

Conformed Resistance

Daniel 1

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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¹In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ²The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power, as well as some of the vessels of the house of God. These he brought to the land of Shinar, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his gods. ³Then the king commanded his palace master Ashpenaz to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, ⁴young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. ⁵The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine. They were to be educated for three years, so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court. ⁶Among them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the tribe of Judah. ⁷The palace master gave them other names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

⁸But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself. ⁹Now God allowed Daniel to receive favor and compassion from the palace master. ¹⁰The palace master said to Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king; he has appointed your food and your drink. If he should see you in poorer condition than the other young men of your own age, you would endanger my head with the king." ¹¹Then Daniel asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: ¹²"Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe." ¹⁴So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵At the end of ten days it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations. ¹⁶So the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

¹⁷To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams. ¹⁸At the end of the time that the king had set for them to be brought in, the palace master brought them into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar, ¹⁹and the king spoke with them. And among them all, no one was found to compare with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they were stationed in the king's court. ²⁰In every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. ²¹And Daniel continued there until the first year of King Cyrus. (NRSV)

I

Many Christians would like to think that these United States of America are a Christian nation. If we vote Christians into the various offices of our local and state governments, if we choose Christians to sit in Congress, if we elect a Christian president, and if that president nominates Christian judges and justices to the federal courts, then we will have a Christian nation. By putting the right people into office, passing the right laws, and procuring political power, our nation will then be Christian, and we will be safe.

We Mennonites, however, have long been suspicious about this project. After nearly 500 years, we've learned that governments rarely operate the way God wants them to. They fight wars and kill people. They waste money on weapons of war. They institute systemically unfair taxes that proportionally favor the wealthy. They burden the weak and privilege the powerful. From our own history as a people, we Anabaptist-Mennonites know that countries can persecute us, drive us away, and even kill us. We know that even so-called Christian countries can do this. We have learned over time that our true home lies in God, rather than in any nation.

Jews have known this too. For most of their history as a people, they have not had a Jewish nation. Only twice have Jews been able to live in a Jewish nation: once from about 1000 to 586 BCE, and once again since 1948. That's only about 484 years in over 3,000 years of history. Often Jews have had to live in nations that harassed them, took advantage of them, forced them to live in ghettos, or even tried to exterminate them. Think Haman in the book of Esther; think Isabella and Ferdinand in 15th century Spain; think Adolf Hitler 80 years ago.

Therefore a big, looming question for Jews has often been this: how are we going to survive? While living in countries that do not value our way of life, that do not accept our ethics, and that may not even acknowledge the God we worship, how are we going to survive as a people? What kind of communities do we need to form? How do we need to act, to speak, to dress, to eat? When and where do we need to say no, we're not going to believe what you want us to think, and no, we're not going to participate in what you want us to do. No, no, and no.

II

The book of Daniel was crafted specifically to address this question. How can we, the people of God, survive in a national context that in significant and persistent ways ignores, contradicts, or sneers at God?

Daniel 1 begins with a blunt statement about reality: Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, invaded Judah, captured Jerusalem, and hauled off both property

and people. The holy vessels that once rested in the Jerusalem temple, and that aided the Jewish people in their worship, were now locked away in the treasury of the Babylonian gods. And the finest young men of Judah, all members of the royal family, were now trapped in Babylon.

The context of this story is crucial. The Neo-Babylonians have conquered and the Jews have been defeated. These fine Jewish lads—Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—must not only contend with living in this alien empire, they must also contend with living in the capital city of that empire. If that were not difficult enough, they must also contend with living in the palace, under the watchful eyes of the king and his administrative staff. These four Jewish lads could not be in a more hostile, seductive, and dangerous context than this. What will happen to them? How will they maintain their distinctive Jewishness? Where will they accommodate and where will they resist?

In this first chapter, Daniel and his friends choose food as the place to resist the Neo-Babylonian nation-state. In later chapters, they will choose still more places to resist Neo-Babylonian culture. But their first point of resistance is food. The king and his staff want them to eat the same royal food and wine that the king eats. However, Daniel and company want to eat vegetables.

It might be possible to interpret this story as an argument for a vegetarian diet. Yet more is going on here than a simple defense of vegetables, which your parents and your doctor ask you to eat anyway. Remember that there were no Jewish laws that prohibited eating all meats—eating lamb and goat and beef was just fine. So in the narrow sense of the term, the motivation wasn't about dietary purity.

Here's where a little socio-economic analysis helps. Royal meats and wine were food of the wealthy, eaten by the top 1% or so of the Neo-Babylonian population. Big, powerful nations typically grab resources from far-flung places and then concentrate those resources in centralized locations like capital cities. Such nations might acquire cinnamon from one location, gold from another, exotic woods from still another place, and so on. Hundreds of products came from hundreds of places, all to feed the pampered lifestyle of the powerful. Babylon did this in the ancient world; Rome did it in the first

century; London did it in the 19th century; and New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles do it in the 21st century. Certain parts of the Bible, such as Revelation 18, sharply criticize this concentration of wealth that benefits the powerful and impoverishes the weak.

This concentration of wealth is what Daniel and his friends are quietly protesting. Who eats royal meat and wine? People in the palace, of course. Who eats vegetables? Poor people, because that's all they can afford. So by eating vegetables, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah resist royal wealth and royal power, choosing instead to identify with ordinary poor people.

III

The book of Daniel shows us that Judeo-Christian faith calls us into active nonconformity to the world. Nonconformity is an old word in our Mennonite lexicon, often favored by earlier generations. It means that we choose to try and conform ourselves to Christ, rather than to the culture we inhabit. We don't say no just to be cranky. We don't resist just to be difficult. Instead we say no in order to say yes to God more fully, more passionately. Our no enables our yes. Our nonconformity to the nation-state enables our conformity to Christ.

The first chapter of Daniel beckons us to ask questions about our own context, our own time.

- What food does this culture want us to eat?
- What wine does this nation want us to drink?
- What one or two places of resistance will help us maintain our integrity as the people of God? What resistance will help us conform to the image and likeness of Christ?

Our survival may depend on it.