

Sermon: Pentecost 19

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September 30, 2018

Year B

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

Psalm 124

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

We hear in today's Gospel... about some moody disciples... who may want some notoriety... some prestige... perhaps some glory... they run to Jesus... tattling like children... In some ways... they're like the Pharisees who focused more on Jesus' healing on the Sabbath... than on the miracle of the healing itself... here's someone who's casting out demons in Jesus' name... but who didn't try to see if they could join the club... a lone exorcist of sorts... and John said... *We tried to stop him... because he wasn't following us...* he's not one of our tribe... but Jesus had no sense of tribalism... and he responded... *Don't stop him... for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me... whoever is not against us... is for us...*

Today is the only day in our three year lectionary cycle... that we have a chance to hear anything at all from the Book of Esther... if we go to the alternate readings... the Book of Esther is remembered on the Jewish holiday of Purim... which was celebrated this year on February 28... when I was growing up... Purim was joyous... but was second only to Chanukah... so here's a summary [I found online] that I'll call... The Book of Esther for Dummies...

The story begins with the Queen of King Ahasuerus... Vashti... snubbing the king's request to meet with her. Naturally, being a rather unstable fellow, Ahasuerus divorces her. Now he needs to pick a new queen and eventually manages to select Esther—a comely, young (secretly Jewish) woman who is a part of his harem.

As for her backstory, Esther's an orphan who was raised by her righteous cousin, Mordecai. When the king came looking for young virgins to possibly fill the role of his

new queen, Esther made sure to jump into line. She wins favor with the people in the harem and eventually with the king himself, becoming queen. Moreover, Mordecai helps uncover a plot to kill the king, allowing Esther to warn him in time. This earns Mordecai some Brownie points as well.

But all's not well in the king's courts—treachery is afoot. When Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman in the street, the evil, probably mustache-twisting counselor decides to engineer a plot to murder all the Jews in the Persian Empire. The plot basically involves Haman going to the king and saying, "I think we should kill all the Jews in the Persian Empire." And the king says "Alright."

Haman walks away, glad that the king has cottoned to his genocidal plans. The king doesn't know that his own queen is Jewish. But the threat of the Jews' imminent demise kicks Esther and Mordecai into action. Mordecai goes and wails outside the palace gates while wearing sackcloth and ash, and Esther fasts for three days before visiting the king.

But she is worried the king will execute her for visiting him unannounced, but she goes... and he offers to give her whatever she wants. She asks him for two banquets on the next two days for herself and Haman. Meanwhile, Haman is excited about the massacre that's about to happen. He builds a huge gallows to hang Mordecai.

But Haman's hopes are dashed the following morning, when the king—remembering how Mordecai saved his life... asks Haman how one ought to honor a great man... Haman imagines this honor if for him... so he talks the king into having a great parade through the city... then the King tells him to honor Mordecai this way. At the second banquet, Esther asks the king to punish Haman for trying to kill her and her people—and the king does. Haman is hanged to death on the same gallows he had built for Mordecai. The Jews massacre all of Haman's agents and supporters (roughly 75,000

people in all), Mordecai is made into the king's new counselor, and Purim becomes an official Jewish holiday to celebrate.

But there's a pivotal line... in Ch. 4: v.14... this is why I'm taking the time to summarize this story... after Mordecai tells Esther that she must warn the King of Haman's plot to kill the Jews... including herself... Esther balks and with good reason... because going to see the King... without being invited... going to talk to the King... when he does not extend the golden scepter... is to die... and Mordecai sends this message to Esther... *If you keep silent... at such a time as this... relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter... but you and your father's family will perish... who knows.. perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this... perhaps you have come... for such as time as this...*

These are powerful words... and remind me of the times I've heard people say... *I was born for this...* it reminds me of the mysterious... cosmic synchronicity... when planets are aligned... when one door opens at the same moment that another one closes... of when the almost imperceptible impulse to act... shouts at us with a voice too quiet to ignore... perhaps some of you have seen that door... felt that impulse... or heard that voice... this is God talking...

When we celebrated Purim... and the story was read in synagogue... every time Haman's name was mentioned... which happens fifty-four times... we got to make as much noise as we could... shouting... or using wooden noisemakers called graggers... to blot out his name... and leave it to the Jews to have a cookie inspired by cultural annihilation... in the Jewish coffee hour which followed... we'd eat triangular shaped cookies called hamantasche... *tasche*... in Hebrew... means *to weaken*...

You know... it's interesting... the Book of Esther is the only one in the Bible that does not mention God... though God's presence is there... is felt... and is acted upon... and in today's reading from James... we hear that... *the prayer of the righteous is powerful*

and effective... is acted upon... so whose prayer is righteous... and just what is righteous prayer...

In today's Gospel Jesus says... *Whoever is not against us... is for us...* but those familiar with the Bible... will remember that in Matthew 12:30... Jesus also says... *whoever is not with me... is against me...* interesting... *whoever is not against us is for us...* but... *whoever is not with me is against me...*

A Bible commentary... though... written by a man named Theophylact [The-oph-y-lact] ... addresses this contradiction... Theophylact was born on the island of Euboa in about 1055... he studied in the finest schools in Constantinople... he served as a deacon at the Hagia Sophia Cathedral... and in 1090 he became an Orthodox archbishop... and served in that capacity until his death in about 1108...

And if Theophylact is right... Jesus is giving us an important and simple tool for spiritual discernment... and as we heard in James... righteousness... not to discern people... but to discern ideas and spirits... all we have to do... is ask if the spirit or idea glorifies Jesus... if it does, it is good... if it does not, it is in rebellion against God and thus evil... and that's why Jesus says... *no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me...* But if you use love and trust to betray someone who is developing a relationship with me... it'd be better to hang a millstone... and yada... yada... yada... and it'd be... *better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye... than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell... where their worm never dies... and the fire is never quenched...*

Jesus is referring here to *Gehenna*... and *Gehenna* is related to two words... the Greek form of the Aramaic *Geihinnom*... and the Hebrew *Ge Bene Hinnom*... the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom... the valley southwest of ancient Jerusalem which runs into the Kidron Valley...

During the monarchical period... it became an infamous high place... and was defiled by being the site of the Cult of Moloch... where some of the Kings of Judah engaged in forbidden practices... like human... and possibly child sacrifice by fire...

Gehenna was cursed by Jeremiah... who predicted that the valley would be filled with bodies when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem... and Isaiah alluded to it in Ch. 66 v.24 when God said: *And they shall go out and look at the bodies of those who have rebelled against me... for their worm shall not die... and their fire shall not be quenched...* the writer of this Gospel picked up on that...

And during the roughly four hundred years... between the end of the Jewish Scriptures and the beginning of the Christian Scriptures... Gehenna came to be used metaphorically... as a designation for hell... so when Mark was written... around the year 70... the importance of discernment and rejecting all kinds of tribalism... was folded into the Gospel...

So let us strive to be more like St. Esther... who though she hesitated... as did Jesus in the Garden... acted to resist evil... and though we may understand Jesus' exhortation to cut off hands... or feet... or tear out eyes... as nothing more than hyperbole... we can certainly ask ourselves... as many times as is needed *What are the things that cause us to sin... what do we need to cut out of our lives...* Holy God... make it so...

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