

“I Know How This Movie Ends”

Daniel 2:25-45

If you are like me, you know how easy it is to lose perspective. Especially when it feels like everything around you is changing. As seems to be the case right now all over the world!! It seems that lately we are bombarded nearly every day with images of unrest and upheaval and turmoil, the news coming on top of all the change taking place in our own worlds, generating instability in our souls.

While waiting for our return flight from New York to Vancouver a week ago, I wandered into the airport bookstore. And the first thing I see is the front cover of Newsweek magazine. On it is a picture of a tidal wave surging toward land, and the words: “Apocalypse Now: Tsunamis, Earthquakes, Nuclear Meltdowns, Revolutions, Economics on the Brink. What #@%! Is Next?”

Perspective: We stand in need of perspective.

A young boy went to a scary movie with some older boys. Some of the scenes in the film were truly frightening, causing the older boys to slump down in their seats. As the movie unfolded, the older boys became more and more terrified. But they noticed that the young boy, although shaken by what he saw, did not slump down in his seat. “Why?” they asked him in a whisper. “Because,” he whispered back, “I saw the preview. I know where it is all going. I know how this movie ends.”

So this morning I invite you to watch a preview with me. In Scripture, the Holy Spirit has given a number of previews. The one that ministers to me the best is the one recorded in the second chapter of the prophet Daniel. This particular preview helps us keep our cool in the midst of change, in the midst of unrest, and upheaval, and turmoil.

And this preview helps us better understand what is happening when Jesus of Nazareth rides into the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It helps us understand what is happening when Jesus rides into any city of the world.

Many scholars have labeled the second chapter of Daniel “a theology of history”. In this text we are given a preview of the course and climax of history. We are not shown the whole movie; in the nature of things that would be impossible. But we are shown the crucial scenes, which sketch for us the course and climax of history. We are shown enough so that in the drama continuing to unfold... even if we move into scary times...we need not slump down in our seats as the other boys and girls do.

Before we read the text let me briefly review the historical context in which the preview was first run.

It was the 6th Century before the birth of Jesus. Daniel the Jew was living in Babylon, the capital city of the most influential empire at that time. Babylon was located in what is now Iraq. Daniel and Jewish community of which he was a part were living in Babylon against their wills. They had been deported there by Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, after the Babylonian army decimated Jerusalem, bringing it under Nebuchadnezzar's rule.

By the way, the late Saddam Hussein thought of himself as "a modern-day Nebuchadnezzar", actually he thought of himself as a reincarnation of Nebuchadnezzar! You may know that he initiated a project to rebuild ancient Babylon. On the bricks of the wall around the construction site he had written: "To King Nebuchadnezzar in the reign of Saddam Hussein."

Back to the 6th Century B.C.

Daniel was not only a resident alien; he was a hostage, a political hostage. But amazingly, he was living and serving in the Royal Palace. Fascinating. Imagine the foreigner occupied a high rank position in Nebuchadnezzar's government. (You can read the first chapter of Daniel's book to find out why this happened.)

At one point during those years of exile and captivity, Nebuchadnezzar went through a period of restless nights. Night after night he was troubled by what was to him a terrifying dream. So he did what he had done other times when he experienced emotional and mental stress. He called for the wise men of Babylon. He brought in his magicians, conjurers, sorcerers, who were trained for just such times. They were experts in dream analysis. Archeologists have unearthed a number of "Chaldean dream manuals". The manuals list various dreams and the events that followed them. They were arranged systematically for easy reference.

Old Testament scholar Joyce Baldwin tells us that:

"Since these books had to try to cover every possible eventuality they became inordinately long; only the expert could find his way through them, and even he had to know the dream before he could search for the nearest possible parallel" (Daniel, p. 87) So the wise men came to the King, dream and analysis books in hand, magic incantations ready to go.

But this time the rules are changed! In addition to wanting the wise men to interpret his dream, Nebuchadnezzar wants them to first tell him what he had dreamed! The dream was so disturbing that only a true interpretation could bring him peace of mind. He did not want to be falsely pacified, as powerful leaders often are by their advisors. So to ensure an accurate interpretation he decides that the wise men first tell him the dream!!

