

Faith Mennonite Church
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Stories of God's People
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A Story of Resistance

Daniel 1

How does a person or community survive with integrity as a minority in a hostile, majority culture? That hostility may take the form of oppression, or it may take the form of seduction. Both of these characteristics are present in the story of Daniel. On the one hand we have a story of exile—oppression. On the other, we have a story of seduction.

In this first chapter of Daniel, the Babylonian captors choose a few elite exiles, the cream of the crop, and entice them with the finest of royal food and wine so that they will become willing servants, perhaps to the detriment of their own community. The chosen four—Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—survive with integrity because they resist. Their resistance is not violent, but based in the grounding of the wisdom and creativity of their tradition. This wisdom and creativity is found in the very fabric of this story. For the book of Daniel is a story within a story. And to fully appreciate what is going on in the story we read this morning, we must step back and see the larger story of the book of Daniel.

At first reading, the book of Daniel would appear to be a history that is set during the period of the Babylonian exile in around 600 BC. And indeed, that is where the stories of Daniel originated. But in the collected book of Daniel, these stories are retold to give courage some 400 years later, during the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes, between 167-164 BC. Antiochus was a cruel ruler, who desecrated the temple in Jerusalem, and brought unbearable suffering to the Jewish community in Palestine. That community was not free to speak out against Antiochus, so they spoke in code: they told a story from the past about another crazed leader, Nebuchadnezzar. They told stories of resistance. And those stories are so rich, we're going to take three Sundays to retell and unpack them!

Today's story is a beginning – the resistance is low key: we won't eat your food. Next Sunday things will get a bit hotter, when three of these men end up in a fiery furnace because their resistance moves from food to allegiance. And the following Sunday, things reach a roaring climax as Daniel spends a night in the lion's den because he will not cease praying to One God alone.

In order to understand the forms of resistance, we must first understand the tools employed by a dominant culture to subdue a minority. In the first chapter of Daniel we find three examples. First is through outright control: taking a people by force, occupying their country, and forcing them into subjection or exile. As descendants of 16th Century Anabaptist Christians, we have inherited stories from the minority, of martyrdom and exile. Within those stories we too have

miraculous stories of resistance. But the miracle in the martyr stories is not in some sensational deliverance from persecution, but rather in the bold determination to face brutal death, even by mothers who left their babes behind, because they were so sure of the presence of God and God's salvation. As citizens in the United States, we have inherited another set of stories, far less noble. Stories of aboriginal people forced from their land and stripped of their language and cultural ways. Stories of African slaves, ripped from their homeland, sold and worked as animals in the new world. We thus have a double inheritance when it comes to the violence of subjection.

A second way that dominant culture seeks to subdue is through cooptation. King Nebuchadnezzar looked for the brightest and best of the Jewish boys. Get them young and malleable, teach them our ways. Put them in positions of power so that their community will have the appearance—if not the reality—of participation and inclusion. Last week I met a linguist who was reviewing a book taking a critical look at how English language programs around the world, many of them associated with Christian mission, often serve to undercut democratization and justice in countries with entrenched poverty. It is often primarily the elites who have the resources to study English, and this only reinforces their power and control of resources.

A third way a dominant culture seeks to subdue the minority is a variant of cooptation: the imposition of the dominant language, culture, and religion on everyone. The Babylonians not only taught the Jewish boys to speak Chaldean, they also imposed new names. The Jewish names, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, were perhaps hard to pronounce, but their captors may have known that each of those names carried a reference to their God: El, Yahweh. Thus we are led to speculate that their new names, Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, referred to Babylonian deities. Calling these men by their Hebrew names would have acknowledged and legitimized their language. Changing their names was an attempt to sever the connection to their families & community. This, of course, is also the sad history of the children of the Lakota, the Anishanabe, and other native communities who were forced into American boarding schools and punished for speaking their original languages. And, sadly, we witness this same instinct in the current outcry in our country for “English only,” and the hostility many communities exhibit toward immigrants who speak another language and follow another faith tradition.

Similarly the Jewish community had well-defined dietary practices that were integral to the practice of their faith and to their identity. They avoided foods such as pork, and they adhered to strict rules of slaughter and food preparation. We do not know what the “royal rations” consisted of, but these four men could not eat in good conscience. Perhaps they were not simply concerned about keeping kosher. They may have abstained from abundant, rich food knowing that their exiled families did not have enough to eat.

Every couple years there is a regional gathering of Mennonites in Central America. Several years ago when the gathering took place in Guatemala, we heard that the Nicaraguan delegation, most of whom were rural pastors, fasted during the noon meal, which was the main meal of the day. Economic conditions in rural Nicaragua were dire and these faithful pastors

refused to eat, knowing that their families and church communities were only eating one or at most two meals a day.

Taking the story of the four men in exile to heart is not easy. Living in the United States is rather like living in Babylon. We are daily enticed to eat the royal rations, drink the wine, speak the language, and do the business of the dominant culture. Yet, as Anabaptist Christians, committed to walking the way of Jesus and the path of peace, we live in exile. We are not comfortable when we hear stories of the mistreatment of immigrants and disrespect for their languages, cultures, and religions. We grieve for the ongoing disparities that exist due to race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. We agonize that such a large portion of the taxes we pay is used for war and destruction. And we know that no matter how simply we live in our society we will always be rich by global standards.

So we, too, are called to be a people of creative, non-violent resistance. We resist by telling and re-telling the *stories* of Daniel, of Jesus, of the Anabaptist martyrs, of the leaders of the abolitionist and Civil Rights movements in this country, and of the faithful around the world. We resist through creative *actions* as individuals, households, and with larger movements. We have so many wonderful examples right here in our midst of those who resist: through bicycling, through growing food and supporting local farmers, through withholding a symbolic portion of our income taxes, through offering hospitality in our homes, through raising children without television, through exercising and eating in ways to remain healthy, through developing creative actions such as Pink Menno, through volunteering in literacy programs and support for the homeless. The list goes on and on.

Resistance, like lifting weights, makes us stronger. The Hebrew men who ate only vegetables and drank only water, didn't just stay true to who they were, they stood out as the most robust and healthy. And their example brought health and hope to their community. Let us continue to do the same. Resistance is *not* futile!