan. 2:30 But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living, but in order that the interpretation may be made known to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your mind.

Dan. 2:31 ¶ "You saw, O king, and behold, a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening.

Dan. 2:32 The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze,

Dan. 2:33 its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay.

Dan. 2:34 As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces.

Dan. 2:35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

Dan. 2:36 ¶ “This was the dream. Now we will tell the king its interpretation.

Dan. 2:37 You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory,

Dan. 2:38 and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all—you are the head of gold.

Dan. 2:39 Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth.

Dan. 2:40 And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things. And like iron that crushes, it shall break and crush all these.

Dan. 2:41 And as you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom, but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the soft clay.

Dan. 2:42 And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle.

Dan. 2:43 As you saw the iron mixed with soft clay, so they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay.

Dan. 2:44 And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever,

Dan. 2:45 just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure.”

Dan. 2:46 ¶ Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face and paid homage to Daniel, and commanded that an offering and incense be offered up to him.

Dan. 2:47 The king answered and said to Daniel, “Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery.”

Dan. 2:48 Then the king gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.

Dan. 2:49 Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniel remained at the king’s court.

Main Point: While worldly wisdom and understanding has some value, it cannot replace the need for human beings to hear from the Maker, whom they were created to know.

Outline:

1. The Failure of Worldly Wisdom (2:1-13)
2. The Need for God’s Wisdom (2:14-49)

Introduction

The historian Tom Holland has pointed out that if you went back to the ancient world before Christianity arose, what you would find is a world where power, strength, and survival of the fittest and strongest were the rule of the day.

He talks about how as a young man, he loved the Romans and tended to think of himself more on the side of Pontius Pilate than of Jesus. Yet Holland says that he began to grow unsettled by his study of the ancient world. He says,

“The more years I spent immersed in the study of classical antiquity, so the more alien I increasingly found it. The values of Leonidas, whose people had practiced a peculiarly murderous form of eugenics and trained their young to kill uppity [*under-men*] by night, were nothing that I recognized as my own; nor were those of Caesar, who was reported to have killed a million Gauls, and enslaved a million more.”

Why did Holland find them so alien? Well here is what Holland says:

“It was not just the extremes of callousness that unsettled me, but the complete lack of any sense that the poor or the weak might have the slightest intrinsic value. Why did I find this disturbing? Because, in my morals and ethics, I was not a Spartan or a Roman at all. That my belief in God had faded over the course of my teenage years did not mean that I had ceased to be Christian.”

Holland is a secular historian, and at least when he was writing this appeared to be agnostic as to the existence of God.

He didn't, of course, mean, then that he was born again or that he believed in Jesus Christ. What he meant when he said he was Christian was that Christianity has left such an impact on the way the way he thought – the way we all think in the west, the way we think of morality, the way we intuit what is good or evil. And he says this is because the teachings of Christ have so embedded themselves in our thoughts and feelings that we can't undo or unhear it. It's simply a part of how we think. Here is Holland again:

“So profound has been the impact of Christianity on the development of Western civilization that it has come to be hidden from view.”

Think about this: even the most God-denying atheist in our own day is *still* at pains to make sure we know that he or she is a good person. Very *very* few of even the most hardened irreligious people that you meet are actual moral nihilists along the lines of Friedrich Nietzsche, and those who *are* exposed as having no morality in a debate are usually considered to have lost the debate, because those listening simply will not go along with that sort of iron-bellied immorality.

People want you to know that they may be an atheist, but they still care about the poor, that they think it's wrong to harm other people, that it's wrong to enslave people, that it's wrong abuse or harm other... people believe most of these things today; even the most ardent opponent of Christianity.

Here's the thing, Tom Holland says: the things I just mentioned that atheists still wanting you to know about them? That is not what ancient people wanted you to know about them.

Slavery was entirely normal.

Abuse of those below you was considered the right of the one in power.

The poor were not a priority to anyone who mattered except to keep them pacified with bread from time to time...

Your social status gave you *permission* and power to do these things to others.