Big problem! The wise men of Babylon were unable to meet the King's demand. He King became very angry...so angry that he threatened to kill the whole lot of them. ("What do I pay you guys for anyway?")

A crisis of huge proportions. The accumulated skills and insight of Babylon's finest could not meet the need. For all their magnificent libraries and research centers, the wise men themselves had to admit the limits of their wisdom.

Enter Daniel. Hearing of the King's decree to destroy all the wise men of Babylon - which by the way included Daniel and his Jewish friends! - Daniel approached the King, requesting a little more time and promising to return and declare the King's dream and its interpretation. That was quite an act of faith! First, to speak to an angry tyrant, and second, to promise an interpretation of a dream before knowing what it was!

Daniel goes to his apartment in the royal palace and calls his friends to join him in prayer. They get down on their knees. And in response to their prayers the Living Lord plays Nebuchadnezzar's dream onto the screen of Daniel's mind, and then impresses on Daniel's mind the meaning of the dream!! Daniel gets up off his knees and runs back into the King's presence.

As we read the text, notice that Daniel is careful to give credit where credit is due. Daniel's ability to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream was not due to any spiritual know-how, professional skill, or academic learning...as valuable and valued as all that is. Daniel's insight was the result of Divine revelation, penetrating spiritual insight given by the God, who, as Daniel says, "reveals mysteries"!!

One more observation before we read the text. Daniel 2 is written in Aramaic, a sister language to Hebrew. This is significant because Chapter 1 of Daniel is written like all the other Jewish prophets in Hebrew. But Daniel 2 is in Aramaic. In fact, half of Daniel (chapters 2-7) is in Aramaic. Why? Why two different languages in the same book? And why the shift here in Chapter 2 with Nebuchadnezzar's dream? Various explanations have been given. The best, in my opinion, is that chapters 2 through 7 were meant to be heard not only by the Jews who were in exile, but also by all the peoples of that day. Thus they are written in the language of international exchange. Aramaic was the English of that era. Aramaic was widely used throughout the ancient Near East from the 7th Century B.C.

As we read in Daniel 2 we are to realize that the dream and its interpretation was meant to be heard not only the folks gathered in the synagogues, but also by those who wield power in the halls of government. What God reveals in Daniel 2 is meant to be heard not only in the private, religious realm, but also in the public, secular realm. God means it to be heard not only in the sanctuaries of our churches, but also in Parliament in Ottawa, in the Legislature in Victoria, in the White House and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

Daniel 2:25-45, Hear the Word of God.

- Imagine...Imagine dreaming that disturbing dream. Imagine night after night seeing that huge, dazzling, awesome statue standing before you: with a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet partly of iron and partly of clay.

- Imagine that little stone “cut without human hands” striking the feet of the statue, causing the whole structure to fall into a pile of rubble, rubble so fine that the wind blew it all away, leaving no trace of its existence.
- Imagine night after night seeing that little stone which struck the statue slowly becoming a mountain, so great a mountain that it filled the whole earth!

The question is, what caused Nebuchadnezzar to dream that disturbing dream?

Dreams usually emerge from our subconscious. What in Nebuchadnezzar’s subconscious gave birth to that disturbing dream?

Had he gone to his psychoanalyst she would, had she read Carl Jung anyway, immediately recognized a profound sense of insecurity. She might have told the King that the statute represented himself and his huge empire. She might have then suggested that the reason he kept seeing the statue fall is that he feared an attack by another empire...or that he feared his empire would not hold together much longer because of its diverse factions (hence the feet of mixed material).

But the fact of the matter is, at that time Nebuchadnezzar had no visible reason to feel threatened or insecure.

- He was enormously wealthy and powerful.
- He was well respected by and popular with the citizens of Babylon (“100% approval”, said the Babylonian Times.)
- No one was challenging his authority.
- His armies could crush any invading force.

Yet, for all his wealth and fame and power, Nebuchadnezzar was deeply insecure. Why? Why this “insecurity dream” in the subconscious of a ruler who ought to feel very secure?

