

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Thriving in Babylon

(Studies in the life and times of the prophet Daniel)

Dreams...Desperation...Deliverance

(Daniel 2)

Study #3

Introduction: Learning from Daniel...

Two weeks ago, we began exploring the life and times of Daniel, an older teenager who was taken away from his home in Jerusalem when the city was destroyed by the Babylonian army.

Daniel didn't go to Babylon alone. We don't ever read about what happened to Daniel's family. They may have died in Israel. Daniel's fellow exiles included three friends - Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah - and all three of these young men lived for their God in a land and among a people that didn't share their faith.

We're spending time in Daniel's book over a few weeks because Daniel and his three friends show us how to navigate our way through a complex world with God's *wisdom*, to remain *faithful* despite any suffering, and to learn *dependence* on God alone - no props needed.

All of this is required equipment when you find yourself, as they did and as we do, in Babylon.

Last Sunday wisdom, faithfulness and dependence on God were all on display as they faced a fight over food. They refused to eat non-kosher food and negotiated a work-around to God's glory.

Today, we see more of the same in a very different scenario.

As the story begins, Daniel tells us that King Nebuchadnezzar was upset and the he gives us the reason for his troubled mind.

Setting the Stage: Nebuchadnezzar the King has a dream (v. 1)

[1] Now in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar,¹ Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; and his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him.

In Babylon, the king's dream was news. The Babylonians believed that the gods communicated to the king through dreams, so when Nebuchadnezzar reported a dream, everybody sat up and took notice. This particular dream, though, was a troubling dream.

The king of the Babylonian Empire was not a scaredy-cat. He was a supremely confident king. But, having had this dream, he was so shook-up that in the days that followed he couldn't even get to sleep.²

But Nebuchadnezzar was not one to be troubled for long without doing something about it. He was a man of action and he took perfectly reasonable action. He called in his advisors.

The King's Dream Turns into His Advisors Nightmare (vv. 2-13)

The King's Unreasonable Demand (vv. 2-3)

[2] Then the king gave orders to call in the magicians, the conjurers, the sorcerers and the Chaldeans, to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king. [3] The king said to them, "I had a dream, and my spirit is anxious to understand the dream."

¹ Because of the way in which regal years were counted by the Babylonians, this would be, to our way of thinking, the king's third year, but only the second full year. The incident of this chapter, then, likely occurred immediately after the beginning of Daniel's service in the king's court.

² Note the similarities between the effects of Nebuchadnezzar's dream on him and Pharaoh's dream on him (Genesis 41:8).

The classes of the King's advisors

The four classes of men listed represent the classes of the royal advisors.³ The sorcerers and magicians and conjurers were part occult fortune-tellers and enchanters and part “*Yes men*” for the King.

The Chaldeans, a separate group who become the spokesmen for the advisors in this scene, were the official Babylonian priests.

The king called ALL of them into his courtroom. These were his “go to” guys when he needed counsel or, as here, dream interpretation.

When they arrived in the king’s court they received the shock of their lives.

The assignment for the advisors

The normal pattern was for the king to tell his counselors his dream and THEN they would tell him what his dream meant. King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to play this one a little bit differently.

Sure, he wanted an interpretation of his dream. But he didn’t plan on telling them what he had dreamed. Understandably, the advisors panicked.

The Magician’s Reasonable Reply (v. 4)

[4] Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic⁴: “O king, live forever! Tell the dream to your servants, and we will declare the interpretation.”

³ As Daniel was not invited, evidently only representatives of the advisors were called in.

⁴ A fascinating aspect of Daniel’s prophecy is that beginning here and continuing through 7:28, the language changes from Biblical Hebrew to Aramaic, a switch that is attributable (I believe) to the fact that chapters 2-7 deal with essentially Aramaic/Gentile history. Aramaic was the language of a Semitic people concentrated in those days chiefly in Upper Mesopotamia and Syria. They are the Syrians of the OT.

The Chaldeans liked the way they had always played the game and they wanted to keep the old rules intact.

Without meaning to disparage weathermen, the Chaldeans were like ancient meteorologists. Being accurate wasn’t the point so much as telling a good story.

