

10th Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

Esther 7-8

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, 'What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.' Then Queen Esther answered, 'If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.' Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, 'Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?' Esther said, 'A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!' Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him. When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining; and the king said, 'Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?' As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, 'Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high.' And the king said, 'Hang him on that.' So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews; and Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. Then the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. So Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Then Esther spoke again to the king; she fell at his feet, weeping and pleading with him to avert the evil design of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. The king held out the golden sceptre to Esther, and Esther rose and stood before the king. She said, 'If it pleases the king, and if I have won his favor, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I have his approval, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote giving orders to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming on my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?' Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to the Jew Mordecai, 'See, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he plotted to lay hands on the Jews. You may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring; for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked.'

The king's secretaries were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day; and an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded, to the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. He wrote letters in the name of King Ahasuerus, sealed them with the king's ring, and sent them by mounted couriers riding on fast steeds bred from the royal herd. By these letters

the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to assemble and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, with their children and women, and to plunder their goods on a single day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. A copy of the writ was to be issued as a decree in every province and published to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take revenge on their enemies. So the couriers, mounted on their swift royal steeds, hurried out, urged by the king's command. The decree was issued in the citadel of Susa.

Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple, while the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. For the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honor. In every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict came, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a festival and a holiday. Furthermore, many of the peoples of the country professed to be Jews, because the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.

And so, we arrive at the beginning of the ending to the book of Esther. These two chapters that we just read symbolize the great reversal in the Book of Esther.

Haman (booooooooo!) finally gets what's coming to him! After wining and dining both Ahasuerus and Haman, Esther finally gets to the point. The King (for the third time) drunkenly offers to do anything for his queen and Esther decides that this is the time to put it all on the line. She tells him that there is an evil plot to kill her people, the Jews.

Ahasuerus looks around furiously wondering who it was that did this (which is ironic because he himself was the one that signed off on it, being duped by Haman who cleverly left out the little detail about the "people" he described being the Jews). Esther points to Haman and unveils him. Think of this part of the story like the last scene in pretty much every episode of Scooby Doo when the gang finally catches the villain and takes off the mask to discover who the bad guy was all along.

Ahasuerus stomps out of the room for a moment while Haman gets on his hands and knees to beg for his life to the queen. Desperately grabbing her clothes, Ahasuerus walks back in to the room, thinking that Haman is now accosting the queen. We, the audience, laugh at the absurdity of the entire situation which only increases when a random eunuch chooses that *exact* moment to remind everyone that just outside the room is the gallows that Haman had built to execute Mordecai. It's just too perfect a moment to pass up. Ahasuerus has Haman impaled upon the gallows. The bad guy gets it in the end and we, the audience, are satisfied.

Although I wasn't here to explain it, the cover of last week's bulletin depicted a scene from a Harry Potter movie that reminded me of this part of the Book of Esther. One of the best villains in the Harry Potter series, in my humble opinion, is Professor Delores Umbridge, the sadistic professor who is actually nothing more than an agent of the Ministry of Magic when the evil Voldemort begins to infiltrate the government. Professor Umbridge is sent to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to undermine the leadership of Professor Dumbledore. At one point, when Harry insists that Voldemort has returned, Professor Umbridge forces Harry to scar himself on his hand by writing on it, in his own blood, "I must not tell lies."

Towards the end of the movie, Professor Umbridge attacks a group of centaurs who then surround her and take her hostage. Screaming in desperation, she pleads with Harry Potter to tell them that she means no harm. Then, in a moment of pure satisfaction for the audience and the reader, Harry Potter simply says, "I must not tell lies." Then Professor Umbridge screams as the centaurs drag her away.

Likewise, for thousands of years, Jewish people have laughed, applauded, and cheered as Haman finally gets what's coming to him as his is, ironically, impaled upon the very gallows that he had constructed to murder Mordecai.

As I mentioned, there are great reversals in this chapter. Haman is executed. Mordecai is alive and honored. Esther begins this story as a marginalized person and ends it as the queen of a vast empire. The Jewish people begin this story having their very lives threatened by an oppressive regime and now find themselves saved by Esther and Mordecai who outwit Ahasuerus and Haman. Having learned (perhaps?) that Haman duped him, Ahasuerus writes an edict that reverses the original policy of his administration, officially giving the Jews all around his 127 provinces the right to defend themselves against any of Haman's followers who were planning on annihilating them. And perhaps the most dramatic reversal of all is that now people are pretending to be Jewish because they are worried that they'll be mistaken as Haman's followers.

And though this would be a nice place to end the story with a nice little bow, our story has a very bloody end that we'll wrestle with next week.

But for today, let us simply dwell on the following question: where is God in this text?

As we've mentioned before, the Book of Esther is the only book in the Bible that does not explicitly mention God. And yet, as Christians dwelling within a story of the Bible, it is our job to ask the question, where is God in this text even if God isn't explicitly mentioned?

I will make the following case, God is always present when a group of oppressed people cry out for justice.

When the Israelites cried out from the bonds of their slavery to the Egyptians, God was present.

When the prophets bore witness to the economic and social injustice of God's children, God was present.

When Jesus preached the Beatitudes, reminding us that God has a special place in God's heart for those who are hungry, oppressed, mistreated, and ridiculed, God was present.

When millions around the country cry out that #BlackLivesMatter, God is most certainly present.

And yes, even though God isn't mentioned once in the Book of Esther, when Mordecai and Esther practiced civil disobedience and stirred the pot to save God's people, yes, God was present.

And so, as we come to this Table, as we are welcomed to the Lord's Table, we must ask ourselves, where is God in the world right now? Where is God in our homes? In our streets? In our schools? In our Zoom rooms? In our hospitals? In our courtrooms? In our legislatures?

How can we, the people and children of God, be present in places where God is calling us to be prophetic witnesses? How can we learn from the bravery of Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai to continue to participate in “good trouble” in order to bring about the change we feel called to pursue in Jesus’ name?

Where is God in the ordinariness of our lives?

You know, we don’t celebrate this feast in the way that King Ahasuerus celebrated his feasts. We don’t celebrate the Lord’s Supper by throwing a party 187 days to show off our strength, our power, and our influence? We don’t celebrate the Lord’s Supper by using elements that are only available to the rich, the powerful, and the influential.

No, instead, Christ calls us to celebrate this meal with simple bread and juice. The most common of elements. This is a meal that isn’t as fancy as one of Ahasuerus’ banquets. This is a meal that doesn’t flaunt power in such a way.

Instead, this is a simple meal that represents a far greater power; a power that doesn’t have to resort to fear mongering, or arrogance, or bullying, or violence, or oppression in order to make itself known. This meal represents the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, a power that reveals the absurdity of regimes of oppression like Haman’s.

So, friends, let us be gathered around this Table, and as we feast of the grave we’ll find there, let us find the places where God is in the world, and seek the places God wishes us to be in the world.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s beloved children say:
Amen.