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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Daniel 1

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Summer of Stories: Daniel and Friends

*Opening Greeting and prayer*

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. Good morning also to all of you who join us online. Welcome to any guests with us this morning. May your heart be encouraged and inspired as you join us in worship.

Please join me in prayer: Sovereign and faithful God, you have been present in the midst of great tragedy and great joy throughout the history of your created universe. Open our eyes and ears this morning as we come again to your scriptures, longing for your will and way to be revealed in our midst through the fresh wind or breath of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name. Amen.

*Message:*

Summer of Stories 2022. Our final story about children as central characters in the Bible. Twelve weeks of reflecting on how children's experiences in the biblical narrative challenge us, encourage us, frustrate us, move us, surprise us, and even exhaust us. We have explored stories from all over the scriptures, from the earliest families to the earliest churches in the Roman Empire. We marveled at God's mercy as Cain leaves the family farm in the wake of murdering his brother, and Abel's short life calls for justice and meaning to be made from such cruelty. With Ishmael, we wondered if there is hope for those who can be easily discarded in our world.

With Isaac's experience, we were reminded of how those closest to us can hurt us severely, sometimes even in God's name. Like infant Moses in Egypt, we might be helpless to make a difference in what seems a horrible situation that threatens our lives, while with Miriam, we might vigilantly follow and observe unfolding experiences in the lives of those we love, while still wondering if God will intervene. With Samuel, we explored the experience of hearing God's call and message and how the message may not be what our teachers or mentors want to hear.

Among those children without names in the scriptures, we listened as an obedient son's words drew his mother back from the greed that was threatening her own family's life, while a young Hebrew servant-girl, kidnapped from her family in the northern kingdom, offers the commander of the Aramean army, her new master, a few words that could change his whole world if he could only find the humility and strength to listen. We wandered with Jesus through Jerusalem and the temple area as he allowed his family and neighbors to leave him behind. We wondered about how the longest serving royalty, King Manasseh of Judah, could have such a horrible reputation and still be redeemed in exile. A couple of weeks ago, we explored the experience of a young boy in the crowd following Jesus and marveled at his generosity. Finally, last week, we explored how the apostle Paul saw the future, the hope, the promise of God's Kingdom continuing in his successor Timothy, a young pastor in the church in Ephesus.

This morning on Peace Sunday, we end our series with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, young boys who grow up in Babylon, the place of exile for the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Mennonite World Conference's theme for Peace Sunday, "Being a New Creation in the Midst of External Turmoil," is one of the main themes of this story from Daniel 1, but I'll let you keep that in mind as we walk alongside these 4 young captives from Jerusalem.

Daniel, Mishael, Hananiah, and Azariah had grown close on the journey from Jerusalem to Babylon. The first several days of walking had been almost completely silent, except for the shouts and instructions from the Babylonian soldiers. By now, all four boys were finally able to sleep when the large group stopped each night. Those first nights, their sleep was disrupted by wild animals and the screams and shouts of that evening's entertainment for the soldiers. Dawn would always come with more walking. Daniel, a year or two older than the other three, had found them one evening playing a familiar game from before the siege. They had lost their parents too when the soldiers finally broke through the wall. Daniel had hoped that his neighbors would be able to hold off the attacks a little longer. He was not far off in age and stature to join the defense, and the king had spoken so valiantly of those who had held the wall. But it had all been lost. Daniel had brief, fleeting memories from before the siege, but he was struggling now to bring those moments back to mind, especially when he needed them most to fall asleep.

When they arrived in Babylon, the city seemed surreal in comparison to their homes back in Jerusalem. The four of them were placed in a group with other Babylonian children in a house near the palace. They had heard horrific stories of King Nebuchadnezzar and the siege, especially his cruelty when he would catch any groups that were trying to escape the city. Daniel's family spoke Hebrew at home, but he had picked up quickly on Aramaic, the language that the other children all spoke. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah knew more Aramaic than he did, so they were able to help him in the meantime.

One of the first strange things that happened when they arrived was their new names. Daniel had always known that his name meant "God has judged," but he didn't realize how true it would become until he was walking out of Jerusalem. His parents had always supported the King, Jehoiakim, in his strategic attempts to manage diplomatic relations with both Egypt and

Babylonia. When Daniel had asked them about the prophets that had started shouting in the streets about the coming doom of the city, his parents brushed off the words, reminding Daniel that their God was here in the city, in his temple. God was not going to let another people or that people's god take over or destroy all that had been built since Solomon. But Daniel couldn't shake that feeling, even now when he remembered the prophets' words, and he wondered where God could be. Daniel's new name, "Belteshazzar," had an interesting ring to it. It meant "Bel guards his life," a reference, according to some of the other kids, to one of the great gods of the city who had given the king victory and protected the people even amidst the changing times of conflict with Assyria and Egypt. Daniel wasn't sure whose life Bel was guarding, but it certainly hadn't been any of the people he had known.