Answer: Grace. God’s grace. God was playing that a dream in Nebuchadnezzar’s subconscious! The Living God was speaking to a King who ignores Him! Imagine that! Grace. The Living God had not washed His hands of that “secular humanist atheist” megalomaniac. God was seeking to bring Nebuchadnezzar into a more accurate and redemptive view of himself and of history. “Twas grace that taught my heart to fear...and grace my fears relieved.”

Daniel says to the King (vs. 28) “there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place in the latter days”. Daniel claims that the tyrant’s disturbing dream is from God! And is all about the course and climax of history... I wonder how many other powerful world leaders have such dreams?

Daniel reviews the dream with the King. And then Daniel straightforwardly spells out its meaning. Now if I had been in Daniel’s shoes, I would have taken a deep breath...and prayed for my life...as I began the interpretation!

“You, O King, are the King of Kings” (2:37)...a little flattery never hurts. But Daniel is careful to add, “to whom the God of heaven has given the Kingdom”, putting the King in his place. Jesus said the same thing to Pilate when that ruler claimed to have ultimate

authority. “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given from above.” (John 19:11)

Daniel then identified the four different parts of that huge, awesome statue, as four outstanding and different human-made empires. Then Daniel declared the mystery: each empire will run its course before the coming of Another Kingdom. Another Kingdom which will put an end to all these Kingdoms...but will itself endure forever (2:45). The first Kingdom, symbolized by the head of gold, Daniel specifically identifies as Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylonian empire. I am sure the King felt pretty good about himself, symbolized in such a grand way. But I wonder how he felt as the interpretation unfolded? For you see, Daniel was telling Nebuchadnezzar that although the empire he was building was impressive and mighty, it was finite. Its time on the stage of history was comparatively short. His empire would grow and it would give way to and, to some extent, shape three empires to follow. Some of them would be impressive and mighty. One day, however, it would become clear that the whole structure was resting on a shaky foundation, on feet of crumbling clay. And one day the whole structure would collapse.

But that is not the big point of the dream. The fall of that structure, the fall of “exalted” human kingdoms, would not come because of feet of clay. That is not the mystery. That fact we can deduce ourselves. Empires built on faulty foundations inevitably collapse. The collapse of the old Soviet Union for example, the collapse of Communism was not hard to predict. It takes no special wisdom to predict the collapse of an ideology built on false premises. It takes no special wisdom to predict the collapse of Western civilization, built as it is on faulty presupposition, it will eventually collapse. That is not the mystery of history.

Here is the mystery: Babylon would fall not simply because of its inherent weakness. It would fall because of the coming of Another Kingdom...Another Kingdom represented by the little stone. Here is the mystery: the fall would come because Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon, and the empires that follow, stood in the way of and blocked the progress of Another Kingdom which comes and fills the future. (so Wallace, *Daniel*, p. 57)

That is what finally explains the King’s deep insecurity. There was indeed “something out there”!! “something from beyond” which threatened Nebuchadnezzar’s powerful empire. Something above and outside of the history he could see with his eyes. There was real, objective reason to feel insecure. His empire, and those that succeeded his, stood in the way of and blocked the progress of a hidden Kingdom, the Kingdom of the Living God.

Daniel did not identify the Kingdoms represented by silver, bronze, iron and clay. Some scholars think that the silver represents the Medo Empire; bronze represents the Persian Empire, and iron and clay the Greek. Other scholars think the silver represents the combined Medo-Persian empire, the bronze the Greek empire and iron and clay the Roman. I hold to this second view.

God was telling Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel that Babylon, Medo-Persian, Greece and Rome would all run their courses. Then, in the days of the fourth empire, in the days of the Romans (vs. 44)...”the God of heaven will set up a Kingdom that will never be destroyed” (2:44).

And that, brothers and sisters, is what was happening on Palm Sunday. That is what was happening at Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter. During the Roman era in the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, the Living God, was setting up the Other Kingdom.

Remember what John the Baptist came preaching? He could sense that there was “something cataclysmic in the air” (Halverson). What was the one word he thundered over and over? “Repent”. “Repent...turn around”. Why? “For the Kingdom of heaven, the Kingdom of God has come near” he said (Matthew 3:2) and what was the first word of Jesus’ preaching? “Repent”. Turn around. Why? “The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15).

