

The Forever King (Evening Service)

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Preacher: Tad Inboden

[0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. How's everyone doing? Good, good, good. I'm glad. So for those of you who don't know, my name is Tad in Bowden, and I, along with Nick Portingen over there and Lynn Unger, we oversee the Youth and Young Adults Ministry here at St. John's.

And I am so thankful for the privilege of getting to share what God has placed on my heart with regard to this passage. So, let's begin. I want to start off by asking you a series of questions, okay?

And so what I'm going to do is I'm going to ask these questions. You can close your eyes, you can write them down, you can try and answer them, but I want you to try to take them as seriously as you can. So let's just dive right in. Close your eyes, get a pen, get a bulletin if you have it. So here we go.

What are your dreams for your life? What are those visions, those pictures that you have of the good life?

For any area of your life that is captivating your heart right now and driving you to do what you do, what is it? Now, ask yourself this. What are you looking to? Are you looking to those things to bring you this kind of ultimate sense of significance and security, safety and fulfillment, stability and peace?

[1 : 29] Now, I want you to ask yourself this. What are you actually building your life on? What are you actually putting your hope in, your trust in?

Is there something or someone that if you lost it right now, career, family member, child, you would feel devastated, not just depressed, devastated, like your life would be hardly worth living?

What are you using? What are you looking to to build a sense of self and a sense of worth? Okay, you can open your eyes. I have just asked you a series of questions relating to the topic of identity.

And there's a reason for that. Because tonight we are going to focus on the topic of identity. How do you build a stable and solid identity?

You see, Daniel 2 compares and contrasts two different kinds of people. One person, King Nebuchadnezzar, has a breakable identity.

[2 : 44] While another kind of person, Daniel, he has an unbreakable identity. And what this passage shows us is that the difference between a breakable identity and an unbreakable one is its foundation.

Okay? So here's what we're going to do today. Something a little bit different, but here's what we're going to do. First, we're going to define identity, what it is. Then we're going to look at what gives shape to identity.

How is identity constructed? Because we are all in the process of constructing identity. And then we're going to look at what Daniel 2 has to teach us about identity.

Okay? Those three things. So first, let's define identity. Identity, what is it? It's a very complex thing. If you're taking notes, this is the time to do it. It's a very complex thing.

But for the sake of simplicity, you can boil identity down into two things. The first thing. Identity consists of a sense of self that is durable.

[3 : 49] Okay? A sense of self that is durable. Now, here's what I mean. We live in multiple spheres in life all at the same time. So, for example, you could be a parent, a husband, or a mom, a wife, a student, an employee, a boss.

And then you can be by yourself before God. And identity, this durable sense of self, is there needs to be some continuity and stability and ballast to who you are.

And if you're constantly changing and going back and forth, or you're one way out in public and another way in private, there's something wrong there. And so this aspect of identity, you figure it out by asking the question, in my public life and in my private life, is my sense of self, is my understanding of myself, is there continuity?

So, in addition to a sense of self, identity also consists of a sense of worth. Okay? Now, we all want to feel like we're worth something.

We all want to feel like we're significant, like our life matters, like we're making a difference. See, I can know who I am. Tadden Bowden is maybe the same here.

[5 : 12] He's the same at home. Maybe he's a little bit different. But all in all, I know who I am. But that doesn't mean that I like myself. Right? I mean, you really do. Some people just struggle so much with feeling worthless, with feeling like their life doesn't matter.

No one cares. So we figure out this sense of worth when you ask yourself, what in my life, honestly, what makes me feel like my life is worth living, like it's worthwhile, like it's good, like it's significant?

So these two things, a sense of self and a sense of worth, together they comprise your identity. So then, how do we shape or construct the sense of self and the sense of worth?

How does it happen? Tons of ways. Klein Snodgrass, in a book, it's a book on identity. It's who God says you are. I mean, he has multiple ways. I think it's like nine or something ways an identity is constructed.