Holland's argument was that what has changed is that the gospel penetrated western civilization and over hundreds of years and then two millennia it got into the blood stream of the west.

And now here we are today, and more than ever in western – certainly in American history – people are willing to claim that there is no God, and that there is no *need* for a God. But in the next breath they make sure we know, that doesn't mean they're a bad person or that they hate the poor and so on. As if it *mattered*, even if there is no God!

The famous atheist Richard Dawkins even says this: "It is the case that since we are all 21st century people, we all subscribe to a pretty widespread consensus of what's right and what's wrong."

So here is what I would suggest as a way for you and I to engage with people around us who aren't very interested in God, or religion: "you think you can live a good moral upright life without God. Will you do a thought experiment with me, or perhaps answer a question, and I want to hear your answer?"

"How do you make a moral judgment? Let's say you meet someone who says they like to pay homeless people to fight each other, and then they upload the fights to YouTube for people to laugh at and watch. Would you tell that person they were wrong? And if so, on what basis would you do that? How do you tell someone who doesn't feel like what they are doing is wrong that they ought to change or at least stop?"

In the Christian view of the universe we can answer that question, right? God created these people in his image. People are not just things to be used. Jesus taught us to love our neighbor.

Or how about this? God says in the book of Proverbs, "Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor."

The Christian view gives us abundant grounds for loving our neighbor and caring for the poor and not abusing or enslaving people. We have deep reasons for not using the poor as entertainment, right?

All the person without God has is a shallow moral preference that can never be enforced on another person.

It is only in a theistic universe where God made us that we can we have a reason to love others that is true regardless of how they feel about it. We can say, "What you've done is wrong" in a universe made by God, and we can only say, "I don't like it" in a universe that is empty and a product of chance.

So we have this moment where we need to acknowledge: people today are very moral – at least in selective ways. Perhaps it's time for a wisdom contest with them where we say, "In a universe without God, why? In a universe without God as you claim to believe in, or at least in a universe where you claim God is not necessary, how can you have universal values at all that you can press upon someone else as a moral demand?"

We need to have a wisdom contest. “Where are you getting these universal moral demands that you place on others? And can you really make them square with an indifferent universe where all we are is walking meat sacks?”

Wisdom contests are not new, and they weren’t invented in 2024. Because what happens here today in our passage in Daniel is a *wisdom contest*. In today’s passage, the contest is between Yahweh, the creator... and also the God of the conquered people of Judah, and between the collective religious wisdom of Babylon.

I want us to get the narrative here, but it’s quite a lengthy passage so we cannot in great detail go over every detail.

But I want us to get the narrative in the broad strokes so we can have more help, once again for ourselves. Because like Daniel *we’re* living in exile. Like Daniel, *we’re* living in a strange land that thinks it has its own answers apart from Yahweh. How does God defend his own name in a strange land?

Two things today: first, the failure of worldly wisdom. Second, the need for God’s wisdom.

1. The Failure of Worldly Wisdom (2:1-13)

First, this passage confronts us with the failure of worldly wisdom.

So King Nebuchadnezzar is two years into his reign. Remember: he’s only just smashed the Assyrians and returned to Babylon in victory. He’s subdued these other nations and in a sense is now here to rest on his throne and enjoy his victory.

Except that like so many in power, he isn’t sleeping well. He is having these haunting dreams that he can’t remember or understand.

I try not to make too much out of my dreams, but if you’ve ever had the same dream over and over again it’s hard not to become very occupied by the dream: “what on earth is going on with me that I keep having this same dream?” It’s haunting, and it sort of forces you to contemplate a bit: what on earth is going on?

Well here the king is, and he has this presupposition: this dream is not random. This dream means something. It's why it's bothering him so much. "I need to know what it means."

So he does what any red blooded Babylonian would do: he goes to the enchanters and sorcerers.

By the way, our own day is so starved for spirituality apart from God, that more and more people are turning back to the enchanters and sorcerers. I did a search for psychics in our area just on Google and got so many hits that I was blown away. One review I read for one of the psychics said, "this psychic could not have known any of this knowledge without having a true gift. I didn't say anything and all of a sudden information I have told no one else came through from the spirits." This was not written in 600 BC in Babylon, it was written in Beaverton in 2024. People are starving, spiritually.

