

Matthew J. Deen
Centre Community Church
May 10, 2020 (Mother's Day)

The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar

I want first of all to apologize for my appearance. As my partner Ella can tell you, I hate getting haircuts. I am never pleased with them and it always takes me a good week or so to get used to them. As it happens I was planning to get my semi-annual haircut on the very week that Ella and I had to clear out of seminary housing, and we landed in Brattleboro three days after Gov. Scott declared a State of Emergency on March 13. But given the focus on Nebuchadnezzar today, my rather feral appearance is perhaps appropriate. And it is not entirely arbitrary that I should be the one discussing Nebuchadnezzar. When Pastor Scott and I talked as he was developing this series, I excitedly spoke up about King Nebuchadnezzar, who I had been studying and writing about for my thesis. There is to my mind no more fascinating king anywhere mentioned in all the Bible than Nebuchadnezzar. But alas, and with apologies to Pastor Scott, I confess I do not find the historical Nebuchadnezzar nearly so interesting as the character we encounter in today's passage, who is rather a composite, or stock, character for a number of Babylonian kings. Although it was almost certainly written much later, perhaps centuries later, our passage is set in the period immediately following the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian empire at the hands of the actual Nebuchadnezzar. So it is certainly a text about what it means for the Hebrew people to be faithful in captivity under Babylonian rule. But as we will see in a moment, it may be more.

I have been endlessly fascinated by the story of Nebuchadnezzar's animal sojourn in Daniel 4. I mean, this is wild! Literally and figuratively. What is this all about?

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By and large, traditional readings have interpreted this passage simply to mean that God is punishing Nebuchadnezzar for his great pride. And that certainly seems reasonable as a surface reading. But I personally don't find this explanation all that satisfying. As some have pointed out, God could have chosen any number of ways to punish if that was God's goal in this story. It seems clear to me, however, that there is more to it than that. As one theologian puts it, "Nebuchadnezzar's pride may have been healed through humiliation, but it was an animal humiliation and he turned to the God of Israel as an animal—details that do not seem altogether incidental."¹ In other words, God's humbling of Nebuchadnezzar is not so much punishment as rehabilitation. Nebuchadnezzar comes to learn his proper place by being deprived of his human sovereignty and this serves as a kind of therapy, if you will, that integrates him back into the fold of creaturely existence.

This calls to mind another text written with the Babylonian conquest in mind, that of Genesis 1, from which Christians derive their understanding of humankind created uniquely in the image of God. In claiming this relationship to the divine, the Priestly writers who wrote this creation story in exile were severely critiquing the preeminent god of their Babylonian captors, the god Marduk, who according to the Babylonian creation myth created humans to be expendable slaves of the gods. But when the Priestly writers composed Genesis 1, they edified humankind above this status and wove this creation narrative together with Genesis 2, wherein we find a God who creates from love and a yearning for companionship with Creation. This is a God who walks among

¹ Eric D. Meyer, *Inner Animalities: Theology and the End of the Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 102.

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God's creatures and has a relationship with them. There could not be a more clarifying contrast between the Babylonian god Marduk, on the one hand, and the Hebrew God Elohim, on the other. So you could say that in standing on the rooftop of the palace and surveying the kingdom splayed out before him, seeing it all in the service of himself, Nebuchadnezzar was bearing the image of the Babylonian god Marduk. But when the Hebrew God forces him into his animal rehabilitation, he learns what it means to be vulnerable as part of a broader ecological web of existence, to see from the lower vantage point of his creaturely relations—i.e., he learns what it is to be a creature of God. Creation no longer serves him. And when he finally comes to his senses, *through* his animal senses, he has learned what it means to bear the image of Elohim.

Friends, I think this has tremendous importance for us as we learn the extent of our own great creaturely vulnerability in this time. The Covid pandemic is forcing so many of us to consider deeply unsettling possibilities related to our physical and financial wellbeing. But it is also showing that we need not just basic necessities but regular contact with our fellow human animals. I think of the many mothers and grandmothers today who will not be able to enjoy this special day with their children because of the imperative to continue social distancing. But if I may be so bold, I think this text may be inviting us to think even about the wider extent of our creaturely relations. We depend on so much more than our human neighbors. While certainly it is no substitute for human contact, what if we saw this time of social distancing as an opportunity to turn toward our wild neighbors with whom we share Creation? How can we be better neighbors to them? As spring returns to our valley, and life begins to stir

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again, how do we carry ourselves in relation to them, especially when their interests collide with our own? Do we bear the image of Marduk or of Elohim?

I will close briefly by mentioning an encounter the Indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer recounts in her astonishingly brilliant book called *Braiding Sweetgrass*. (This is such essential reading that it was required for no fewer than three of my seminary courses!) There's a very memorable scene in which she recounts trying to be a good mother to her daughters by cleaning up a pond on her property so they can have a place to go swimming. While clearing brush around the pond, she cuts and cuts until she eventually unveils a nest with three eggs. Nearby she notices the frantic calls of a yellow warbler, who is flitting from branch to branch and realizes that in trying to be a good mother to her own children by creating the best possible home for them, she has basically destroyed the home of another mother. As she hauntingly puts it, "I forgot to acknowledge that creating the home that I wanted for my children jeopardized the homemaking of other mothers whose intents were no different from mine."² Every creature has a mother. I can think of no better insight to ground us and guide as we seek to take seriously what it means to bear the image of God, to each other and to Creation. Hopefully this simple yet profound truth can help us as we continue our ministry to a world in need, a world that very much includes *all* members of Creation. How we express our commitment to life will always be limited—in perspective, in opportunity, and in impact. But so long as we remember what it is to be vulnerable, to need one another and to face the possibility of scarcity together, then we will remember

² Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015), 92.

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what it means to be a creature of God. This is perhaps the only way we can bear the image of God faithfully. In this we can see that the "madness" of King Nebuchadnezzar has something of great value to teach us. May each of us in the priesthood of all believers be inspired by this rehabilitation and internalize this wisdom for our own shared commitment to one another and to Creation.

Amen.