But I'm just going to focus on one. And I think it's a big one. One of the major ways that identity is constructed is the fundamental narratives that we allow, worldview stories, that we allow to give shape to how we view our sense of self and how we estimate our worth.

[6 : 37] Is this making sense so far? So, what are some of the fundamental stories that give shape to how we view and construct our identity?

There's several that try and persuade you. So many in our culture. So many different religions. So many different worldviews. But I want to focus on two fundamental stories.

The first story I'm going to talk about is a story that's as old as Adam and Eve. It's run all throughout the Bible.

And it's particularly powerful and persuasive in our culture today. And here's the story. It's the story of the modern secular narrative of the sovereign self.

So what does this story say? The sovereign self. What does it say? The story says this. That we have the power to create by ourselves a sense of worth and a sense of value.

[7 : 38] We have that power. And it is up to us to look inside ourselves. To look inside. To discover my deepest dreams. My deepest desires.

All my passions. And then it is up to me to express them. No matter what it takes. No matter who says I'm crazy. And here's the thing.

We must do this ourselves. And we must not rely on anybody else on the outside to affirm us. Or give us a sense of significance. Or tell us who we are.

It's called the sovereign self. Because it holds its supreme values. Self-reliance. I only rely on myself. Self-discovery. I discover who I am. Self-assertion.

I'm going to do and pursue my dreams. No matter what anybody else tells me. And self-recognition. It is up to me to bestow on myself a sense of value.

[8 : 37] And so the essence. You're like, okay, well where is this? I don't see what you're talking about. Right? This has permeated literally everything. To music. To novels.

To movies. I mean it is so powerful and pervasive. Let me give you one example. The essence of this is found in the song Let It Go. In the Disney movie Frozen.

Okay? The song is sung by Elsa. Determined no longer to be the good girl. That her family and society has wanted her to be.

Instead she says, I'm going to let it go. Let it go. It's so funny watching kids sing that song. And then she goes on and express what she had been holding back all along on the inside.

Here it is. Look inside yourself. Pursue your dreams. And don't let anyone else tell you who you are. Those are the slogans that encapsulate this powerful cultural narrative.

[9 : 39] And it has seeped in to the way that we right now, as Christians, are constructing our own identity and sense of value. But there is another story, another fundamental worldview story at play here.

And it's a live option. And it's not just a story. It is a true story. And it's not the story of the sovereign self. It is the story of the sovereign God.

And here's what this story says. It says something very different. It says, you are not the creator of your life. Actually, God alone is the creator. Not just of the world, but of you.

And you only discover who you truly are and truly worth when you give up control of your life, when you turn to him in humility and allow him to show you your true identity.

Now, this is where Daniel 2 comes into the picture. In our passage for today, what we are told is that these two fundamental stories of constructing identity, they lead to two very different identities in us.

[10 : 53] One identity, the identity built on the sovereign self, will end up being fragile and unstable. And it will eventually lead to breakdown and disintegration.

While the other identity, the identity built on the sovereign God, that story, you will have a solid identity, a stable identity, and a secure identity.

And it will lead to this durable and unshakable sense of self and an unbreakable and indestructible sense of worth. So let me show you what I mean.

Okay. Are we ready? Are you with me? Okay. Okay. Here we go. Let me just get some water. This is good. H2O. Okay.

So Nebuchadnezzar in this story, Daniel 2 is a very long chapter and we got to focus in. So Nebuchadnezzar, he represents the person building their life on the sovereign self narrative.

[11 : 56] You see, Nebuchadnezzar was a man who had a dream for his life. His dream was to build the greatest kingdom that the world had ever seen.

And despite the opposition from the outside, despite what Syria did, what Egypt did, all the opposition with Judah, he worked hard, defeated his enemies, and eventually achieved his dream.

And then after building his kingdom, he looked out and he saw and he's laying back and he says this in chapter 4, verse 30. You can turn there if you want. He says this, Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence?

