

September 30 – Pentecost +19

Esther 4:1-17; 7:1-10; 9:20-22

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Esther+7%3A1-6%2C+9-10%2C+9%3A20-22&version=NRSV>

Mark 9:38-50

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+9:38-50>

One of the things we talked about last week was uncertainty and asking questions. When we read about Jesus telling His disciples once again that He was going to die, the passage says, “but they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” For whatever reason the disciples didn’t ask because they were afraid, whether because they might look foolish, or unintelligent, who knows, but as we pay attention to where God is, and what God is doing, questions do arise; doubt and confusion are parts of faith, and we have to come to terms with asking and even embracing questions – even if they don’t lead to clear answers. Asking such questions can actually free us to live out and explore deep concepts that God wants us to, like welcoming the unwelcome, or marginalized.

Well today I have some more questions from exploring our texts, but let’s start with a general overview of Esther. It’s quite interesting that the original book, in Hebrew text, never mentions God. Furthermore it doesn’t mention prayer or worship either.¹ These ten chapters that make up the book also stand out because they focus on a strong female as the main character in contrast to so many other books in the Old Testament. With all of these anomalies it definitely deserves our attention, especially since this is the only week in the three-year cycle of lectionary readings that any passage from Esther appears. There are many peculiarities.

Our reading today describes the pinnacle, the climax of the book, and it’s a shame we weren’t able to lead up to it, but to provide some context, this book is situated in the Persian Empire. The powerful King Artaxerxes, who also goes by Ahasuerus, rules over a kingdom that extends as far to the east as India, and to west as Ethiopia, covering 127 provinces. The Jews have been exiled following the Babylonians, so many of them are scattered across the lands, including Susa, the capital of city of the Persian Empire.

I’ll try not to go into too much detail but the stories are really worth extra time and attention. Esther is an orphan, but is cared for by Mordecai, her cousin – both of whom are Jewish. One day the King send for his wife, Queen Vashti, but she refuses to come. This doesn’t go over well for the king and his wise men, so he is advised to look for a new queen. So many young, beautiful ladies are rounded up, including Esther, and the king, over a period of time, let’s just say gets familiar with them in order to decide who he wants for his queen. Esther finds favour in the eyes of all who saw her, including the King, and he loves her more than all the others, and makes her queen instead of Vashti. Now Mordecai, before all of this transpired, told Esther to keep her Jewish identity secret...this comes into play in today’s reading.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2631 Kathryn M. Schifferdecker

One day Mordecai overhears an assassination plot by two of the king's officials, and he lets Esther know so that she can tell the king. The two conspirators are killed and the story goes on. And of course we need a villain to make things better...his name is Haman. Haman is looking for power and has just received a promotion from the king – he's advanced over all the princes, and as a result men bow down and pay homage to him...but not Mordecai. And this just fills Haman with rage. So much so that he looks for a way to kill him. Haman tells the king let there be a decree to kill the Jews and I'll pay then thousand talents of silver into your treasury. He frames in such a way that portrays the Jewish people as scattered and dispersed, their laws are different, they don't follow the king's rules, and it wouldn't be in the king's interest to keep these people around. This seems to make sense to the king who basically says to Haman, go ahead with your plans.

When Mordecai catches wind of this he tears his clothes, and cries out loudly. In 127 provinces a decree is made and the Jews mourn, they fast, they weep, searching for hope. Mordecai sends word to Esther, looking for any way to change the situation, and he says, "who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" Who knows if there's a reason why you've been made queen instead of all the other woman.

We're still building up to today's reading, but you can sense the plot thickening. Now one night the king can't sleep, so he asks for the records, the chronicles, kind of like Minutes over the past few weeks; and he reads that Mordecai had foiled the assassination plot on his life. This is the first he's heard of it! So he asks, what honour or dignity has been shown to Mordecai for this? And the servants say, nothing has been done for him. So the king asks for someone in the court, and Haman has just arrived, still fuming about Mordecai and, after consulting with his peers, has moved forward with building massive gallows to hang him on. Haman has come seeking the king's permission to hang the very man that the king wants to honour – this is starting to sound more like Shakespeare than scripture. The king sends for Haman and asks, "what is to be done for the man whom the king desires to honour?" Haman thinks the king is talking about him! So he says bring a royal robe, a horse that the king has ridden, a crown, and put them all on the man in public so that everyone can see how the king has honoured this man. And the king days take the robes, the horse, and give it to Mordecai the Jew, and don't leave out anything that you said. The blood rushes from Haman's face...his jaw drops...his heart beats faster...he can't believe his ears. What is he going to do now? He carries out the honour afforded to Mordecai, and hurries home, when Queen Esther invites him to a banquet.

And now we get to today's reading. The queen asks the king for a favour. She reveals that she is Jewish, and that someone plotted to kill her people. The king asks who would dare do such a thing, and Esther reveals it was Haman. And the very gallows that he had prepared to humiliate Mordecai ends up being the instrument of Haman's own demise. In the words of Shakespeare's title, 'all's well that ends well.' The Jewish people are saved, the villain Haman dies, and what seemed like a hopeless situation has become a holiday, a time of celebration.

