

## **“THE GOLDEN IMAGE.”**

**Rev. Robert T. Woodyard**

**First Christian Reformed Church**

**June 26, 2016, 6:00PM**

**Scripture Texts: Daniel 3.1-7**

### **Introduction.**

Is this just an ancient story of a megalomaniac king?

In the late 1930's at the height of Joseph Stalin's reign in the Soviet Union during a standing ovation no one dared to be the first to sit down. Finally an old man, no longer able to stand, sat down. The next day he was arrested. His crime, not worshiping the idol long enough.

On April 20, 1938, the 49<sup>th</sup> birthday of Hitler, the prisoners of Buchenwald concentration camp were ordered to pay tribute and take off their hats. Rev. Paul Schneider refused and was beaten. He also refused to raise his hand and say, “Heil, Hitler” and refused to salute the swastika flag. Three months later he became the first protestant pastor to be martyred by the Nazis.

And this is not just a thing of the past.

Today in North Korea everyone is required to reverence and applaud Kim Jong-un. Everyone. No one dares show any lack of reverence or adoration. North Korean's must show totally loyalty and absolute obedience. To refuse is to be sent to hard labor camps or killed.

An American visitor to North Korea in 2009 writes:

“The first stop on our itinerary was the obligatory visit to the Mansudae Grand Monument, a 65 foot bronze statue of the “Great Leader” Kim Il-Sung. This is one of the holiest sites in Pyongyang, with thousands of North Koreans paying their respects to the Great Leader each day.

“Every tour group is expected to purchase bouquets of flowers, lay them at the feet of Kim Il-Sung, and then bow in accordance with local customs.

“Obviously, bowing to a statue of a ruthless dictator is not something you want to do, but if you are set on visiting North Korea, this bizarre gesture is a requirement that many simply accept as the price of admission”(blog).

Millions today are bowing to gold Buddha's. Nearly two million a year make pilgrimage to Mecca. Every Muslim is expected once in their lifetime to walk seven times around the Grand Kaaba, bowing and kissing and praying. This year it is set for September 12.

**Nebuchadnezzar's image of gold, vs. 1.**

Our text begins abruptly, “King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold.” Perhaps with images of his dream still in his head, Nebuchadnezzar decided to build a huge golden statue, 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. He meant for this statue to be the focus of everyone’s attention.

If it was solid gold, then it represented fabulous wealth, but even if gold coated it would have been very impressive and seen from a great distance.

Even as great as Daniel’s God proved to be, Nebuchadnezzar was not a changed man, his heart was the same. The old man, the flesh was still very much in control. Was he even more hardened? Sometimes when we get a glimpse of truth and light, we fall back even farther into our old ways. Early religious experiences are often fruitless later in life if not acted on and maintained by spiritual discipline.

What was the image? Was it a deified image of Nebuchadnezzar? Was he exalting himself? Ancient kings and leaders like the pharaohs and the Caesars often thought of themselves in deified terms, like gods, or like the son of a god.

One wonders if this image was a statue of what he saw in his dream. If this image was from the dream, the head would be gold, a testimony to the greatness of Babylon. Maybe the gold head got to his head, “You are the head of gold” ( Daniel 2:38).

Was it a statue dedicated to Bel, the main god of the Chaldeans, or Nebo or Marduk? Was it a newly invented god, a special one for the occasion?

Daniel’s three friends seem to refer to it as a god in vs. 18.

**Daniel 3:18** ... we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

It’s possible to say all of the above. On the surface Nebuchadnezzar might be quick to say it’s an image of some god and deflect attention that direction. But below the surface he was certainly promoting his own fame and glory. While pretending to promote worship of a god, he makes himself superior to god. He has the power and authority to make a god worthy to be worshiped. This is the work of a proud heart who wishes to be long remembered.

It represented Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian gods. It was a symbolic representation of Babylon and all Babylon stands for and of the power of the king and his authority, it is a monument to the state and to the states religion, to which one must be loyal.

