

Sermon 092715 Loyalty
Scripture- Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10, 9: 20-22
Sermon Title- Courage and Loyalty

I'd like to tell you a story today. It is the story of Esther from the Hebrew Bible that we just heard a section of in our reading. But first, I'd like to talk about the Jewish Holiday that celebrates this story, called Purim. I actually got to go to synagogue and participate in a Purim service about 20 years ago.

I'm a Christian and thankful for it, but there are other religions that do some religious rituals in ways we can learn from. For example, an ordained clergy, most often in a church, presides at most every Christian worship service. Jews, on the other hand, have a High Holiday religious service, not in the temple or synagogue, but in the home with a layperson leading it. It is called the Passover Seder. The Last Supper was a Seder. Also, Christians usually follow what is called an 'order of worship' making most religious services basically the same. Jews, have some religious services in the synagogue that are very different for the norm and Purim is a prime example.

Purim takes place one month before Passover. It takes place in synagogue and is probably the most fun I've had at a religious event. Purim has been called 'Jewish Mardi Gras' because everyone dresses up in costumes for it. There are noisemakers, too. It is definitely a joyful and fun experience. What they do for

the service is someone, or a succession of people, get up and read the book of Esther. It doesn't take long to read because it is only around twelve pages in the Bible, although the service is long because they stop reading periodically. Now, I'll tell you the story in a minute, but there is an evil character in the story called Haman. Every time the word Haman is read, the synagogue erupts into booing, foot stomping, and the noisemakers are rattled. It is quite a scene.

After the worship, they eat triangular shaped, fruit-filled cookies called hamentaschen that are quite delicious. Eat drink and be merry is encouraged, and you'll see why when I tell the story. The Jewish culture is not really a culture that drinks a lot of alcohol, but participants at Purim are encouraged to drink until they cannot tell the difference between evil Haman and good guy Mordecai.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we do this, but wouldn't it be fun to come to church in costumes and have a big fun party once a year? That is why I say we can learn some things from other religions.

So, onto the story told in the Book of Esther. An interesting thing to know about this book is that it is the only book in the Bible that never mentions God, or worship, or sacrifice or anything religious. It appears to communicate that God is present, but

working behind the scene. The story takes place in the court of the king of Persia. Esther is Jewish and quite beautiful, so beautiful that the king selects her from his harem and makes her queen. The king does not know Esther is Jewish. It was Esther's uncle, Mordecai, who had raised her as a daughter, who encouraged her to hide her identity. She never lies and says that she is not Jewish; she just never mentions it. There was an arrogant, egotistical bad-guy advisor to the king named Haman. Mordecai, who was known to be Jewish, refused to bow down to Haman. Haman decided to take this out on all the Jewish people and convinced the king to put him in charge of the Jews.

One of the haunting things about this story is that Haman convinces the king in a speech that is all too familiar to Jews to this day, "Then Haman said to King Xerxes, 'There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples on all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the kings laws; it is not in the kings best interest to tolerate them. If it please the king, let there be issued a decree to destroy them.'" (Esther 3:8) Sound familiar? It should be if you are familiar with the term 'holocaust.' The king puts the fate of the Jewish people in Persia into the hands of Haman who plans to exterminate them.

Mordecai convinced Esther to go to the king without being summoned, a very dangerous thing to do. He convinced her to expose to her husband, the king, the plot by Haman to kill all the Jews. The king asked Esther what she wanted. Esther told the king that there was someone trying to kill her people. When the king asked whom it was she said, “The adversary is this vile Haman.” (7: 6) The king had Haman hung on the gallows that Haman had made to hang Mordecai. So, at Purim, Jews celebrate the Jews of Persia avoiding extermination, surely cause for a party.

So what is to be learned from this story in the Bible that never mentions God? I can tell you that many Christian (but not Jewish) feminist theologians that have written on this topic do not like this book at all. They dislike that fact that Esther became queen not because she was brave, or smart, or strong, but because she was pretty. Esther came into a position of influence by basically winning a beauty contest. She does not appear to be particularly smart or clever. She follows coaching from Mordecai throughout the story, appearing docile and submissive. She remains loyal to her people with the help and guidance of Mordecai. She appears to be limited in most ways with her best quality being her good looks. The king appears to be superficial in that his decision to take a queen is made on her looks.

Yet there is great evil in this story, Hitler level evil, in the character of Haman who is defeated by the ordinary but pretty Esther. How did this happen? Well, maybe this is the part where God, who is never mentioned in the story, works behind the scene, or said another way; God works through people. Esther, limited in her gifts and talents, used her one gift to get into the position to do the right thing, the good thing. She also had the good sense to listen to her uncle Mordecai, a man of integrity and smarts. She learned from Mordecai to be loyal to her people even if her and Mordecai were the only ones who knew who her people were. She learned the right thing to do and she showed great courage to do it. She did it. She stood alone. Esther was the only one who could stop Haman at that time and place, and she did it. Limited Esther did a great and good thing. An ordinary person did an extraordinary thing. One small person, at the right time and in the right place, doing the right thing changes everything.

Well, how about us? Any Esthers here? There is certainly a bevy of beauties here, but I'm not sure if anyone has ever won a trophy or a sash. I'll guess that everyone here has some gifts or talents yet also has limitations. We might all be described as ordinary people. I'll guess that despite your limitations, when the time comes, you'd like to do the right thing. I'll guess that you hold a loyalty to your people, even if you are not around them

much. I'll guess that you might have listened to someone else in your life in order to get help in making important decisions. I'll guess that you maybe have even asked for God's help in a pinch.

Maybe we are all Esthers. Maybe we don't know nor understand our gifts. Maybe we are more familiar with our limitations. Maybe we need help and guidance to do the right thing. Maybe we are all capable of doing the right thing, doing God's work when it really counts. Maybe we can find the courage to do the hard things, the right things, if we are open to God's help. Maybe we can find God's goodness and wisdom in someone else.

Ultimately, like Esther, we stand-alone. We can learn from others, and find strength and peace in God, but we stand-alone. It is up to each and every one of us. We are ordinary, but every day, we have the chance to do the right thing, the extraordinary thing. We may not face great evil every day; maybe we will someday. But, we all make choices between right and wrong, between good and evil. Often it takes courage, and a lot of it. There are moments in our lives when we define who we are. Esther seized that moment so saved her people because of her loyalty, her courage, and her openness to the goodness of God as received through her uncle. She defined herself in that moment, as a Jew, as a woman, as a person.

We define ourselves not just in one moment, but also in a lifetime of moments. God's only hands in the world are our hands, said Theresa of Avila. Each and every one of us, with all our limitations and our ordinariness, has the opportunity to change the world. It is not about just using our talents, it is about using our talents for the good. Being a person of faith means loyalty, courage, choosing right over wrong. You, yes you, can change everything. AMEN