But Nebuchadnezzar had long suspected that the Chaldeans were gaming him, that they were just making stuff up, so he changed the rules. And he was firm on these rule changes.

Stalling... (vv. 5-11)

Nebuchadnezzar lays it on the line (vv. 5-6)

[5] The king replied to the Chaldeans, “The command from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you will be torn limb from limb, and your houses will be made a rubbish heap. [6] “But if you declare the dream and its interpretation, you will receive from me gifts and a reward and great honor; therefore declare to me the dream and its interpretation.”

Up to this point Nebuchadnezzar had simply been trusting the Chaldeans to tell the unknowable future *after* he told them his dreams. This time they have to tell him what his unknowable dream was - or he’ll put them to death in an especially gruesome, Babylonian sort of way.⁵ Their panic grew.

[7] They answered a second time and said, “Let the king tell the dream to his servants, and we will declare the interpretation.”

The king was adamant. They had to tell him his dream, first.

⁵ The severity of this edict accords with the character of Nebuchadnezzar, especially as is seen in his dealings with the Jews (see 2 Kings 25:7, 18ff; Jer. 39:6ff; 52:1ff; vv. 24-27)

The King intensifies his accusations against them (vv. 8-9)

[8] The king replied, "I know for certain that you are bargaining for time, inasmuch as you have seen that the command from me is firm, [9a] that if you do not make the dream known to me, there is only one decree for you..."

The king is spot on with his accusation that his counselors are "***bargaining for time.***" They are stalling. They are gambling that over time, he will eventually tell them the content of his dream, just like always. And they tell him how unfair he's being.

The advisors repeat their request (vv. 10-11)

[10] The Chaldeans answered the king and said, "There is not a man on earth who could declare the matter for the king, inasmuch as no great king or ruler has ever asked anything like this of any magician, conjurer or Chaldean. [11] Moreover, the thing which the king demands is difficult, and there is no one else who could declare it to the king except gods, whose dwelling place is not with mortal flesh."

I hear what they're saying and I sorta feel sorry for them. Except that the king was really only requiring them to do what they claimed to be able to do - reveal mysteries. And the king has finally had enough of their stalling.

The King's Decree: DEATH! (vv. 12-13)

[12] Because of this the king became indignant and very furious, and gave orders to destroy all the wise men of Babylon. [13] So the decree went forth that the wise men should be slain; and they looked for Daniel and his friends to kill them.

So the decree has been issued. Death to all the advisors. Our four Jewish young men weren't there during this whole scene. But, since they are serving in the king's court, they are on his hit list. They are condemned to death.

Now watch what Daniel does. And as you watch think wisdom, faithfulness, and dependence on God.

By this time (he has been in Babylon around three years) Daniel has been in Babylon long enough to know how things worked.

So, when he caught wind of the death sentence he headed straight for the man who was responsible for carrying out the king's commands, Arioch, the king's bodyguard.

A Desperate Daniel Meets a Willing and Able God (vv. 14-23)

Daniel - AND FRIENDS (vv. 14-18)

[14] Then Daniel replied with discretion and discernment to Arioch, the captain of the king's bodyguard, who had gone forth to slay the wise men of Babylon; [15] he said to Arioch, the king's commander, "For what reason is the decree from the king so urgent?" Then Arioch informed Daniel about the matter. [16] So Daniel went in and requested of the king that he would give him time, in order that he might declare the interpretation to the king.

Off to see Arioch to negotiate time (vv. 14-16)

Daniel's bold action here is remarkable.

He kept his wits about him. He took bold initiative. He approached the right person in the right spirit and suggested in just the right way that just maybe the king's challenge could be answered. Maybe the dream puzzle could be solved.

Well, Arioch was sufficiently impressed that he led Daniel straight to the palace for a personal audience with King Nebuchadnezzar.

Standing before the king, Daniel asked for and received the one thing he needed: TIME.⁶

Last Sunday we saw Daniel and his friends courageously refuse to eat the king's defiling, non-kosher food. Here, again, we see Daniel's courage - and something else. This something else is critical for anyone who wakes up in Babylon.