**Nebuchadnezzar’s command to bow down, vss. 2-7.**

Did you notice the repetition as I read the text? King Nebuchadnezzar or Nebuchadnezzar is named *seven times* in these seven verses. There is a strong emphasis here on his royal authority and power. He can make demands and command things of everyone and expect absolute loyalty.

No less than *six times* it says he set up this massive image of gold. There is no doubt in anyone's mind about who was behind this and what authority he had.

This is a man with a powerfully inflated ego, full of self-importance who spends his wealth on his own glory. He feeds his pride rather than his people.

***There is pressure to conform to the royal decree, to government.***

He didn't just build a monument, there is much more going on here.

It's set up on the *plain of Dura*. This is considered the location where the Tower of Babel has built. Remember that deviant attempt to build a lasting legacy to their own glory and to show their unity.

Nebuchadnezzar had the same two goals, to build a lasting legacy or monument to himself and to unify all the people in the common worship of it, a forced religious unity.

With many foreigners in his empire, having conquered all the nations around him, he faced a problem of divided loyalties and worse yet, his own people being seduced to worship foreign gods. So a new statue was raised to which all his subjects must bow.

Was he trying to build unity and cohesion in his kingdom to stand against the disintegration predicted in the dream? Was the answer a common civil religion, a central point of worship?

***This is how all totalitarian states function.*** There are visual symbols of unity around a strong leader or dictator or tyrant, symbols to which homage must be paid. Those who hold supreme power most often then dictate who or what is to be worshiped.

You see this in most communist countries. Huge statues of the dictators in the public square.

Mao Zedong's statues and huge images were all over China. Only this year a giant 120 foot golden statue was being built for him when controversy ended the project.

Lenin's image was everywhere in Soviet Russia.

The ruthless dictator of Albania, Enver Hoxja, had a huge statue that dominated Skanderbeg Square in the middle of Tirana, the capital of Albania. Saddam Hussein had huge statue in Baghdad.

When Japan invaded Korea and Manchuria they forced emperor worship on all those conquered, Christians, Confucians and Buddhists alike. China today only allows state sponsored churches and the state controls what is said and done.

Every totalitarian regime demands allegiance which is both political and religious. Allegiance to the state, the nation, the government must be supreme. These regimes can't tolerate a separate and free religion, a separate free religion is always *subversive*.

Either Caesar is lord or Christ is Lord, but both can't be at the same time.

We face the same pressures. Our culture is slowly moving in that direction, a common state religion, an intolerance of the intolerance of all the other religions. What is the law of the land, separation of church and state, right?

The church is to be subjugated to the state. The church and religion are to stay out of the public square and public debate. You can believe what you want as long as you keep it private, but we are not to influence political ideology, we are not supposed to be partisan in our pulpits.

The government has removed God from the classrooms, from the text books, from the universities, from science. We are even being told we can no longer hold our Christian conscience if it seems discriminatory or intolerant.

The government is encroaching more and more and demands more and more allegiance and loyalty. We have become so dependent we can't say no anymore. The pressure is increasing to conform, to show unity by abandoning truth.

This is why Christian worship always has an element of subversion to it, it is subversive to the state, it resists the authority of the state when the state resists the authority of God's Word.

The church in the United States is a subversive presence to a government that promotes abortion, same-sex unions, euthanasia pills, lotteries, sexual immorality and more and more.

***Then there is pressure from peers***, and conforming to what they do. Crowds and mobs can powerfully influence our behavior.

Notice the lengthy list of titles is given twice. They aren't just political figures, these are representatives of all "the peoples, nations, and languages." No one was exempt. Everyone bowed and bowing indicated this was definitely religious as well as political.

If you are in a very great multitude and everyone is told to do something and you look around and everyone is doing it, who is there who would dare to refuse?

We feel the pressure to conform all around us, in matters of fashion, in matters of politics, in matters of social issues, in matters of allegiance or submission to the state. And if we don't conform, there can be great cost.

All the officials and leaders and people were required to bow down. For most of them this was no big deal. They could do this without offending their favorite deities or other gods, one more god was not a problem.

