

December 4, 2022: THIS DAY'S SERMON – Esther/Justice

Readings: Esther 4:1-17; Matthew 5:13-16

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Let us pray: *God of justice, you found your servant Esther living a life of privilege and grew her heart so that those without would be taken care of. Open our eyes to recognize the privilege that exists in our lives today and show us how to advocate for those who have less, so that your world might be filled with justice and peace. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*

There is a bigger story here that I want to share with you. The author of the Book of Esther opens with an opulent display of the Persian king's lifestyle, using detail to give us a description of his character: Ostentatious, showy, unbridled; a direct contrast to the usual Jewish values of modesty and self restraint. While no disapproval is voiced directly, the message raises the suspicion that this opulent lifestyle hides an empty core.

As this morning's reading unfolds, the Jews, God's chosen people, are living in exile. Jerusalem was conquered and its people were taken into Babylonian captivity. A Persian king, Ahasuerus, whose name was most likely actually Xerxes, now rules; his kingdom extending from India through the borders of Egypt and from the Ionian coast, which is modern-day Turkey, to the Arabian desert.

Under Xerxes, the Persians now rule. Some Jews have been allowed to return to Jerusalem, but displaced, scattered Jews have remained to marry, make their homes in Susa, and now live as a recognized minority in the heart of the powerful Persian empire.

As the story goes, Xerxes has established his rule securely enough to give two banquets to celebrate: The first includes military and civic officials of the entire Persian empire. It lasts 180 days, or half a year.

The second banquet is for the people of Susa, both great, the palace officials, and the small – the regular – people. The description of the garden of the king's palace where the banquet is held is given to convey the opulence of the palace and the wealth of King Xerxes.

Great emphasis is placed on drinking, the pace of which was usually set by the king. In other words, when he drank, everybody drank. At this banquet, however, a special ruling had been made that this rule had been suspended.

While this seems unimportant, the author uses the detail to let us know that everything in this court, including drinking, proceeds according to the whim of the king. It denotes power, which is, in fact, the theme woven throughout this story.

As the story goes, when "the heart of the king was in good

wine" – in other words, he was drunk – he decides to show off another of his prized "possessions" and sends his eunuchs to "fetch" the beautiful Queen Vashti so that her beauty might be displayed before his guests.

There is just one problem: The queen refuses to answer the king's summons. We are never told why. It could be that Persian law forbade wives to be seen by strangers. It might be, as the rabbinic community infers, that she had been commanded to wear the royal crown; which may have meant that the crown was **all** she was to be wearing.

As we might expect, the king is both enraged and embarrassed by his wife's refusal. He turns to those learned in the law to decide how to deal with this uncooperative wife. The king **must** take action: Queen Vashti's refusal to obey her husband threatens the entire structure of the Persian culture; the peace and stability of all families is at stake. A royal decree – a law – is issued under the king's seal and the letter of the law is sent throughout the kingdom: Every man should be master in his own house; a given in his day.

Vashti disappears from the scene, opening the door for the appearance of Esther and the main plot of this story. Esther is both a female and an orphan. She is also a Jew, something which was considered another drop in status as an outsider in Persian culture.

Esther enters our story as an "unknown" – a resident alien, a foreigner, a member of a "tribe". Her status challenges her to decide when and if she should reveal her Jewish identity within the Persian culture which dominates.

Esther becomes, for us today, a mirror image of the Hebrew people in exile. She is an orphan, without security, identity or rootedness of family. Rescued through adoption by her cousin, Mordecai, her sense of family is short lived when she is summoned for the king's harem and eventually elevated to the position of queen following Vashti's expulsion.

Our story begins with the visible grief of Mordecai, who tears his clothes, dons sackcloth and ashes, and walks through the city of Susa, loudly wailing, until he reaches the palace gate.

Mordecai mourns because of an edict which has been prepared by the royal official Haman, written in the king's name and sealed with his ring. A law has been written to order the destruction of all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the 13th day of the 12th month. Not only that, but orders are given to plunder their goods.