By my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty. And then, then to celebrate his great success and achievements, we learn in chapter 3 that he had plans to build a massive statue of himself.

A massive, dazzling, golden image of himself. To present to the world. And he said, this is how I want the world to see me.

[13 : 19] But now, in chapter 2, verses 31 to 35, and the whole chapter really, the whole chapter starts with it. God comes to Nebuchadnezzar.

This is amazing. And his love and grace for this greedy, prideful king. He comes to him, breaks in his life, knocks on his door, and he says this to him.

He says, Nebuchadnezzar, listen to me. I love you. I created you. I designed you. Listen to me. You have feet of clay.

Your foundation is crumbling. It is so weak that a little stone can knock the whole thing down. And Nebuchadnezzar, we read in verse 1 following, freaks out.

He freaks out. So the question we must ask ourselves is, what is this dream about? What is God trying to show Nebuchadnezzar in this dream? What is he trying to show him about?

[14 : 21] Building his identity on this sovereign self narrative. What's he trying to show him? What's he trying to show us? Now, before we dive in, a little caveat. There are two ways to interpret this dream, okay? One way is a cosmic interpretation.

So that interpretation says, I'm going to look to the future and to the end times when I interpret this dream. And so people say, you know, all these different materials, they represent the different kingdoms of the world.

And they say, you know, one is Babylon, the other is Persia, Greece, and Rome. Or if they don't think it's those, and they think it's some other ones, and they think about the end of the time. Here's the reality. That has textual basis, right?

The interpretation says that. But we don't know all the kingdom. We don't know all that stuff. But the reality is, is God's kingdom is going to come one day. The second coming, he's going to destroy all that's in opposition, all other rival kingdoms.

He's going to set up his kingdom in the whole world, okay? That's what Revelation says. This is a valid interpretation. It's a cosmic interpretation. However, I think there's a more basic meaning in the text. And other commentators think this too.

[15 : 26] And it can be interpreted personally, okay? Personally. And how this would then change the interpretation of the dream, it would say, it is God's warning to anybody, anybody, any human being, who attempts to build their own kingdom.

Anybody in history, anybody who tries to build their life on anything other than God and his kingdom. Okay then. So we're going to do the personal interpretation.

So what does it mean? What is God trying to show us about building our life on an identity other than God, on the sovereign self narrative? Here it is. First, God is saying that the sovereign self identity, if you're taking notes, here you go, is incoherent.

It is incoherent. Verses 32 and 33, they tell us that there's this incoherent and incompatible mixture that make up this statue.

He's basically like a Frankenstein statue, right? God's saying this is what you basically look like. And the sovereign self narrative tells us to look inside ourselves to discover a sense of self.

[16 : 36] But what this is showing us is that's an impossibility. We will never establish a durable sense of self by looking inside ourselves.

Why? Because our dreams and our desires are constantly changing. They're constantly in flux. They're oftentimes incompatible and contradictory. So one day, right, I want to be a lawyer and I want to fight injustice.

The next day, you know, I actually really want to, I used to struggle with this all the time when I was trying to figure out what I want to, you know, I want to be a pastor. Well, actually, I want to go into business. Well, I really want to go and watch Netflix, right?

Well, my dream for my life is this. And I remember some person came up to me and he said, man, you're always changing what you feel like you're supposed to do. And that's the reality when you look inside yourself to try and establish a sense of self.

It's incoherent. Second, this is the second thing that God shows Nebuchadnezzar and he's showing us about the sovereign self-identity. He's saying it's an illusion.

[17 : 40] It's actually an illusion. Our culture tells us that we must not rely on anyone else outside of us to give us affirmation and approval. That we bestow the verdict of significance on ourselves.

But this, in reality, it's impossible. You cannot get an identity through self-recognition. It is not possible. The fact that King Nebuchadnezzar just went and built the statue, right?

