

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

Psalm 124

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

Once every three years, the Revised Common Lectionary gives us a little snippet from the Book of Esther which is actually just one story that has nine chapters. This book has the distinction of being the only book in the Bible that makes no reference to God or to worship of any kind. There are many scholars who wonder why it was included in the canon of Jewish Scriptures. But it's there for a reason. Without ever speaking of God, this story reveals God's faithfulness to God's people and the nature of God in reversing fortunes by exalting the lowly and humbling the mighty. In order to understand these few snippets of scripture that we heard this morning from the Book of Esther, we need to know the whole story. So here it is.....

The story takes place in the Persian Empire about 400 years before the birth of Christ. The Empire is enormous stretching from India to Ethiopia. It has 127 provinces. Its inhabitants speak multiple languages. It includes thousands of Jews who had been displaced by the Babylonian Exile about a hundred years before. These Jews have kept a low profile and have adopted many of the customs and dress and eating patterns of the Persians. They blend in well.

The Empire is ruled by King Ahasuerus and Queen Vashti. The story opens at the end of a banquet that the king has given for all his officials and ministers throughout the land that has lasted for six months. He is now providing a banquet for the people of his palace that lasts only seven days. Queen Vashti is also giving a banquet for the women of the palace at the same time. At the end of his banquet, the King summons Queen Vashti so that he can show off her beauty to all his guests. She refuses. The King is enraged...insulted and embarrassed. She has humiliated him and held him in contempt. The King banishes her and passes a law forbidding her to ever be in his presence again. The law also says that all women in the kingdom are now required to give honor and respect to their husbands no matter how high or how low their station. Perhaps that's where we get the saying, "A man's home is his castle!"

The search for a new queen begins. All the young maidens living near the king's castle are rounded up and sent to a 'women's house,' also known as a harem, where they are pampered and groomed for over a year. Among those sent to the harem is a young Jewish girl named Esther. She was orphaned as a young child and adopted by her much older cousin, Mordecai, who raised her. It's just the two of them, so Mordecai goes each day and walks around the

front of the harem to keep an eye on Esther and to reassure himself that she is OK. Each young girl in the harem has a chance to spend time alone with the king. When the king meets Esther he falls in love. He loved her more than any of the others and made her queen. She moves from the harem into the palace, but even she cannot enter into the king's presence unless he calls for her by name. And she does not reveal to the king that she is Jewish.

Mordecai now sits at the king's gate so that he can continue to keep an eye on Esther. One day while he's sitting at the gate, he hears two palace guards plotting to assassinate the king. He reports what he's heard to Esther who promptly tells the king who just as promptly executes the guards.

Unrelated to the incident with the guards, King Ahasuerus promotes an Agagite named Haman to be his right-hand man. No one other than the king now has more power or social standing than Haman. Upon his promotion, everyone in the kingdom has been ordered to bow down to Haman when in his presence, but Mordecai refuses. It seems the Agagites and the Jews have a multi-generational feud going on...not unlike the Hatfields and the McCoys. They are hereditary enemies and detest one another. When people ask why he won't pay homage to Haman, Mordecai says that he is a Jew and Jews do not bow down to Agagites.

Haman is furious, but he thinks getting in a brawl with Mordecai is beneath him, so he plots to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom instead. He goes to the King and tells him that there is a certain people living among the king's subjects and scattered throughout the provinces who have their own laws and customs and they do not obey the king's laws...without specifically naming the Jews. He tells the king that it's not appropriate for the king to tolerate such blatant defiance. It's even dangerous for the king to do nothing about these people who are so disrespectful, so he asks the king to issue a decree that will authorize Haman and the king's armies to destroy these people completely. Haman offers to pay the king an enormous sum of money to have this decree implemented. The king agrees and gives Haman his signet ring authorizing him to implement the plan.

They cast "pur" meaning "lots" to determine when the day of destruction will occur. It falls on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month. The Jewish Passover is celebrated on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month, so one month prior to Passover, all the Jews are to be annihilated.

Mordecai and many other Jews put on sackcloth and cover their faces with ashes. They go through the streets weeping and wailing. They are in deep agony. They are fasting and lamenting. Mordecai gets a written copy of the decree and sends it by messenger to Esther. The

messenger is to explain to her what the decree meant and to ask her to go to the king and intervene.

Esther sends a message back to Mordecai: "If anyone goes into the inner courts of the king without being summoned, that person is put to death. I haven't been summoned for thirty days." Mordecai's answer to her is: "You will not escape this edict because you are in the king's palace. If you keep silent, relief for the Jews will come from some other quarter. Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Esther resolves to go to the king and she thinks "If I die, I die".