With life on the line Daniel turned to his friends who together turned to the Lord.

Off to see his friends to fervently pray to God (vv. 17-18)

[17] Then Daniel went to his house and informed his friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, about the matter, [18] so that they might request compassion from the God of heaven⁷ concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his friends would not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.

A retreat to the believing community of like-minded brothers was the need of the hour, and that was where Daniel went.

From the solid foundation of their shared faith they could stand together and wage the real battle in prayer to God.

These men understood that the challenge was not to try really hard to figure out what the king's dream was.

No, they needed revelation from God. Daniel knew that unless God revealed the king's dream to him, they were all sunk. He also knew that these kinds of battles are best fought shoulder-to-shoulder, on bent knees, with faith-filled friends.

⁶ Whereas the advisors' requests were evasive and manipulative, rightly interpreted by the King as "stalling" techniques, Daniel's request was above-board and purposeful.

⁷ "God of Heaven" was the common designation for God by the Jews in the time of the exile.

I've just finished re-reading a couple of books by Tom Doyle, books that describe the lives of believers in Jesus today in the Middle East. The books are [Dreams and Visions](#) and [Killing Christians](#). I recommend these books.

We know that outspoken Christians in predominantly Muslim countries (like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria) often face grave danger. Many of our Christian family members heroically stand for Jesus in these places.

But there is a thread that weaves its way through the stories I have noticed in these books. These Christians stand together. They pray together. They make it because they stay in close contact with each other.

Now you and I are not facing death threats like Daniel was. We don't need to be on the run like Christians in some places today.

We are, though, living in Babylon. Our beliefs and practices are considered extreme by many people. Our faith labels us irrelevant by others.

This is the time to live boldly, to speak up, to love well, to serve in Jesus' Name. And we can't do this alone. We are not wired to do this alone.

So...We need our own Hannaiah/Mishael/Azariah friends. In Babylon, we need friends with God in the middle. Who are yours? Where are your God-in-the-middle friends?

There is urgency here. You want to be "on mission" for Jesus and His Great Commission in your Babylon. Starting this afternoon, would you prayerfully take steps to seek out a like-minded believing friend or two or three with whom you can walk and seek the Lord?

These are the friends with whom you will pray for wisdom and faithfulness and dependence on God. In his crisis, Daniel's first move was to turn to friends who would then, together, turn to the Lord. Let's follow Daniel's lead.

As I've considered Daniel's life, I would say that no trait of Daniel stands out more clearly than his prayerfulness.⁸ I suspect that no lifestyle choice he made drove him to prayer more than his **[Proverbs 27:17] iron on iron** relationships with his God-fearing friends.

In answer to their specific prayers, God did reveal both the king's dream and its interpretation to Daniel. When he received the answer to his prayers, Daniel let loose with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

God Does What Only He Can Do (vv. 19-23)

[19] Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven;

[20] Daniel said,

**"Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever,
For wisdom and power belong to Him.**

**[21] "It is He who changes the times and the epochs;
He removes kings and establishes kings;**

**He gives wisdom to wise men,
And knowledge to men of understanding.**

**[22] "It is He who reveals the profound and hidden things;
He knows what is in the darkness,**

And the light dwells with Him.

**[23] "To You, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise,
For You have given me wisdom and power;
Even now You have made known to me what we requested of You,
For You have made known to us the king's matter."**

He had been facing certain death at the hands of the most powerful king alive. Then, he and his three friends had given themselves to pray. What they were praying about, they knew God could do. They were begging compassion from Him. They were asking that "can" would become "will."

We don't know how much time King Nebuchadnezzar gave them to pray - and it probably wasn't all that long. But their prayers were VERY fervent that God would do for them what only He could do.

Their prayers were desperate, and desperation is the best soil around for growing a dependent heart.