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah seemed much more hesitant to take on their new names, always calling each other when Ashpenaz was not around by their Hebrew names. Hananiah, which means "YHWH has been gracious," had always irritated Daniel because of his positive attitude and uncanny ability to find the best in any situation. Daniel hadn't heard him complain since he had met him. Hananiah's name became Shadrach, "I am fearful of god," something he and the other two had wasted little time in finding ways to mock. Daniel had noticed though that Mishael, which has a more confusing meaning of "who is what God is," had been the most devastated by his new name. His name became Meshach, which means "I am of little account," a name that the other children often reminded him of. Mishael was already small, a head smaller than Daniel and the most easily ridiculed. He reminded everyone of what his real name was and often, except when Ashpenaz came around. Azariah had spoken very little since they had arrived in Babylon. His name means "YHWH has helped," which had been meaningful when he had found this new group of friends on the journey, but all that had happened before was beginning

to settle in for him. His new name, Abednego, meant “servant of the shining one,” a play on the Babylonian god Nebo.

The days and weeks went by and each of them grew more comfortable in their new home. One day, Ashpenaz came by and led the whole group to the palace. He explained that he had brought them there because they were next to be considered for the King’s court. Training would begin that very day with the king’s magicians, wisdom-keepers, and advisors so that at the end of three years, they would be ready to stand before the king and answer his questions. Daniel shuddered at the thought of standing before the king, but he listened closely as Ashpenaz continued to explain. They would eat the food and drink that the king provided and listen closely to their teachers, for it would mean their futures in the empire.

But Daniel had been most bothered by the king’s requirement of food and drink. Everything was used in worship of Babylon’s gods, and he could not get the words of the prophets back in Jerusalem out of his head. They had said that judgment was coming because the king and priests had allowed for worship of images of Baal and Asherah poles even in the temple. Daniel was very aware of what that judgment looked like, so after they had been shown their sleeping quarters in the palace, he went to speak with the guard that oversaw their daily activities. The first few meals, Daniel had made up excuses for why he could not eat, but that would only last so long. When he found the guard, he asked him about the king’s food, wondering if he could have something different, maybe vegetables and water, but the guard brushed him off saying that he would eat what was given to him. Ashpenaz had said something similar when Daniel had asked him. After another day, Daniel went back to the guard with an idea. Let him and his friends eat vegetables and water for the next ten days and see if the guard or Ashpenaz notices a difference. The guard seemed to oblige, so Daniel told the other three.

This was only the first of several tests that would prove Daniel and his friends in the right. By the time that they appeared before the king at the end of the three years of training, they had filled out, grown taller, and looked healthier than all of the rest. The king praised their knowledge and wisdom in the ways of his kingdom, and each of them was given a place in the king's court. After his first days and weeks on the court, Daniel could not shake his memories of prophets and judgment in Jerusalem. God had judged, but what did it all mean now?

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah continue to discern as they grow older what being a new creation or a member of God's covenant community means in the midst of external turmoil. By the end of our chapter, though, they are proven in the right. The ways of empire that have been used against them cannot hold out against their fierce commitments to God, nor can God be limited by where God's people find themselves. Note that God intervenes three different times in our story, allowing for Jerusalem to be overtaken, granting Daniel favor with those who oversee his new journey in Babylon, and blessing these four Hebrew youth with what they need. God sustains them, holds them, fortifies them in the midst of their new learning. The king has his way, the ways of power, dominance, control, humiliation, and destruction, but those ways do not prove true in the end. Notice who outlasts whom in the story. Daniel continues in the king's court even into the reign of Cyrus, who is not a Babylonian king, but the first king of the Medo-Persian empire that defeats the Babylonians. The empires continue to rage against one another, leaving death and hopelessness in their wake, but Daniel finds new life, new creation in the midst of this turmoil as he continues in the way of the faithful one who continues with him even in the capital of the enemy's empire. May we find that same hope and fierce commitment that Daniel does when God seems to have lost to evil or God seems to have abandoned or deserted us.

*Closing prayer:*

Let us pray: God of hope beyond death, inspire our hearts, minds, and bodies with a fresh breath of your Holy Spirit as we seek to live in the way of Jesus. Help us to see, as Daniel did, your kingdom coming through us, in us, and around us even when it seems that we have lost our way or lost you in the midst of external turmoil or difficulty. In Jesus' name. Amen.