

11th Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

Esther 9-10

Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day, when the king's command and edict were about to be executed, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain power over them, but which had been changed to a day when the Jews would gain power over their foes, the Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who had sought their ruin; and no one could withstand them, because the fear of them had fallen upon all peoples. All the officials of the provinces, the satraps and the governors, and the royal officials were supporting the Jews, because the fear of Mordecai had fallen upon them. For Mordecai was powerful in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces as the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful. So the Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. In the citadel of Susa the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred people. They killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, Vaizatha, the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews; but they did not touch the plunder.

That very day the number of those killed in the citadel of Susa was reported to the king. The king said to Queen Esther, 'In the citadel of Susa the Jews have killed five hundred people and also the ten sons of Haman. What have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? Now what is your petition? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled.' Esther said, 'If it pleases the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict, and let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows.' So the king commanded this to be done; a decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed three hundred people in Susa; but they did not touch the plunder.

Now the other Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and gained relief from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them; but they laid no hands on the plunder. This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness.

But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the open towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, a holiday on which they send gifts of food to one another.

Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor. So the Jews adopted as a custom what they had begun to do, as Mordecai had written to them.

Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur—that is, ‘the lot’—to crush and destroy them; but when Esther came before the king, he gave orders in writing that the wicked plot that he had devised against the Jews should come upon his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. Therefore these days are called Purim, from the word Pur. Thus because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, the Jews established and accepted as a custom for themselves and their descendants and all who joined them, that without fail they would continue to observe these two days every year, as it was written and at the time appointed. These days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every family, province, and city; and these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

Queen Esther daughter of Abihail, along with the Jew Mordecai, gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. Letters were sent wishing peace and security to all the Jews, to the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, and giving orders that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as the Jew Mordecai and Queen Esther enjoined on the Jews, just as they had laid down for themselves and for their descendants regulations concerning their fasts and their lamentations. The command of Queen Esther fixed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.

King Ahasuerus laid tribute on the land and on the islands of the sea. All the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia? For Mordecai the Jew was next in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was powerful among the Jews and popular with his many kindred, for he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his descendants.

Well, here we are: our final stop on our seven-week journey through the Book of Esther. If perhaps you're joining us late on this journey, allow me to give you a quick recap.

There was a jerk of a king named Ahasuerus who through a 187 day long binge drinking party and demanded that his beautiful wife, Queen Vashti, parade herself around naked in front of his frat brothers. She refused, he through a temper tantrum, banished her, and found a new queen named Esther, who was a Jew, even though he didn't know it. Esther's uncle, Mordecai, refused to bow down before the king's advisor, Haman, who is pretty much literally the worst. Haman, like the king, through a temper tantrum and decided that because Haman was Jewish that *all* the Jews should die because his fragile ego was bruised. So Haman tricked the stupid king into writing an edict ordering the genocide of the Jewish people. Mordecai practiced civil disobedience to protest this edict and encouraged Esther to do the same to protect the Jews. Esther breaks the law by going to the king without being asked and invites him and Haman to a series of banquets. Esther gets Haman and Ahasuerus drunker than a skunk and then tells her husband that she's a Jew and that Haman is planning on killing all of the people. Ahasuerus decides to kill Haman on the very gallows that Haman had built to execute Mordecai. Mordecai is honored. Haman dies. Esther saves the Jews. The end.

Well, it's not quite the end. This absurd book of the Bible has a rather violent ending. Haman's followers, you see, are still scattered all over King Ahasuerus' 187 provinces and still have standing orders to kill all of the Jews on a certain date. Obeying Queen Esther's request, King Ahasuerus gives permission for all

of the Jews to defend themselves against Haman's followers. And, well, they do. And a lot of people die. By a lot of people, I mean more than 75,000.

Now, did 75,000 anti-semitic followers of Haman actually die? I don't know. Likewise, did King Ahasuerus *actually, literally* throw a party that lasted 187 days? I don't know. If we've learned anything about the Book of Esther, it is that it's an absurd book that tends to use exaggeration and ridiculous excessiveness to add to its carnivalesque themes.

From the beginning of this story, extreme measures are taken. King Ahasuerus could have thrown a party over a weekend, but instead he throws one for 187 days. The young women who were selected to participate in the pageant to replace Queen Vashti could have spent a weekend at the spa getting prepared, but instead their beauty regimen takes *twelve months!* Instead of taking Mordecai to court for his disobedience, Haman opts instead for genocide. I think it's safe to say that restraint is not practiced much in the book of Esther.

Likewise, when Haman is unveiled and brought to justice, the book doesn't stop there. Instead, the Jews gather and defend themselves against all of Haman's followers, which number more than 75,000. Apparently, Haman's anti-semitism was quite popular if there were that many of this followers throughout the kingdom. And so, Esther and Mordecai convince King Ahasuerus, who by this point is doing whatever they ask, to allow the Jews to defend themselves, violently if necessary.

Now, if the violence at the end of this book leaves a bad taste in our mouths (which, for the record, is completely understandable. I feel that way, too), perhaps we should remember that there's another book of the Bible that tells a somewhat similar story.

There's a reason that slave owners didn't want their slaves to know the story of the Book of Exodus. It, like the Book of Esther, tells a story of the Israelites in captivity and then being saved and freed. Like the Book of Esther, the people who oppressed them, in this case Pharaoh's army, meet a very violent end. Stories like these function as an important kind of literature meant to give hope to marginalized communities, such as the Jewish community for which the Book of Esther was originally written. Those of us, like me, who have never been persecuted or oppressed because of our race or ethnicity were not the original audience of the Book of Esther so it's important that we understand that context when we read this bizarre and beautiful book of the Bible. Long before people ever cried out that #BlackLivesMatter, the Book of Esther made it perfectly clear that #JewishLivesMatter. The violent end to the Book of Esther makes it very clear that the anti-semitic policies of Haman are never again to be tolerated.

So, friends, I hope that you've learned a lot and wondered a lot as we've gone through the Book of Esther these past seven weeks. I hope we leave this sermon series pondering the following:

- That there's a power to be found when oppressive systems are called out for what they are: weak, racist, patriarchal, and deadly dangerous for the people who live under their control.
- That there's a power to be found when marginalized people stand up to oppressive systems and participate in civil disobedience to call attention to the oppressive nature of systemic injustices.
- That there's a power to be found when women and girls like Queen Vashti and Queen Esther stand up to men like Haman and Ahasuerus who suffer from FMES (Fragile Male Ego Syndrome).

- And, finally, that there's a power to be found when an ancient story from the Bible is brought to us by the Holy Spirit for such a time as this, when such topics are quite relevant to our current circumstances.

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