

God's Unexpected Fingerprints
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Woodbury UMC
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Last week I made reference to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which told a story spread out across 22 movies. Most of the references were to the first of those movies, and I tried hard so that if you knew nothing about any of that, you could still follow along.

If I dropped you into number 20 or 21 in that sequence, knowing you hadn't seen any of the prior films, and asked what you thought, it would be perfectly reasonable to say that there were lots of neat-o things to look at, some good action or impressive special effects — but that you had no idea what was motivating it all, what any of it meant, or most importantly, why you should care.

Well, that's what you get in this week's lectionary reading.

We come in at or near the climax of the story — hard to understand without a sense of how we got to this point, and even as scripture it is particularly hard to see how it speaks to our lives as modern Christians. Today, we are looking at Esther, and it is a very strange book indeed — particularly when you consider that it is Holy Scripture, part of the Biblical canon. We know that these books were written by people and included as part of the Bible because someone decided that what they have to say is incredibly important, and that we need to hear it. What is this book about? Well, by the time it is over, it tells the story behind why the Jewish people celebrate the festival of Purim.

So, why do the Jewish people celebrate Purim? Recently I heard a description of the various Jewish festivals, saying that they could all pretty much be summed up like this:

Enemies tried to kill us.

We survived.

Let's eat!

This is the only time in the lectionary cycle that Esther comes up — in three years worth of readings, 4 or 5 selections every week, this is the only time that this reading comes up. And on top of that, today's part of Esther Doesn't even include the most famous, most beloved part of the book! If any of you know even just a little bit about Esther, it is from chapter 4, which never comes up in the lectionary, probably the words spoken by the character Mordecai: "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

And the reply that Esther gives to this challenge, this suggestion? Just as good, maybe even better — and not in the lectionary! I remember asking someone about the great film Citizen Kane at one point, and I got the reply "Sure I know that one — Rosebud is a sled, right?" So he knew one very important detail, but devoid of its context, there was absolutely not reason why it mattered or why you should care.

So what are we going to do with this?

My task as preacher is to help you better understand what is being said in whatever scripture we highlight during worship. I'll do my best. As pastor and teacher, I caution you mightily against taking scripture out of its context, or drawing conclusions based on an incomplete understanding, so I really must be careful not to make that same mistake myself.

What is best would be if I just read the entire thing to you. It is short, just a few pages, and I commend it to you to read for yourself, very easy to do in one sitting. Read it, and you will see there is no mention of God, no mention of Jewish ritual or any of the things they were supposed to do in their relationship with God. People don't pray when they are in trouble. It might be the most secular book in the whole Bible. It takes place somewhere around 470 BCE, during the time of exile. Remember, the Hebrews were pushed out of their land into exile by the Babylonians, and then the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians. This story takes place during that time, in the court of Persian King Ahasuerus. He has dismissed his queen for an insubordination that was entirely justifiable on her part — another great story — and in looking for a new queen, he selects Esther, and in the process the fact that she is Jewish never came up. She had been under

the care of her uncle, Mordecai, and when Mordecai overheard a plot against the king, he told Esther, who told the king, who was grateful to Mordecai for this information.

The king's close advisor, Haman, is a vain man, and demands that people bow to him. Mordecai refuses, believing that good Jews bow to no human authority, and this infuriates Haman to a point where he plots to have every Jew in the kingdom killed, even tricking the king into approving this plan. There is a funny interlude where Mordecai is lifted up and praised by the king, Haman getting his ego badly bruised and cranking up his rage in the process. Haman ensures that a letter from the king is sent all over the kingdom designating a day when all are to rise up and kill the Jews, throwing the kingdom into confusion as that day is awaited.

Mordecai is thoroughly distraught, and arranges for Queen Esther to learn about this evil plan. This is where we get those famous, beautiful lines, where Mordecai challenges Esther to act, saying:

For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.

And brave Esther agrees to take action, stoically noting the tremendous danger with these amazing words:

I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.

What a cool, tough as nails woman Esther is — if I perish, I perish — in a movie, you can imagine her saying that while putting on her dark glasses.

So Esther hatches a plan of her own, approaching the king at great risk — if he did not accept her, she would be put to death for daring to approach him — but he does accept her, in fact so glad to see her that he will grant her anything she wants, even up to half the kingdom.

Her only request is that he attend a banquet she will prepare — and that Haman comes along, too. At the banquet, the king again asks what she wants, and again she asks only that he and Haman come to another banquet she will prepare in his honor. And during the second of two banquets, the third time Esther has been granted an audience with the king since beginning her plan — only now, after all of that, is where we come to the text for today.

The tension is drawn out so, so much. Esther makes the king wait, and then makes him wait again, refusing to tell him what's really on her mind. With a 75 foot tall gallows looming outside, the stakes are literally very high. And everything is pushed to its extreme — Haman's plan isn't to kill a man who offended him, it is to kill everyone of that man's national and racial group. The gallows that Haman builds to kill Mordecai are an absurd height (75 feet tall) — readers are meant to see that this great height corresponds with his tremendous ego!

All that said, this is a Jewish story, and when they tell this story during Purim, they really lean into the humor of it all, throwing parties, dressing up in costumes, and generally have a raucous celebration.

