We have spent the summer diving into a couple of books of the Hebrew Testament: first, we spent 7 weeks in Leviticus, and then we spent 4 weeks in Esther. What does the Hebrew Testament have to offer us “for such a time as this,” to borrow a well-worn phrase from Esther?

These are a couple of books that we don’t often spend time with. Leviticus is dry and often repetitive; when it’s not dry and repetitive, it seems irrelevant. But as we discovered this summer, Leviticus is actually all about loving our neighbors, about remaining in community with one another, about caring for each other and prioritizing that care even over worshiping God.

Esther is a fictional story about the remnant Jewish community in Persia, about 100 years or so after the end of the exile. It involves petty jealousies that blow up into political intrigue, ancient family hatreds that stretch back hundreds of years and threaten the lives of an entire people, a king who can’t seem to make any decisions on his own, and a savvy queen who relies on her faith and the faith of her community, as well as her wisdom and good sense to get them all out of the jam they’re in. (And it’s a little steamy, if you like that sort of thing!)

One thing that both books have to offer us is a glimpse into a different culture – even a different time. As Christians, reading books that are in our Bible, it’s very easy for us to lay our own sensibilities on what we read. I think we reinforce that point of view when we refer to the two testaments in the Bible as Old and New rather than as Hebrew and Greek. “Old” and “New” makes it sound as though we’re comparing them, and one is better, more valid, or more right – and that’s not true. (That’s something I’m actively working on changing in my own vocabulary.)

For example: if Jesus said to love our neighbors as ourselves and pray for those who curse us, why is it right that Leviticus kicks people with skin diseases out of the camp? Why is it right that Mordecai turns Haman’s edict around and lets the Jews do the same to the Persians that Haman was ordering the Persians to do to the Jews?

But when we ask those questions, we don’t take into account that both Leviticus and Esther predate Jesus by several centuries. They were written in a different time, when the world was different even than it was in Jesus’ day – and VERY different than it was today. And the differences weren’t all easily quantifiable, like how big cities were and what careers people had and what percentage of the people were subsistence laborers, or how much of an impact the terrain or average rainfall had on people’s overall wellbeing. There were other, major differences too: where did they think God lived? What did influence, or direct power, did God have (or not have) in their lives, such as why illness or natural disasters happened? What did they believe about death and what comes after?

I say all of this to point out that we are at a bit of a crossroads here in the US. If you listen to our political leaders and the talking heads, we have become more and more divided between the left and the right. Between the haves and the have-nots. Between the immigrants and the people whose families have been here for generations. They want us to dislike each other, even to be scared of each other. We have a choice to make. We can fall in line, or we can choose not to.

But here’s the secret: *we know better.* Even in this huge, beautiful, melting pot we call home, where there are so many diverse people from so many diverse places with so many diverse beliefs and opinions, we *know* that we are capable of so much more. We *know* that we can respect people who think and believe differently from us, even people who come from different cultures.

We *know* that we can ask the hard questions and have the challenging conversations. We *know* that we can love our neighbor as ourself, and care for them, and remain in community with them, despite (even because of?) our differences.

Because the Bible tells us so.