When the king sees her approaching he summons her into the inner court and asks what she wants. He promises to give her anything...even half of his kingdom. She asks the king to come to a banquet that she has prepared and she asks that he bring Haman with him. At the end of the banquet, Esther asks the king to come the next day to another banquet and to bring Haman with him again.

Leaving the first banquet, Haman encounters Mordecai who refuses again to bow to him. Mordecai's disrespect ruins Haman's elevated feelings of importance at having been included with Esther and the King at their intimate banquet. Haman brags to his wife about his status with the king and also complains to her about Mordecai's disrespect. His wife and family urge Haman to build a huge gallows for Mordecai and hang him on it and then go and enjoy himself at the second banquet. Haman does build the gallows, but he has to get the king to issue a decree in order to be able to hang Mordecai.

While Haman is busy building the gallows, the king is having a restless night and can't sleep. He asks that the annals of the palace be read to him, so he can fall asleep. While he's listening, he hears again about Mordecai's intervention revealing the guards' plot to assassinate the king. He tries to think if anything had ever been done to honor Mordecai for such an action. He realizes that no honor had ever been paid to him.

Early in the morning the next day, Haman goes to the palace to get permission from the king to hang Mordecai. Before he has a chance to make his request, the king asks him what should be done for a person that the king wishes to honor. Haman thinks the king is talking about him, so he goes into an elaborate description of the wonderful things that should be done for such a person. That person should be given the finest robes and a crown put on his head. He should be placed on a horse with someone leading the horse all through the town shouting out the virtues of this person and telling everyone that this is someone that the king wishes to honor.

The king likes these ideas and tells Haman to carry them out. He then tells him that the person to be honored is Mordecai who can be found at the king's gate. Haman does as he is told, but he is humiliated. When he goes home to tell his wife and family they realize that Haman will not prevail over Mordecai.

The king's messengers have to be sent to get Haman for the second banquet hosted by Esther. Again the king asks her what she wants. This time she tells the king that she wants to be saved from annihilation and she wants her people to be saved as well. The king, having forgotten the decree that Haman had talked him into, wants to know who's responsible for ordering the death of Esther and her people. Esther names Haman.

The king leaves the room in a rage. While he is gone, Haman, pleading for his life, throws himself prostrate at Esther who is reclining on a couch. When the king returns, he assumes that Haman is assaulting Esther. And that's it for Haman. One of the king's attendants points out to the king that Haman has just built this huge gallows for Mordecai. The king promptly orders that Haman be hung from those gallows instead.

The king give Esther Haman's house and Esther sets Mordecai over the house of Haman. The king retrieves his signet ring from Haman and gives it to Mordecai. Esther pleads with the king to rescind Haman's decree that the Jews be annihilated, but decrees from the king cannot be rescinded. So another decree must be written. This new decree gives the Jews the authority to organize and arm and defend themselves from any armies or groups of people who try to harm them on the day that Haman's decree had named. And with their children the Jews were allowed to plunder their goods on a single day.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month, the day that was chosen for their annihilation, the Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword and did as they pleased to those who hated them. Throughout the Empire they killed 75,000 people on that day. And in the city surrounding the castle they killed 500 people including all of Haman's family. But they did not plunder. They were fighting for their survival, not to increase their wealth.

Mordecai wrote another decree that on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month a celebration named Purim (for the Pur or lot that had chosen that day for Jewish annihilation) would be remembered as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies and their sorrow had been turned into gladness. To celebrate they are to send gifts of food to one another and give presents to the poor. Purim is one of the most joyous celebrations in the Jewish calendar.

The moral of the story: Listen to that still, small voice within that is calling you to do something that is right even when it means it is risky for you to do so. God is moving and active in the world. God takes care of God's people. God elevates the lowly and humbles the proud and haughty.

Just look at all the coincidences in this story. Is it a coincidence that Esther, a Jew, ends up in the king's inner circle? Is it a coincidence that Mordecai overhears the assassination plot against the king and reports it? Is it a coincidence that the king has insomnia and is reminded of Mordecai's aid to him? Is it a coincidence that Haman is forced to honor the man he's plotting to murder for being disrespectful? Is it a coincidence that the king mistakes Haman's plea to Esther for his life as a sexual assault against her? Those coincidences that we find so fascinating may be nothing less than what Old Testament commentator Jon Levenson calls "A miracle in which God wishes to remain anonymous."

This story of God's action in the world, never mentions the name of God, and yet, just like our own lives, it has God's handprints all over it.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.