In Jesus of Nazareth the Everlasting Kingdom is breaking into history and altering history. Jesus is the little stone “cut from a mountain without human hands” (2:34). Jesus and His Kingdom resurrection is the stone that strikes the statue and becomes a great mountain filling the whole earth (2:35). He is the stone upon which empires either stand or under which empires are crushed.

In the preview of history played on the screen of Nebuchadnezzar’s subconscious we discover that the birth, life, death resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth has consequences not only for the private, religious sphere of life, but for the public, secular sphere of life as well. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news

- not only because it declares the forgiveness of sin,
- not only because it involves justification before the Throne of the Universe,
- not only because it offers us the gift of adoption into the Family of God, the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the gift of Eternal life.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is such good news because in Jesus Another Kingdom is breaking into the kingdoms of this world, a Kingdom that invades and transforms the private, personal realms of life...and invades and transforms the public, corporate realms of life. He comes to save our souls and to rule as King over all. He comes to rescue us from all bondage, and to call the world into a wholly different order of life into new governance.

The little stone “cut without human hands” has come ...and keeps on rolling...slowly but surely overcoming any and every thing blocking its way...until one day it fills the whole earth. That is the mystery of history...first unveiled to Daniel and through him to the King of one of history’s most powerful empires.

Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream has profound implications for understanding what is happening in the world in our time. Let me hold before us just five.

- 1) First, we now know the main cause of turmoil in the world. The main cause of the upheaval of history is not the moral weakness of human societies. The main cause of the upheavals of history is not the social and economic factors we can observe. Nor is the main cause the demonic forces at work behind the scenes. In his superb work on the book of Daniel, biblical scholar Ronald Wallace shows that “the main cause of upheaval in history ‘is the progress of the hidden Kingdom of Christ, this pressure in our present world from beyond’” (p.59). Jesus’ Kingdom keeps on invading human kingdoms...but keeps on being rejected and resisted by those kingdoms. The turmoil in our world is fundamentally due to human resistance to King Jesus’ Kingdom of light and justice.

- 2) Second implication: the turmoil will continue until the resistance ends. Unrest will mark the work until humanity lays down its resistance to Jesus and His Kingdom. Jesus says (Luke 16:16), “The law and the prophets were proclaimed until John (the Baptist); since then the gospel of the Kingdom of God is preached and everyone is forcing his way into it”. An Arab scholar I think has translated that better: “since then the gospel of the Kingdom of God is preached, and everyone because of it is under pressure”. God’s New World Order is pressing in upon the world, and everyone because of it is under pressure. The pressure is relieved when we lay down our resistance and give in to God’s rule of grace. What is true in the world is true in our personal lives. The turmoil signals some sort of resistance in our souls...somewhere I am fighting the Kingdom. The turmoil will be there until I surrender.

- 3) Third implication: a positive side of the second. Turmoil is a prelude to the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. I learned this while living and serving in the Philippines from 1985 to 1989. We arrived in Manila in September of ’85. It was in a time of great tension. You could sense it everywhere. It was frightening at times. People who spoke out against Ferdinand Marcos...who had been a corrupt dictator...were disappearing. Even some newspaper columnists were turning up dead. The tension was running very high .It was then the Lord showed me that all the turmoil was a prelude to a New Order of the Kingdom. He gave me a way to picture it. Beneath the earth’s crust are tectonic plates. The Lord seemed to suggest that this Kingdom, previously hidden, is like those tectonic plates: ever present, ever moving, ever pressing. Sometimes tectonic plates butt up against one another...and there is an earthquake. Sometimes the plates get locked together...and then suddenly break free...and there is a volcano. So the Kingdom of God: ever present, ever moving, and pressing, pressing, pressing. And in the pressing, heating things up. I found myself saying to the people of Manila, again and again, “do not be afraid of the turmoil...it is a prelude to more Kingdom coming!”
 You see the implication? Turmoil in our lives is not a sign of the absence of God’s rule. Quite the opposite: it is a sign of the presence of God’s rule...pressing up against the reign of other gods before whom we have bowed. The turmoil is not due to God having forgotten us; it is due to God’s bothering us! As He did Nebuchadnezzar. Turmoil in both the private and public realms is a prelude to the release of Kingdom life!