Desperation says, *"I can't, but You can."* Desperation says, *"I have the least control over the things that I care about most. So, would You, God, do what only You can do - for my neighbor? For my son? For my daughter? For my wife, my husband? Would you save, heal, protect?"*

No, desperate prayers don't guarantee a "Yes" from God. We don't twist God's arm by our desperation. More to the point, our desperate prayers align us with His will. Desperate prayers put us in our proper place as subjects to our King.

And to this desperate prayer, God answered, "Yes!" With the answer given, Daniel ran to Arioch with an urgent message for the king.

Present and Final Deliverance (vv. 24-45)

Daniel Honors the KING in Front of the "king" (vv. 24-30)

Daniel requests an audience with the king (v. 24)

[24]... "Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon! Take me into the king's presence, and I will declare the interpretation to the king."

Arioch, understanding the need for haste, took him straight to the palace and announced him to the king.

The executioner announces the deliverer (v. 25)

[25] ... "I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can make the interpretation known to the king!"

The king questioned Daniel.

⁸ See also 9:3-19; 6:9-11; 10:2-12 for other prayers or examples of praying.

The king wonders... (v. 26)

[26]...“Are you able to make known to me the dream which I have seen and its interpretation?”

What a question! This is the Philippian jailor asking, “*What must I do to be saved?*” or the Ethiopian eunuch asking, “*Could you please explain Isaiah 53 to me?*”

Well, King Nebuchadnezzar just opened the door wide for Daniel to give glory to God. And Daniel walked right through those doors.

Daniel gives all the credit to God (vv. 27-30)

Daniel directed the king’s attention away from himself to the God who was responsible for the revelation and the interpretation.

He reminded the king that none of his trusted counselors were able to reveal the dream (v. 29) and then this: **[28] “However, there is a God in Heaven...”** - and it was this God who revealed what the dream was and what the dream meant.

Nebuchadnezzar’s dream concerned the future. (v. 29) He had probably been thinking about his own future, late at night - and who doesn’t get that?

That could be any of us. We’re thinking about the impact we’re making, the legacy we’re going to leave behind. Whatever your life is wrapped up in is your “kingdom.” Will it flourish? Will it expand? Will it last?

If you’ve ever gotten lost in a daydream, thinking, planning, wondering - even praying - about the things that mean the most to you - you can understand what Nebuchadnezzar was doing that night.

In the middle of this exercise in mental kingdom-building, God showed up and gave Nebuchadnezzar a dream to remember. This is the dream.

Daniel Reveals the King’s Dream (vv. 31-35)

[31] “You, O king, were looking and behold, there was a single great statue; that statue, which was large and of extraordinary splendor, was standing in front of you, and its appearance was awesome. [32] “The head of that statue was made of fine gold, its breast and its arms of silver, its belly and its thighs of bronze, [33] “its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. [34] “You continued looking until a stone was cut out without hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay, and crushed them. [35] “Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were crushed all at the same time, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away so that not a trace of them was found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.”

No wonder Nebuchadnezzar was confused. It’s a pretty weird dream.

The statue he sees divides into four parts: head, the chest and arms, the torso and thighs, and the legs and feet. Moving from top to bottom, the materials of the statue are of decreasing value, but increasing hardness. The lowest part - the feet and toes - are worthless and brittle.

The dream ends as a stone comes out of nowhere, rolls like a bowling ball into the statue, destroys the statue, while the stone itself expands to fill the whole earth.

Thankfully, Daniel followed up the telling of the dream with an immediate interpretation.

Daniel Gives the Interpretation to the Dream (vv. 36-45)

The golden glory of Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom (vv. 36-38)

[36] “This was the dream; now we will tell its interpretation before the king.

[37] “You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength, and the glory; [38] “and wherever the sons of men dwell, or the beasts of the field, or the birds of the sky, He has given them into your hand and has caused you to rule over them all. You are the head of gold.”

Daniel describes Nebuchadnezzar as **“the king of kings.”** We Christians feel funny about that, because that is a title we reserve for Jesus. But, Daniel’s use of the term fits Nebuchadnezzar was the pre-eminent king of his era.⁹ His kingdom was the prototype of all world-powers to come.