In chapter three, he does it, reveals in him the deep desire in all of us, in all of us for public recognition, external affirmation and approval.

Of lapping up the praise of other people. See, here's the thing with all of us. We need someone from the outside to say we are of great worth.

We really do. We need someone. Here's the thing. And the more powerful that person is, the more we respect that person, the more we think that person is, oh man, he's amazing.

[18 : 44] Or she's amazing. The greater power that they have to instill a sense of self-worth in us. Third thing God is saying to us about the sovereign self-identity.

Here's what he says. It is crushing. It is absolutely crushing. Do you notice that the statue is fragile and unstable? Verse 34 says that it came crumbling down with something as small as a stone.

This reveals why Nebuchadnezzar in his heart of hearts, he's haunted by anxiety and intense pressure that results in explosive anger because he can't control his life.

It's like verse one says. See, our culture tells us this. This is such a lethal narrative, but it's so powerful. It says you have the power to create yourselves.

It puts an emphasis then on independence and self-reliance. So here's what that means. Success or failure is completely up to me in life.

[19 : 50] It is completely up to me to achieve things, to accomplish things. It's not just that, but I have to decide what I'm going to wear, how I'm going to act, what I'm going to do, and I have to be successful in what I do.

I have to be the best, the brightest, the most beautiful. And here's the catch. Everyone has to think it. So if my identity was resting in my ability to be a communicator of God's word, if that's where I derived all of my significance and satisfaction and whatever, insecurity in life, I would be a slave to whatever it is that you think of me.

And I would be so inflated when you say, oh, that was such a good sermon, but also so deflated, so crushed, so devastated. If you bring any type of criticism to me.

That's what will happen. It's crushing. The identity is crushing. Fourth and lastly, it's disintegrating. Notice this about the materials.

I thought this was a very interesting point. There's a degenerative principle which is implied in the sequence from top to bottom, from gold to silver to bronze to iron and then the clay.

[21 : 07] It's splendor, you see, dissipates. But the hardness actually increases. You see, when it's up to us to bestow our sense of value and significance on ourselves, the reality is we stop caring about other people.

We care more about our own self-interest. And here's what we do. We either use people like Nebuchadnezzar, use the magicians and the sorcerers and the enchanters, or we use people like he used Daniel and his friends.

And if they don't happen to, you know, affirm us or tell us what we need, dude, we get rid of them, or if they threaten us, we destroy them. Here's what it's saying.

You gradually become, on this narrative, become less and less of a human being. And your humanity begins to break down.

You become more and more like an animal, like a beast. And do you know what? This is what's amazing. This is exactly what happens to Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4.

[22 : 13] God says this is the inevitable result of this kind of life, this kind of building your life on this identity. And he lets him turn, basically, to an animal.

Here's the point. Here's the point I want to make about this. We are all like Nebuchadnezzar. All of us. Every single one of us. We are all trying to create this dazzling image of ourselves, and we want the world to think we're special.

And we're trying so hard to win the applause and the approval and the admiration and the respect of people through our accomplishments and achievements. And here's the reality.

It's crushing us. And we're haunted as a society. We are haunted by anxiety. Haunted by it, just like Nebuchadnezzar.

And we're headed towards breakdown. You know, a few years ago, a few years ago, like two or some years ago, while I came to St. John's, it was my first year here, this is hard to talk about, but it's good to talk about.

[23 : 24] I had a breakdown. And this, I mean, this is very true. This passage has spoken to me very, very personally, and it's made me think a lot.

The reality is, is even though I was a Christian, God's approval and acceptance of me, it didn't hit my heart. And so, in reality, my sense of self, I didn't really have one.

I mean, I'd go around from place to place and begging people to say, you know, you're significant, you're worth it. And my sense of worth, oh, was so contingent upon what other people think or what my dad thought of me or what my family thought of me.

And it drove me to insanity. I went to Regent. I would spend sleepless nights trying to perfect stupid papers that no one cares about. And then eventually, like, I got into all these situations with church planning, all in the name of God.