- 4) Fourth implication: a hard one to hear, but critical. Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream warns us. It warns us that it is possible to waste our lives; it is possible to waste our talents, time, energy and money on that which in the end will not count. The preview warns us that whatever is not consistent with the Kingdom of Christ, whatever cannot be taken up and incorporated into the Kingdom of Christ, will one day be revealed for what it is...so much chaff which the wind will blow away leaving no trace of its existence.

Charles Colson, who came to Jesus Christ during a political crisis (Watergate), tells of a trip he and his family took to Rome. He writes:

"We stood on the very ground where the Roman Senate, the world's mightiest political institution met to erect the laws which would shape the history of the world. As I stood snapping photographs, my mind flashed back to the Roosevelt Room in the White House, a few steps across a narrow hallway from the President's Oval Office. At eight o'clock each morning a dozen of us, the President's senior aides, had gathered around the antique mahogany table; its polished surface reflected the serious, intense expression of men who believed the destiny of mankind was in their hands. 'The decision we must make today,' Henry Kissinger would often say, 'will affect the whole future course of world history.' We believed it. Just as the Roman senators, dressed in their flowing togas, believed it nearly 2,000 years ago. Yet here sat their once majestic forum in dust piles of stone and rubble. Would even this much be left of the Roosevelt Room, I wondered, two centuries, let alone two millennia from now?

At home several days later I was sorting through a stack of photographs taken in Europe. Wendell (my oldest son), just graduated from Princeton and working in housing construction outside Washington, was looking over my shoulder. "What's that one, Dad?" "That's the remains of the Roman Senate." "Wow! Imagine that. Looks just like the construction site where I work." Wendell took a big swallow from his soft drink and walked away. Or me the imagery was suddenly overpowering, vividly underscoring the unsettling thoughts which had assaulted me on the plane trip home. The only lasting kingdom is God's" (*Life Sentence*, p. 142, 146)

Daniel 2:35: "not a trace of them was found". The preview warns us that it is possible to waste our lives serving a kingdom which in the end does not stand.

- 5) Fifth implication: the flip side of the fourth. The preview encourages us; it gives us hope. We never waste our lives living for the Kingdom of God. Try as they might, no human kingdom, political or personal, secular or ecclesiastical, East or West, Marxist or Capitalist, can finally block the Kingdom of God. Which means we never "seek first the Kingdom of God" in vain. We never pray "Thy Kingdom Come" in vain. What Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream and what Daniel proclaimed in the interpretation is that the coming progress and triumph of the Kingdom of the stone is inevitable. One day, the little stone, rejected and resisted, will be the mountain that fills the whole earth.

It was this preview, this revelation of the mystery of history, which gave Desmond Tutu, long before he won the Nobel Peace Prize, the courage to walk into the office of the Minister of Law and Order, into the office of the man who was responsible to enforce the

policy of Apartheid, and say “Mr. Minister, We must remind you that you are not God. You are just a man. And one day your name shall merely be a faint scribble on the pages of history while the name of Jesus Christ shall live forever”.

I researched Daniels’ preview in Manila inn 1985, on the last Sunday of November, Christ the King Sunday. Unknown to me that day, were sitting in the sanctuary two men from Washington, D.C.; one a C.I.A. agent, the other an consultant from an image-making firm in Washington, who had been hired by Ferdinand Marcos to help change his image in the Western press. During the choir anthem, after the sermon, unknown to me (until later in the week) the image-maker began to shake inside and outside, something that had never happened to him before. And he said that he heard God speak to him! He said God said to him “when you meet President Marcos tomorrow, all you are to do is read Daniel 2 to him”. The image-maker did it! And three months later – in February of 1986 – Mr. Marcos was gone.

Perspective. “I have seen the movie.” “I know how this movie ends. Nothing finally stands in the way of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of the crucified and risen Jesus.

Nothing.