

Path Chapter 15  
Esther 3:5-6, 8-11, 4:1-3, 13-17, 7:3-6  
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood  
February 11, 2018

### Be Woke and Stay Woke

This week's reading from Chapter 15 of *The Path* was longer than usual, but I wanted you all to have a sense of the story from the book of Esther. It's one of those books in the Old Testament we don't dive into regularly, as our standard lectionary only includes one short reading within the 3-year cycle. It's a great, flamboyant story, filled with power plays, extravagance, and palace-intrigue, and more than its share of exaggeration — not a story to be taken literally, but one that carries the voice of truth.

It takes place in a time when God's chosen people are scattered. Some have returned to Jerusalem under the Persian rule, but there are also large numbers of diaspora Jews living as a religious minority within the Persian empire. Esther is one of them: an orphan, a woman, a resident alien, who's being raised by her Uncle Mordecai, an advisor at the royal court.

We first learn in this book that the king has set aside his former queen, so now there's a search for a new queen. Esther, having hidden her Jewish identity, wins the love of the king and is crowned queen. Then her Uncle Mordecai becomes a hero by warning the king of an assassination plot.

But Mordecai has a court enemy, Haman, who has risen to power and convinces the king to decree that all Jews be killed. We don't know all the reasons why, but Haman is a schemer and wants to rid himself of Mordecai and all those like him. And Esther has a choice to make: use her privilege to fight for justice for others or continue blend in and conform to survive. And it's an even more difficult problem for Esther, for Persian court protocol dictates that she can lose her life for even attempting to talk to the king if he has not called her. And he has not called her.

Not quite the level of intrigue of *Game of Thrones*, but within this story of passion, politics, and power, the book of Esther points us towards important truths: lessons about seeing God's hand at work in the world and how we are all called to see and be aware of what's happening around us.

First, you may have noticed that God is not spoken of directly in this Old Testament story. We don't hear about prayers or praise to God. There is one time when Esther asks for fasting and prayers of support from her community as she prepares herself to visit the king, but there's nothing overtly pointing us towards God.

Yet all these crazy circumstances and coincidences amazingly seem to align to save God's people. Esther, a Jewish orphan, just happens to become queen in this time and place. Her Uncle Mordecai somehow stumbles on the plot to kill the king and saves his life. And the king, who we discover can be quite capricious, is willing to listen to Esther when she comes to his courts, uncalled. An alignment of unforeseen circumstances creating the possibilities for good — one coincidence after another. Is this series of events simply random happenstance? Perhaps. But some have said that a coincidence is a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous.

The book of Esther encourages us to see that even without overtly identifying God. God is there. Ultimately, deliverance comes through Esther claiming her identity as one of God's own beloved people. While the people of the world — the powerful, the wealthy, and sometimes

even the evil — appear to be in control, there is actually much more happening: a far greater power setting things right. God is there, giving hope, working through God's people to achieve God's justice in God's own time.

But what really gets my attention in the book of Esther is recognizing just how precarious it is to be in the minority, for the dominant culture can almost effortlessly lean into an uneasiness about those who dress or speak or behave differently than themselves, while also carelessly causing the minority untold harm.

It was critically important for Esther, a daughter of Abraham, one of the minority, to summon up all her God-given wit, capabilities, and courage to stand before the king and put a face on the Jews he was willing to destroy. But it was even more important for the king, the majority, the dominant culture, to become aware and stop the oppression, harm, and injustice towards *those who are seen as other*.

It's no different in our own time. We who today are part of the majority also need to be aware, to "stay woke" — and I'm using that term "woke" with all its ties into the "-isms" of our day — racism, sexism, classism, and others — to be in tune, to notice the harsh realities that those defined as other do face within our own culture and begin to stand with our brothers and sisters who cry out for equity and justice.

I've been participating for a while with others in the Diocese on a commission striving to address racial healing. This gives me an opportunity to meet with others and hear their stories — stories of pain and progress as we work together, in community, to continue the conversations that can lead us to racial reconciliation and healing by coming to understand one another and building relationships of trust.

During one discussion, a white attendee shared a story they had seen on social media about two women who had gone to a grocery store. They were sisters-in-law, both black, one light-skinned, the other dark.

The light-skinned woman went through the cashier line first. She was warmly greeted, wrote a check without any questions, had her groceries bagged and was given a polite "Thank you and have a nice day," as she completed her transaction.

Then it was the dark-skinned woman's turn. When she was given her total, she also wrote a check. And the cashier asked for 2 forms of id, which were scrutinized before the pertinent information was written on the check. Then the cashier pulled out the bad check list from her drawer, looking closely at each and every name for a match.

Her sister-in-law, who had waited a short distance away, noticed the painful dissimilarities in the transaction and returned to ask the cashier why she's doing this. Why is she going through all these additional steps, so different than own experience? Then she asked the cashier to call her supervisor.

The storyteller glanced at those of color at the table and quietly asked, "Is this real?" The people of color looked at one another, and all nodded. Yes, in so many simple, and seemingly routine, even mundane circumstances, they regularly face the embarrassment and shame of being treated differently for no other reason than the color of their skin. Yes, this kind of pain still exists and it's such a small example: the tip of the iceberg. How many of our neighbors are also "othered" — treated as "less than" — if not because of race, then because of gender, religion, sexuality, country of origin, or economic status? All of us need to be aware, particularly we who

are the majority — to “be woke and stay woke” — and see the truth of the world, and speak out about injustice, as we strive to live our lives in Christ.

The book of Esther tells us truths: first reminding us that there is hope — hope for those who are the marginalized, who society says are less than — for God is with us and whether we can directly see if or not, God’s hand is at work.

And for those of us within the dominant culture, we can discover, with God’s help, how important it can be to see through the eyes of the marginalized and be willing to recognize our privilege — not to cause guilt or shame — but to encourage us to be more critically aware of the circumstances of the oppressed and stand with them for justice and equity. We can and should create the space to hear the voices of those with minority perspectives that can enable us to better understand what others do experience in the world.

As we enter into the season of Lent this week, a time that encourages us to examine ourselves and our relationship with God, I’d invite you to ask for God’s help *to explore how you see others*. Invite the Spirit to open your heart and help you to be more aware — to “be woke and stay woke” — striving to better understand what our brothers and sisters are experiencing today. Ask for God’s help to see others through Christ’s eyes, eyes of love and compassionate caring for all God’s beloved people. And invite Jesus to show you the way that you too are called to be a beacon, carrying God’s light and hope and helping others to see God’s hand working in the world. Amen.