(It is worth noting, of course, that literally, Nebuchadnezzar was not a universal ruler. His Kingdom didn’t reach to the Americas or Australia or to the Far East and it didn’t extend very far into Europe or Africa. It did, however, extend over the whole civilized world of Asia.)

So, the golden head refers to the Babylonian Empire, as ruled by Nebuchadnezzar. The rest of the dream views successive kingdoms which will arise after Babylon, and the universally fading glory of them all.

And, we can actually identify these kingdoms without resorting to sleight of hand and without special help from God. That’s because identifying most of these kingdoms doesn’t involve knowing the future. It was future to Daniel, but it’s past to us. And it is much easier to foretell the past than the future.

I happen to have been blessed with the gift of foretelling the past.

⁹ “King of kings” - a title customarily applied to Medo-Persian and Babylonian emperors, found not only in the Greek classics but in the records of the countries involved and in Scripture (Ezekiel 26:7 and Ezra 7:12).

The fading glory of all human kingdoms (vv. 39-43)¹⁰

The kingdom of silver - the Medo-Persian Empire (v. 39a)

[39a] “After you there will arise another kingdom inferior to you...”

The kingdom of silver (v. 32) represents the kingdom of the Medes and the Persians. It replaced Babylon in 539 B.C. (about a half a century after Daniel 2), and we read about it in Daniel, chapter 5.

This kingdom’s supremacy began with the reign of King Cyrus and was never a truly unified Empire, as both the Medes and Persians contended with each other for supremacy for the two centuries of its existence.

Geographically, the Medo-Persian empire was greater than Babylon as it stretched far to the west into Asia Minor and Europe. But, as the dream pictures, it was grossly inferior to Babylon both culturally and politically.

The kingdom of brass - Greece (v. 39b)

[39b]...“then another third kingdom of bronze, which will rule over all the earth.”

The third kingdom, that of bronze, represents the world power that arose after the Medes and the Persians passed off the scene. This would be the powerful but short-lived Empire of Macedon/Greece, ushered in by Alexander the Great around 334 B.C.

Daniel says that, like Babylon, this kingdom would rule over the whole earth. But then, it too, would be replaced by a fourth kingdom - a kingdom of iron.

¹⁰ Little is said of these kingdoms here, but they are more fully described in chapters 7, 8 and 10.

The kingdom of iron - Rome (vv. 40-43)

[40] “Then there will be a fourth kingdom as strong as iron; inasmuch as iron crushes and shatters all things, so, like iron that breaks in pieces, it will crush and break all these in pieces. [41] “In that you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it will be a divided kingdom; but it will have in it the toughness of iron, inasmuch as you saw the iron mixed with common clay. [42] “As the toes of the feet were partly of iron and partly of pottery, so some of the kingdom will be strong and part of it will be brittle. [43] “And in that you saw the iron mixed with common clay, they will combine with one another in the seed of men; but they will not adhere to one another, even as iron does not combine with pottery.”

Iron was the strongest metal around in Daniel’s day. And just as iron broke all things in pieces, so this kingdom will break in pieces and destroy all the kingdoms that had preceded it. The statue’s iron legs speak of the military might of Rome.

(There is less certainty about the feet of iron mixed with clay, but it at least refers to the weakening and division of Rome as time passed.)¹¹

That fourth Kingdom will not be the final kingdom. The king’s dream concluded with a picture of another kingdom that will put an end to all other kingdoms.

¹¹ Some believe that it refers to the nations that were formed out of the Roman Empire, which would include much of Europe, Asia, and northern Africa, through to our own time. Others believe that Daniel’s vision only went as far as the time of the Roman Empire (perhaps through the time of Christ) and that it ignores the centuries since, jumping to the time of Jesus’ reign on earth with the image of the stone that shatters the statue. I am drawn to this last view.

The enduring glory of the final KINGDOM (vv. 44-45)

[44] “In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people;¹² it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever.”¹³

The destruction of the giant statue will be sudden and complete. And the stone that rolls over all the other kingdoms is the kingdom of God.

It took guts for Daniel to interpret the dream to King Nebuchadnezzar.