While he is joined by his fellow Jews throughout the empire in fasting and lamenting, Mordecai's mourning goes deeper

for him. It is personal. It is personal because **he** is the cause of the edict. It was written because he had refused to bow down to Haman as the king had commanded.

Haman's reaction to Mordecai's refusal to bow to him speaks of revenge made possible by power. His knowledge of Mordecai's Jewish identity, fed by his ego and hatred, broadens Haman's desire for revenge beyond Mordecai himself to the entirety of Jews living in the kingdom as a group.

In seeking the king's approval for destruction of his targeted group, the Jews, Haman never names them. He refers to them, instead, as "a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces whose laws are different and who do not keep the king's laws." He also never mentions Mordecai nor the encounter which drives the request. Without questioning or requiring evidence, the king honors the request and the destruction of the Jews is ordered.

Because of the great diversity which existed within the kingdom – made obvious by the fact that the royal notices were sent to every province and every people in its own language – the organized targeting of a group such as the Jews was completely unprecedented and unexpected.

The Jews living in Persia were among many peoples of varied ethnic and religious identities who were exiled when their kingdoms were conquered. Both Esther and Mordecai were descendants of people who had been carried away from Jerusalem generations before and now remained in the lands to which their families had become exiles when the Persians came to power.

There was no evidence to support Haman's assertion about a certain people who do not keep the king's laws. In fact, there is nothing separating the Jews from or setting them in opposition to other peoples in the Persian kingdom at all. Haman's hostility towards the Jews is, sadly, a projection of his anger and hatred towards Mordecai.

So often this story is seen as one in which Esther is the hero; and she is. It's also seen as the revelation of God's divine providence even when God's name is never mentioned. It is that, as well. The question that hangs in the air for us this morning is how does this story relate to the words of Jesus we hear from Matthew's gospel calling us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world?

I spoke to our Rabbis, Victor and Nadya, about the story of Esther this week because I wondered how it feels to someone who is a Jew, especially in this time when anti-semitism is rising and seemingly becoming more normalized in our culture. Rabbi Victor responded by calling the story of Esther "the story that never happened and always happens." He specifically referred to that line of Haman to the king "There

is a people among us that do not do it our way. Let's deal with them."

This story stirred the thought in Rabbi Nadya of the ageless hatred of the "other" – the Jews. She went on to say that, as a Jew, she, her family, her congregation, take their true nature seriously, and in doing so, they make themselves vulnerable to anti-Semitic tropes and projections. She pointed then to Rabbi Victor's opening statement about this being the story that never happened and always happens.

The message of Esther and Mordecai is a message for today, and not just as it relates to the Jewish people. At a time when the daily use of the "N" word on Twitter continues to grow, and, with it, the use of slurs against gay men and transpersons, we hear Jesus calling – commanding – us to enhance the flavor of this world; to bring light to all in the house ... for such a time as this, perhaps?

Jesus uses the natural elements of salt and light to describe influence. The presence of salt influences the taste of food, and has the potential to make it either too salty or bland. The presence of light influences what we can see. We've all experienced both darkness and brightness, dependent upon the amount of light where we are. Jesus' point is that, as his followers, we are meant to make a difference in the world. We are here to be an influence on the world around us.

In this world, we are reminded through Micah that what God demands of us is to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. We are called, every day, in every circumstance, to assert our identity through the words we choose and the actions we take; **not to remain silent.**

This morning's text speaks to us of both freedom and justice. Martin Luther King, Jr., in speaking at a gathering in Montgomery, Alabama, in March 1956 said this: "Freedom doesn't come on a silver platter. With every great movement toward freedom there will inevitably be trials. Somebody will have to have the courage to sacrifice. You don't get to the Promised Land without going through the Wilderness. You don't get there without crossing over hills and mountains, but if you keep on keeping on, you can't help but reach it. We won't all see it, but it's coming and it's because **God is for it.**"

He went on to say, "We won't back down. We are going on with our movement. Let us continue with the same spirit, with the same orderliness, with the same discipline, with the same Christian approach."

Rabbi Victor, at the end of our conversation, reflected on the Book of Esther as a call to live the authentic life and not hide the self. That seems to be precisely what Jesus is calling us to.

Amen.