But starving people will eat anything. Anne Applebaum in her book *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine* relates how in the 20th century, Russia intentionally created a mass starvation in Ukraine. She relates the horrible things that people did once they were truly hungry. Trees were stripped of their bark and eaten; shoe leather was cooked and gnawed. Starving people will look for anything to eat.

People in the west have plenty of *food*, but the *spiritual* hunger is real, and many people in their desperation are turning to the enchanters and sorcerers as Nebuchadnezzar does here.

Well, how do the enchanters do? Not good. The dream has shaken him, but he cannot remember it. He needs to hear from someone who can know his dream. He needs God. But these sorcerers represent the best of worldly wisdom in the most dominant nation on earth – a people who conquered the planet, and then gathered the best together in one place. And they could not tell the dream, and certainly not explain it.

And when we're talking about a wisdom contest, here we are again: facing the limits of what the world can do apart from God.

Heinrich Bullinger was one of the Reformers of the 16th century, and he points out that the reason this philosophy or wisdom of the world failed is

because it wasn't from the Spirit of God and attributed all things to the power of people.

We live in this moment, again, where people have a potent belief in the power of man to bring prosperity, in the power of our inventions to deliver us into some sort of amazing new age. Just look at the hysteria around artificial intelligence at the moment. You might expect me to be skeptical and say, "No, AI won't deliver what people expect." But I don't know that. Maybe it's real.

Let's try this experiment a moment, and hopefully it will show you the limits even of truly amazing technology. And remember that what is technology today would have looked like magic and sorcery to ancient people.

So here's the experiment: let's say that the invention of AI ushers in a new age of American prosperity. People don't need to work at lunch counters anymore because the AI will take their order. They don't need to work in kitchens anymore because the AI will make robots that will serve us perfect hamburgers. We don't even need doctors anymore because the robot will take your temperature and cure your cancer all in one visit. Let's just say that the wildest dreams of the futurists come true. Let's say there is a universal basic income and everybody gets a check big enough that they don't even need to work anymore. That's realistic, right? Heck, let's just say we even get flying cars while we're at it.

Let's say it's all here, and we're in a futuristic Jetsons-like paradise. It still can't take away the ache. It can't answer our deepest needs. It can't deal with your guilt or your sin. You can't "AI" your way out of a guilty conscience or the sort of painful experience that the person who has reached the pinnacle of comfort and success still feels. Here Nebuchadnezzar, is, a conquering king who should be enjoying his luxurious victory lap, and he can't sleep. He has everything, and he can't sleep.

You can have everything, and let's say AI can give it to you (I'm skeptical that it will, but let's go with this a moment), but *everything* isn't enough. Everything can't fix your struggle to sleep, or your hurt, or your broken relationships, or your sense that you were made for more than just to be served by robot butlers.

There will always be limits to human wisdom, and there always has been.

2. The Need for God's Wisdom (2:14-45)

This leads us to the second thing today, which is the need for God's wisdom. To make a long story short, the king becomes frustrated and calls for the deaths of all the wise men of Babylon, because they're all worthless fakes. They're eating the king's food, drinking up his wine. He's had enough.

Well Daniel and his friends are about to get caught in this dragnet, too. So Daniel steps forward to tell and to interpret the dream. And we see the key to all of this in verse 27 and 28. Daniel says this:

“No wise men, enchanter, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days.” (Daniel 2:27-28 ESV)

So Daniel does two things here. He tells the king that his dream isn't random, and that it includes a vision of what he calls “the latter days.” But he also makes sure that the king doesn't think that Daniel is just another one of these sorcerers. Instead, Daniel wants the king to know that God is interpreting this dream, not just some sorcerer from Judea.

The sorcerer and enchanter model of wisdom and knowledge is bankrupt, and Daniel is shattering that old framework Nebuchadnezzar was operating under: it's not sorcerers that you should look to, it is God and his wisdom. Stop looking to man and his wisdom, because when you do that, you get nothing.

