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December 8, 2019—Second Sunday of Advent

Series/Theme: Christmas Preparations—Repent!

Sermon Text: Daniel 4:19-37—A Lesson on Humble Repentance from a Proud King

The plane had been in the air for about a minute when disaster struck. Taking off from New York's La Guardia airport, the US Airways flight struck a flock of geese, losing power in both engines. The pilot, Captain Chesley Burnett Sullenberger III, knew they were going down. Calmly instructing his 150 passengers to brace for impact, he landed the plane in the frigid January waters of the Hudson River. As the passengers and flight crew evacuated through the emergency exits onto the wings of the slowly sinking plane, a fleet of civilian boats and rescue vessels arrived to save them. The calm, quick-thinking skill of the pilot from this "Miracle on the Hudson," made "Sully" a household name.

And for good reason! Sully's skillful flying saved a lot of lives! But imagine if, when all the rescue boats arrived, Captain Sully shooed them away, saying, "Did you just see me land this plane in the Hudson? If I could pull that off, I don't need your help!" If Sully's pride kept him from humbly acknowledging that he and his passengers still needed others to rescue them, the story would've ended much differently! A prideful lack of humility would have been deadly on the Hudson River that day.

But a prideful lack of humility can be spiritually deadly for us, as we prepare our hearts for Jesus' coming this Advent season. We're reminded of that today by an unexpected source—Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon.

We know a lot about Nebuchadnezzar from both the Bible and history books. Considered the most gifted and ambitious world leader of his day, the Babylonian kingdom reached its peak power during Nebuchadnezzar's 40-year reign. The borders of Babylon stretched from modern day Iran, to western Turkey, to Armenia in the north, and even down to Egypt! But Nebuchadnezzar is best known for being a talented builder, having revamped the capital city of Babylon into the largest, most magnificent city of the ancient world.

Biblically, Nebuchadnezzar was the king who captured and destroyed Jerusalem, and carried Daniel and his friends off into exile. The king who condemned Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to the fiery furnace for refusing to worship the giant statue he built. Like many kings, Nebuchadnezzar was kind of a power-tripper. Since he had such power and skill, he was prideful and self-reliant. But then, this prideful king ran into the King of kings!

God sent him a dream in which Nebuchadnezzar saw an enormously tall tree, large, strong, and fruitful. Then, a messenger from heaven commanded that the tree be cut down, leaving behind only a stump with roots in the ground. Finally, the messenger proclaimed, ***"Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals...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."***

This was the second time God sent Nebuchadnezzar a dream. The first time, God gave Daniel the power to interpret it, making him a highly trusted advisor to Nebuchadnezzar.

So when God gave Nebuchadnezzar this second dream, he went to Daniel. And by God's power, Daniel interpreted the dream's strange meaning. ***"You, O king, are that tree! You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven."***

Seven times will pass by you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes."

This prideful king wouldn't just temporarily lose his throne, he'd also lose his mind! Living outside day and night with wild animals, eating grass like a cow. The most powerful king of his day to a common animal. Talk about being humbled!

God warned Nebuchadnezzar, this will be your fate until you ***"acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men."*** Daniel advised the king ***"Renounce your sin by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed."*** God wanted to see some humble repentance from this prideful, self-reliant king.

It was the same message John the Baptist preached 600 years later in the Judean wilderness. ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*** To "repent" means to change your heart and mind about sin. Repentance means you stop loving sin and start loathing it. You stop seeing sin as desirable and start seeing it as destructive. You stop living in sin, and start running from it. John warned the people that to prepare their hearts for the Savior's arrival, they needed to turn from their sin and turn to God.

And 2,000 years later, that's the same message of humble repentance we still need to hear. It sounds simple enough, doesn't it? "OK, I'll just try to stop sinning." But it's not that simple! Because repentance requires...humility.

Every time that we sin, knowing what God says is right and wrong, we're acting pridefully. Me sinning says, "I know better than God." Or "I don't care what God says, only what I feel." Repentance requires us to humbly acknowledge that we're wrong, and to humbly depend on God for forgiveness. And we don't easily do that! The kind of mental gymnastics we do to convince ourselves that our sins aren't actually sinful could qualify us for the Olympics! When we fail to repent, in sinful pride, we refuse to acknowledge that we need help. We rely on ourselves.