Best of all, when the name of Haman comes up in the reading of the scroll of Esther, it is drowned out by booing and noisemakers. When the names of Esther or Mordecai are read, they are cheered. I found that there is even an ancient tradition from the Talmud instructing Purim celebrants to drink until they are “unable to differentiate between the phrases ‘bless Mordecai’ and ‘curse Haman’” (*Megillah 7a*).

And only then do we get to today's text. You can see why I thought this needed a little set up. And I am streamlining as much as I can!

And only now do we get to the words Bud read for us a few minutes ago. After all of this, Esther asks for her life to be spared, and that of her people. And she denounces Haman as a foe, and an enemy, and wicked.

We are told of Haman's gory execution, killing him in the same way he had intended to kill Mordecai. And then the story skips ahead, and we are told that this is how the festival of Purim came to be, and we celebrate, and we live happily ever after. The idea of impaling Haman is gory, but trust me — they cut out lots of killing people. It is hard to take a story from an ancient culture and have it be fully recognizable to us 21st century modern Americans because to us, being the good guys means you don't go and kill everyone, but that it more or less what happens here — those who would have been killed; now go and kill everyone else — that is where the Jews who had been fearing for their lives take violent retribution. It is really violent. This seemed appropriate in many cultures, and especially those who have lived under threat of violence but by the time it gets to us, we aren't so comfortable with all that violence.

What are we on a Sunday morning supposed to make of this?

God is never mentioned. For this reason, some have puzzled over Esther's place in the canon. Even though God is never named, is there any doubt that God is involved? Though there may not be direct interaction, remember, Mordecai talks of salvation coming from 'another place.' And Esther herself draws from great well of courage and determination. God may not be named in this story but it seems clear that Esther is mediating on behalf of her people, just as Christ intermediates with God on our behalf.

I think this is a story about discerning God's presence in the everyday events of one's life. Frederick Buechner has written at length about this:

The question is not whether the things that happen to you are chance things or God's things because, of course, they are both at once. There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak ... He speaks, I believe, and the words he speaks are incarnate in the flesh and blood of ourselves and of our own footsore and sacred journeys ... remember 'Be not afraid, for lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.' He says he is with us on our journeys. He says he has been with us since each of our journeys began. Listen for him. Listen to the sweet and bitter airs of your present and your past for the sound of him."

How do you perceive God in your life? I can say that for me, most often it is God's fingerprints show up, indicating where God has been, rather than catching God in the act — as Buechner puts it, the sweet and bitter airs of the past and the present. This might actually be one of the biggest lessons for us from this strange selection. How often in life do we fail to attribute things to God because we don't see a pillar of fire or a burning bush? Is it possible for God to be moving in the world in ways that are less explicit, but no less divine? God saves God's people not through direct intervention, but through the wisdom and courage of Esther and Mordecai.

This took tremendous courage — perhaps that courage is found in the conviction that **you** are answering God's call on your life.

As an example, consider this: Esther is referred to as Queen Esther 14 times in this book. 13 of those times come after her saying if I perish, I perish. Something significant has changed in her, going from someone fluffy to someone substantial. Even more than that, once Esther has sprung her trap, she is referred to only as the queen, not by her given name. She embodies her full power in this moment.

I think there is a lesson here for us about living our lives passively, and an encouragement to live as an active participant in our own lives. Being a child of God does not mean that you are to live your life passively, waiting for God to take care of things. Belonging to Jesus comes with it a responsibility to do what is right.

Esther meets Mordecai at the gate and is confused by his attire and behavior, until she learns that all the Jews are to be killed. Point being I don't think you have an obligation to act boldly if you are clueless. But once you have knowledge of injustice being perpetrated on the innocent, I have to conclude that you have a responsibility to do something about it. If you are small, do what you can. But if you have just found yourself with the ear and attention of the king, you have a chance to really make a difference.

I like this story because it speaks to me of discerning God's will and action in the everyday realities of life. We may wish for God's direct intervention or an obvious miracle, but most days we (like Esther) don't get such things. Indeed, I read one description saying most of the time, God is subtle to a fault. And yet, if we pay very, very close attention, we may be able to discern where God is acting in our lives. Think about your own life, with all of its complications. Might God have been using the unanticipated twists and turns of your life to put you in a particular place, at a particular time, for a particular purpose?

That is another place where this story of Esther might lead us: to the understanding that in the coincidences and chance encounters of our days, we are called and claimed by God. I think that might be how this book speaks to us Christ-followers today. As a reminder that our God can indeed use all things for good. That God's timeline is not our own, and that our personal crises might be minor blips to God, serving to prepare us for the great task or tasks God may have for us.

In my everyday life there aren't lots of people who aren't always crying out loud to God, aren't performative in loudly calling themselves Christians in front of everyone else. In my everyday life I regularly encounter people who draw strength from the Lord, who have a prayer practice, who draw the line at places they believe would not be what God wants, but not calling attention to that fact.

Esther reminds me that God is always there, always active in the world, and you not saying it or you not noticing it doesn't make it any less true.

So notice — and to God be the glory! Amen.