God is never mentioned in the book of Esther. God does not speak or act in the story. There are no burning bushes here; no miracle by the sea. And yet, by the end of the book, God's people are saved and their enemies are defeated.² One of the ancient promises and covenants God makes is that God will be faithful to Israel, if they are faithful to God. Perhaps the way in which God is faithful is not through obvious means, but through an invisible hand guiding events and people along the way. God saves God's people not through direct intervention, but through the wisdom and courage of Esther and Mordecai. "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royalty for just such a time as this," Mordecai says to Esther.³ It makes one wonder, doesn't it, how God works through the lives of people.

If we shift our focus from Esther to the gospel, we see this theme played out. Someone casting out demons in Jesus' name, who doesn't follow the rest of the disciples. They try to stop him, but Jesus says not to. Whoever is not against us is for us. Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

Is God able to work through people we don't expect? People not like us. Whoever does something as simple as giving a cup of water, showing care and compassion, should not be rebuked. Last week the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest, now it seems they're fighting about who's included or excluded from the Jesus movement. Don't we still hear some of that today? Maybe not as much as used to but you probably know what I'm talking about. Who are the real Christians? There was once a time when Protestants couldn't marry Roman Catholics, do you remember that? Do you see where the Orange Hall is located in relation to the Anglican Church? Do you know where the Roman Catholic church is? Way down yonder on the 102, not here in the Village core. Sometimes we create denominational fences or barriers, as if we were in control of God, as if we could contain the Holy Spirit.

Whoever is not against us is for us. At a time when many of us are preoccupied with churches getting smaller or closing, about where the young people are, we need to be reminded that this isn't what we're called to focus on. We're called to follow Christ, and use our gifts in God's service. We use our spiritual gifts, patterning our lives with Jesus' life, to serve God. In Esther we don't read God's name once. We live in a society now where we're more likely to hear God's name used as a curse word than anything else. The temptation is for us to think that we who attend worship services are the only true followers of Christ, but God is at work in so many other places too, in the lives of so many other people.

This isn't a critique of the church, of our church, but an invitation or a reminder that we are invited to partner with God in doing the ministry of God's Kingdom, to feed people, to help those in need, to clothe people, to visit people, to love creation and take care of it. It can sound overwhelming, I know it does to me. There are times in my ministry, especially as my time draws nearer to an end, when I wonder if I'm doing this stuff. Have I helped the poor, or anyone who is marginalized and isn't here today. It can seem daunting, it can seem costly both in terms of time and money, but opportunities do present themselves.

² Schifferdecker

³ Schifferdecker

You might know three things about me. I'm not a morning person, I take Mondays off, and I love NFL. There's kind of a trifecta since Sunday is football all day, even a late night primetime game. Sometimes they don't finish until after midnight which is fine since I have Monday off and can sleep in without feeling guilty about it. But a few weeks ago I was asked if I wanted to help with the breakfast program at the Gagetown School. I had filled in for someone before, and didn't mind doing it once or twice every few months, but to commit to every week seemed like an invasion on my time and sleep. But I thought about a sermon from a few weeks back, about Jesus and the disciples returning from the journey, looking for some quiet time, when the crowds find them. They get into a boat and try to escape but the people reach the destination on foot first. And Jesus has compassion for them.

This is just a long way of saying, I decided to put my sleep aside, because feeding kids is more important. I have no idea of their background, if they ate that morning, if they had even eaten the day before, but on Monday morning I get to feed people, and the food is provided. All I have to do is toast the bread, spread some margarine, and then peanut butter or jam, or both, when kids ask. And the really cool part is that our card (from the intergenerational service in September) is right where breakfast happens. The breakfast program happens with Christians and without 'Christians' but I believe God is at work. We might not hear God's name in school or in the community, but that doesn't mean God is not at work in the lives of people, through events that take place.

I don't know how God works through the lives of people, or if God is at work in everyone. I don't know why certain things happen and others don't. I can't explain why the Jewish people were saved through Queen Esther but not from Hitler. I have seen God's hand in my life, and have cried wondering if or why God allowed certain things to happen. I can't explain everything, God's will and action can be found in the everyday realities of life. We may wish for God's direct intervention, for a clear voice coming from a burning bush or vision, but most days we (like Esther) don't get such things. Indeed, most of the time, as one scholar writes, God is subtle to a fault. And yet, if we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear, we may be able to discern where God is acting in our lives. On this last point, Frederick Buechner is helpful. He has written at length about discerning God's presence in the everyday events of one's life:

The question is not whether the things that happen to us are chance things or God's things because, of course, they are both at once. There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak ... God speaks, and the words are incarnate in the flesh and blood of our selves and of our sacred journeys ... 'Be not afraid, for lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.' God is with us on our journeys. God has been with us since each of our journeys began. Listen for God. Listen to the sweet and bitter airs of your present and your past for the sound of God."⁴

Though we might only look at Esther once every three years, maybe we need to remember that God is with us in the ordinary events of life, and sometimes in the not-so-ordinary events, in the coincidences and chance encounters of our lives. May we, like Esther, find the

⁴ Schifferdecker

courage to be vessels for God, and use our lives and gifts to work for God's Kingdom here on earth. Amen.