But here's the thing: Daniel leaves no doubt about this: without God Daniel would be nothing. Without God Daniel would know nothing. Daniel is wiser than all of these sorcerers, but he needs his wisdom to come from God.

Conclusion

Here is what I want you to see as we conclude here today: here Daniel is, he's far from Israel – probably a thousand miles, by road. He is far from the temple, far from everything he really loves and remembers of his old life. Amid a strange people trying to make him forget his home, his name, and who he really is.

And it would be easy to think that he had gone into exile alone without the Lord. And if God had remained at a distance, if God hadn't been with Daniel in his exile, Daniel would have experienced the same fate as the Babylonian sorcerers. Except God didn't remain distant. He drew near. He came near and delivered this man whom he chose to set his love upon.

And Christian, God didn't just come near to *Daniel*. He has come near to us in Christ.

And that's not just me going, "Okay, I need to make this sermon about Jesus now," it's here in the text. I wonder if you saw it. It was in Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

In the dream, look at verse 34:

"As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces."

What does this have to do with Jesus? Well consider: this is a rock that breaks anything that falls on it, even the image that's as strong as iron breaks when it falls on this rock.

But this is even more interesting: this is not just a very powerful stone made by people, but it says this is "a stone cut out by no human hand." Keep going to verse 35.

It says that the stone broke the idols so thoroughly that they turned to dust and nothing was left of them. Then look what it says:

"But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth."

In Luke 20:17 and 18 Jesus tells us that he is the stone that the builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone. There he's pointing to himself fulfilling Psalm 118.

But then Jesus explicitly says that he is the stone from Nebuchadnezzar's dream: "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."

So here Jesus is, and he sees himself in the dream of this pagan king 600 years before. Jesus says, “I’m the one who was haunting Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams. I am the stone that can’t be broken and that will break anyone.”

That’s Luke 20:17. You can look it up for yourself later.

Daniel gives the interpretation to the king: kingdoms are going to rise and fall. Even *yours* will fall, another will come up. Over and over the cycle will happen. In part he’s probably seeing the story of the rise of Rome, but he’s also telling the story of all human history. So many rulers and tyrants raised up and thrown down. We talked about Stalin earlier: the greatest murderer in human history – he had power over so many, but he died fitfully and in fear, screaming and shrieking, as though he knew what was coming for him.

But there is one kingdom that will never be broken and never thrown down. That’s the real point of the dream. And Jesus tells us that this kingdom is his kingdom.

Jesus is haunting the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar, and his kingdom is such a threat that it woke the king up in a cold sweat.

Jesus is the stone that cannot be broken. Human wisdom will fail. Human efforts will fall apart. They will be scattered like dust in the wind. But Christ remains. And hasn’t that proven true? Christianity has outlived and transformed the Roman world, the western world. In fact it’s all over the world now, conquering hearts and minds and changing people. In many ways we can see that Christ has even now filled the whole earth and he continues to break the hearts of sinners and falling on people the world over.

He could have remained distant. He could have left us to ourselves. He didn’t owe us anything, certainly not his favor. He could have let us suffer the same fate as the people living by the world’s wisdom, and instead Christ left heaven and joined the exiles here. He walked among us, bore our sins, and carried our sorrows.

If you are not a Christian yet, I want to challenge you: how has the world’s wisdom worked out for you? Have you pinned all your hope on material things, on the best this world has to offer? How has that worked out for you? Or even if you think it *has* worked out for you at least materially let me challenge you in this way: can a life without God answer the deepest truths that you know about yourself and the

world we live in? Let me suggest to you that God in Christ is the answer, and let me encourage you to speak with me after church or at the very least explore these things further for yourself: what is truth?

But if you're already a Christian I want you to be encouraged, today. We *are* in exile, as we saw from Peter's letter last week. We're not in heaven, we're not in the promised land, we're not in the midst of triumph, at least in a worldly sense. Instead, we are in exile, but not abandoned. In a strange land, but not alone. Because if our God is with us, then wherever we are is home.

Let's pray.