That was the prideful attitude God was trying to lead Nebuchadnezzar to repent of. But although Daniel never led him astray before, Nebuchadnezzar ignored his encouragement to repent. Because sinful pride is the enemy of repentance.

God wanted Nebuchadnezzar to acknowledge that God is in complete control over every earthly kingdom, including his. But one year after his dream, Nebuchadnezzar, looking upon his magnificent city said, ***"Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"*** Not exactly humble, was he? Since Nebuchadnezzar wouldn't humble himself, God did it for him.

As soon as the proud words left the king's lips, a voice boomed from heaven, ***"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."***

Just as God had warned in the dream. The once proud king, literally brought low, eating grass on all fours like a cow, living outside like and with the animals. It sounds like a fairy tale, but Nebuchadnezzar's bizarre behavior is linked to an actual mental illness called lycanthropy, where a person believes and acts like they've changed into an animal. Nebuchadnezzar probably suffered from the subset of lycanthropy called boanthropy, where the person believes and acts like they're a cow.

Why would God do that, though? Is pride really that serious? Don't we encourage people to be proud of themselves and their accomplishments? I mean, Nebuchadnezzar was a pretty powerful, important guy. He had plenty of reason to be proud! Why would God humble him like that? Is God vain? On a power trip, trying to keep us down so he can feel in control?

Not at all. God humbled Nebuchadnezzar to save him from himself, from his prideful, self-reliant spirit. Because pride can be deadly! I'm not saying you can't be proud if your kid got straight A's." But self-righteous, self-reliant pride is spiritually deadly! The kind of pride that tells God, "I don't need you," and acts accordingly. Men are sometimes generalized as "too proud to ask for directions." That kind of pride means you might drive around lost for an extra half-hour. Spiritual pride means you're lost for eternity in hell, refusing to acknowledge that we need God to save us. Sometimes God lets us be humbled, because he loves us!

As far as I know, God hasn't used boanthropy to guide any of you to repentance. But maybe God has allowed you to face other struggles to lead you towards humility and repentance.

Maybe it was a health issue that shook your false sense of invincibility. Maybe you lost the job you thought was your security blanket. Maybe you got caught in the sin you were rationalizing, and suffered the consequences. Those things can humble you, knock you down on all fours like King Nebuchadnezzar.

God humbled Nebuchadnezzar so he would acknowledge that God rules over every earthly kingdom, including Babylon. In humble repentance, that's what Nebuchadnezzar did. As he explained, ***"At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored."*** We're unsure how long "seven times" was. But it was the precise amount of time God knew was needed for his purposes to be carried out. Nebuchadnezzar raised his eyes toward heaven.

"Raising his eyes" didn't mean that Nebuchadnezzar finally looked up from eating the lawn. It meant he finally looked to God in reliance. The proud king humbly repented of his sinful pride and acknowledged his need for help from the God of heaven!

By allowing us to suffer, God seeks to save us from our sinful pride and self-reliance. The health issue leads us to raise our eyes to the creator and sustainer of body and soul. Being unemployed forces you to raise your eyes to he who promises to provide for all our needs. Suffering the consequences of sin leads us to realize that sin is destructive, and needs to be repented of.

When our pride grows, our understanding of how much we need mercy diminishes. And when we don't see a need for mercy, we rely on ourselves; we keep living in sin; and when we cling to our sin rather than Jesus, we're doomed to destruction. Because just like Sully and that sinking plane, no matter how much we think of ourselves, we can only be saved if another rescues us.

That's why it's necessary for us to be reminded of our need for humble repentance. Because we have the perfectly humble Savior we need! The Son of God, willingly humbled to be born of a Virgin and take on human flesh. Willingly humbled to die on a cross. Willingly humbled, to forgive all the times our sinful pride swallows up our humble repentance.

During this Advent season, be like Nebuchadnezzar. Not eating grass and living outside, but humbly lifting your eyes to God, acknowledging your need for repentance and forgiveness. But as you raise your eyes to him, take heart! Because that forgiveness is yours through faith in the perfectly humble one who has come, and will come again!

Captain Sully accepted being saved by the rescue boats because he understood his need. Understanding his need, he humbly accepted it from those who could give it. In the same way, when we understand our need for God's mercy, we eagerly accept it with repentant and humble hearts, from the one who has given it, and will continue to. The one for whom we prepare our hearts with humble repentance, and joyful trust.