***Then there is the pressure of emotions and feelings***, always good to have lots of music to stir that up. Make it a festival, music, food, drinking, lots of people, a great time could be had by all.

Thing of a huge sporting event and the festive atmosphere, the music, the food and drink, the tailgate parties. This is the inauguration of a new cult with music, pilgrims, celebration.

None stop to consider the folly of worshiping first this god and then that god and tomorrow yet another or the folly of something just made yesterday at the hands of men. There is no stability or comfort in this, only insecurity and anxiety.

How long will one waver between opinions? How long will one be moved by nothing more than the winds of time and culture or emotions?

*Finally, there is the pressure from the threat of death*, a burning fiery furnace. We all have a very strong survival instinct.

One wonders if the king expected some resistance to state so specifically what the punishment would be and to name not just a normal means of death, but a truly horrible one.

In other words, to refuse to bow would be considered treason, subversive activity.

All these pressures are unrelenting, they come again and again. Satan never rests, never ceases his attacks. He tries to wear us down with his dogged persistence, he tries to make us grow weary in our resistance to sin and evil and darkness or weary in well doing.

### **A word or two about idols.**

Some might say that the king only commanded an outward gesture, to bow down. He didn't command a verbal expression of commitment. What harm is there in going along, as long as in your heart it means nothing to you, you don't believe in it?

Scripture everywhere teaches what worship is both inward and outward, there is an inward profession that finds an outward expression. We are to bend and bow to God both mentally and bodily, in heart and with mouth. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

**I Corinthians 7:34** ... be holy in body and spirit.

Satan is absolutely opposed to our worship of God so he does everything he can to distract us and side track us and get us to water down or dilute our worship with idols.

Idols are not just something pagans worship, people in faraway poor, backward counties.

Idols are not objects made of wood or stone or precious metals.

Idols reside in the well feed, well educated, middle class American's Christian hearts.

When any good thing, any created thing is made ultimate, or is made most important. Idols can be any created thing, and often are especially things that are gifts of God.

Work, a good gift from God and commanded by God, can be an idol is put in place of God and other God-given priorities.

Family, another good gift created and given by God, can be an idol if we are preoccupied with it and it is put above everything else.

Being well-liked, not necessarily always a bad thing, can be an idol if it restricts us from acting or taking risks, if it puts us in bondage to what others say or think.

Our appearance, our clothes, our homes, our yards, our gardens, a clean house or garage, our cars and trucks, our toys, our vacations, our bank accounts, our health, our children or grandchildren can all easily be idols.

Our earthly security is a huge idol. To say it another way, our insecurities about ourselves and our lives make us create idols that we cling to.

Idols involve self-centeredness, putting ourselves first in some way, when we or our concerns or our priorities or pleasures are put at the center of our attention.

Until we believe in our own heart's capacity to make and worship idols, we will offer no resistance to the temptation to idolatry.

John was warning every Christian and every one of us when he wrote, "Keep yourself from idols" ( I John 5:21).

There can only be one God. There is no god but God.  
To rely on any god but God is heresy and treason against the one holy God.

### **Implications and application.**

What is the most important thing about our worship? The pastor and the preaching, the music and the instruments used? The building?

No, the only important part of our worship is the object of our worship, the one true living God. What we like in worship is unimportant, what matters is what God wants in worship. Our surrendered hearts.

He wants us wholly submitted to Him, to His will, to His Holy Word. And in this to stand, even if threatened with a hundred deaths.

The answer to idols is watching, praying, perseverance. The answer is the armor of God. We must seek and strive and ask for divine assistance to please God and not man. The answer will be seen next week in the response of three young men.

**Prayer:** Lord God Almighty, Holy Father, we are prone to wander and leave the God we love, we are susceptible to lies, deceptions, superstitions, temptations and profane things, grant us wisdom and obedience from the Holy Spirit to walk only in your ways according to your will. Take away any fear of man and may we never bend to the threats of the godless, but remain faithful to you alone. Keep our feet on the paths of righteousness for your names sake and your glory until we reach heavens shore through Jesus Christ, Amen.