But in reality, it was like, look, all I want is to shore up enough stuff on my performance record to point out to people and say, aren't I worth something?

[24 : 32] Please love me. Please approve of me. And it literally crushed me, and I broke down. There were a whole bunch of other reasons for the breakdown, but that was a big one. This is real stuff, even for Christians.

Friends, God gives us warning sign after warning sign that we are headed towards breakdown. Maybe he's speaking to you in your life, and here's what you need to ask yourself.

What are my nightmares? What are those things in my head that I worry about? Maybe it's my job, finances, kids, my marriage, whatever it is. What are my greatest fears?

What are my uncontrollable emotions? What do I get angry about or scared about or whatever? Maybe God is trying to speak to you, man, that you're headed in a direction, a trajectory towards breakdown.

So here's, in concluding, how do we avoid this unstable and insecure identity? What is the alternative to building our identities on this sovereign self-narrative?

[25 : 35] It's the sovereign God narrative, obviously. And Daniel represents the person who builds his identity on this. Daniel has a remarkable life. Look at his identity in this chapter.

He literally was threatened with death and destruction, but yet made calm and collected. He knew who he was. He possessed a stable sense of self. Verses 12 through 24, read through it.

It says, it shows us that he was the same guy before the king, before his court, before his friends, and before God. And more than that, he had an unbreakable sense of worth.

He didn't look to his own wisdom or achievements to gain a sense of confidence or boldness. Verse 30. He didn't look to the king to give him acceptance or approval. But what did he do?

He sought out the mercy of God. Verse 18. Nor did he use his career to get a sense of self and achieve a sense of worth. He used it to serve the common good of the city.

[26 : 34] Verses 27 through 30. How did he get this unbreakable identity? Here's the thing. Here's the key. Daniel acknowledged that everything in his life was a gift from God.

Verse 23 says, I thank and praise you, God, my ancestors, because you have given me my wisdom and my power.

You made known to me, and we ask of you. See, acknowledging that all of life is the gift is the difference between Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar.

He tries to get him to do this in verse 37. Here's the thing. Here's the key point of this sermon. The main difference between a breakable identity and an unbreakable one is that a breakable identity is an achieved identity rooted in our own imperfect performance, while an unbreakable identity is a received identity rooted in Christ's perfect performance.

You see, Jesus Christ in this story, Jesus Christ is the unbreakable and indestructible rock. You know that? And he described himself, Jesus described himself in Luke 20, 17.

[28 : 00] Do you know what he said? He said, On that stone, and the builders rejected me, and I have become a cornerstone. Do you know what this means for Christian identity?

It means that Jesus, the forever king, became breakable for us. He was literally crushed under the weight of God's eternal judgment so that we could have an everlasting name in God's family and an unbreakable identity that lasts forever.

Here's the thing. On the cross, we are treated. Jesus was treated as we were deserved, as we deserved, so that when we believe in him, we are treated as he deserves.

And now, in Jesus, it is literally true that the person that we adore the most in the whole universe also adores us. In the eyes of God, in the opinion of the only judge that matters, we are valuable, more valuable than all the gold in the world combined.

And now, God is not just our judge, but a perfect heavenly father who will never condemn us, leave us, or forsake us when we fall into sin, when we fail, when we mess up, is what Hebrews 13, 5, and Romans 8 says.

[29 : 23] This is the very opposite of a fragile, thin, and insecure identity based on our own performance. But here's the great paradox, guys. The great paradox is this, that we only find this sense of worth and the sense of self, this unconquerable and unbreakable identity, only through humbling ourselves, acknowledging that God is sovereign over my life, and I am not.

We get it when we stop the right, stop wanting the right of self-determination, and then put our life in Jesus Christ's hands. And then when that happens, when we lose our life, Jesus says, we will find it.

This was the path of the forever king, and this is the path we're called to. Amen.