On the one hand, the dream was complimentary. Babylon was the golden kingdom. On the other hand, it will be defeated by another kingdom that will be defeated by another which will be defeated by another.

As for the legacy that the king had been dreaming about, the lasting legacy will not be his. It will be the kingdom that God will set up which will **[44] endure forever.**

The end of the story shows King Nebuchadnezzar responding in a way we might not have expected. He honors Daniel and his friends, giving them high offices in his government. And he also praised Daniel’s God.

¹² This prophecy throughout has referenced political kingdoms. This last one is surely of the same character, and not a “spiritual” one. The political ruler of the final kingdom is King Jesus.

¹³ Some see these verses as fulfilled in Christ’s first advent (post-millenarians), while others look for a future fulfillment (a- and pre-millenarians) at the return of Christ and the setting up of an eternal (a-) or millennial (pre-) kingdom. I believe that when Christ comes again He will establish a literal one-thousand-year reign on earth (see Revelation 20), and that this is what the king saw in his dream.

[47] The king answered Daniel and said, “Surely your God is a God of gods and a Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, since you have been able to reveal this mystery.”¹⁴

So, praise God and what a wonderful conclusion. A pagan king gives glory to the one, true God as God’s faithful servants rise to prominence.¹⁵

Both of these are valid and important take-aways from this, one of the most famous of the Daniel stories. But I don’t want to end here.

I want to re-emphasize what we’ve already seen and then highlight one final element from this final scene. It may be one that you need to hear today.

Conclusion:

First, remember how important it is to have friends with God in the middle when you are in Babylon. You need prayer partners and teammates and people to spur you on in your faith. Please take action to begin to nurture this kind of friendship with a few. Start today.

Second, remember that God values it when we come to Him in a spirit of desperation, asking Him to do what only He can do. Embrace the truth that you control the least what you care about the most - and take your deepest longings to God in prayer. Babylon is a great place to nurture the grace of desperation for God to show His awesome power.

The last thing I want to highlight has to do with kingdoms and power. You might even say that it concerns politics, since that is what kingdoms and kings and power is all about.

¹⁴ Judging from events that follow immediately after this (vv. 46ff), we can imagine that Nebuchadnezzar is on his way to faith. He’s not there yet, though, as the events of chapter three will show. Being impressed with a miracle does not bring eternal life. I do believe, however, that the king’s conversion is recorded in Daniel 4.

¹⁵ The king’s response (bowing) before Daniel is remarkable. He saw Daniel as a man in whom the gods manifested themselves. So, to a certain degree, the king did honor Daniel’s God. But, Nebuchadnezzar has not abandoned his heathen ways.

The final kingdom is God’s. All others will fall. His alone will stand.

When we find ourselves in Babylon, it is possible that we might become sad. In our current Babylon, the foundations from a general biblical orientation to life have shifted. In some ways, there has been an earthquake that has done away with those foundations.

The temptation is to go a step beyond sadness to despair. To panic. To outrage. To fear. To loss of perspective. To loss of hope. To cynicism.

We need to stop it. Now.¹⁶ We are Christians and we serve the risen Lord Jesus. We are, first and foremost, citizens of His kingdom.

And Jesus’ church will flourish in Babylon

It flourished in wicked ancient Rome. More recently, Jesus’ church exploded AFTER the communist takeover of China. His church grew healthy, underground, in the Soviet Union. Jesus’ church is thriving in some parts of the persecuted world today.

God is not restricted to only work in places where there is great freedom for the Gospel. And if our land is darker than it once was, the light we shine now will shine brighter. If we face opposition, the love we show to enemies will be more powerful.

Regardless of who or what party occupies the halls of power, Jesus’ church will prevail. Despite whatever new and even dangerous winds may blow in our Babylon, God’s work will go forward.

Jesus is the king. He is reigning now and His kingdom reign will one fill the whole earth.

Let’s show our Babylon *faith*, not fear and *dependence on God* when all the props are knocked out from under us and *wisdom* to honor God as we navigate life in our Babylon.

¹⁶ As Andy Stanley said in a message recently, “*You need to stop it. You’re scaring the children.*” ☺