

Sermon: A Story without God

Year B, Proper 21

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Psalm 19:7-14;
James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

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You guys did great when I asked you to imagine why I would hold up the story of Esther to our young adults as they begin the journey of confirmation. You noticed things in the reading that I did not. So now it's time for me to tell you why most of you have only vague memories of Esther's story.

The book of Esther almost doesn't make it into the Hebrew Bible. It's one of the last books to be canonized, to make it into the final set. It doesn't appear to make it in until after Jesus has lived and died and been resurrected. It doesn't make it into the Christian Bible until the Council of Carthage in 397 CE. The book of Esther appears to be the work of a single author, well preserved, meaning multiple editors didn't get their mitts on it and "fix" it. It basically explains how the popular holiday of Purim is celebrated even though it has no basis in the Laws of Judaism.

In reality, probably none of that would be an issue if it weren't for this one quirk. Nowhere in the book of Esther is God mentioned. Nowhere. God has many names in the Bible. None of them show up in Esther. It's the only book in the Bible where God isn't mentioned.¹ The book of Esther is never quoted in the New Testament, though the story was clearly popular when the New Testament texts were being written.² There's no mention of worship, torah, food laws or distinctive dress³ in Esther. In Esther, we see Jews, Mordecai and Esther among them, who have completely assimilated with the dominate culture around them, who are not following any of the fundamental observances that have made the Jews a special people, clearly set aside and identifiable among all the peoples of the world. The book of Esther has one point, to explain how the festival of Purim got started and why it's celebrated the way it is. In the Revised Common Lectionary, which assigns Scripture readings to each Sunday and holy day in a three year cycle, today's reading is the only time we use Esther. For Jews, this book is read almost exclusively on Purim. For Christians, that's not a holiday we celebrate. The text itself reads like the *Real Housewives of the Persian Empire*. Fun in its over the top drama, but basically a guilty pleasure that doesn't even mention God.

You can see why preachers and teachers don't spend a whole lot of time on the book of Esther. Thus, I better explain why I went out of my way to use it in a celebration of confirmation.

¹ H. James Hopkins, "Proper 21, Homiletical Perspective, Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 99.

² Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Book of Esther: Introduction," vol. 3 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1954), 830.

³ Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., "Proper 21, Pastoral Perspective, Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 98.

In the book of Esther, we see people making nationalism their religion in complete indifference to God.⁴ Or worse yet, identifying their personal ambitions with God's intentions for this world.⁵ And then we see Mordecai and Esther stand up to them. We see a case where a few people, working together, true to their faith change the course of history. Isn't that the faith we want to confirm we have? In the book of Esther, the villains are more awful, the good guys are more cunning, there isn't as much political back story to lay out about the Roman empire and its oppression of the people they have conquered. The plot of Esther really lays everything out there. And honestly, it's looks remarkably similar to today. So, I hope the young adults who are heading into confirmation would recognize that if Esther and Mordecai can stand up in their faith, so can we.

In the book of Esther, the Jews are not allowed to call on God by name.⁶ That is not the case in our country, because many people over many years have fought to keep it that way. But it is the case in other places in the world today. And it is the case in places where we find ourselves in this country. I can't think of an office I have worked in where prayer wasn't awkwardly accommodated, where making sure the Jewish and Muslim holidays were included in a project plan wasn't treated as a complete nuisance. I know I have never worked or studied in an environment where God's name wasn't used as a curse word without any regard for how it might land on someone else's ears. We have all trained ourselves on how to "pass" in a wider culture that has no space for people who call on the name of God in a faithful way.

Esther and Mordecai have done that. They are in the inner circle of the tip top of Persian society. There is no need for them to break their cover and identify with the persecuted people, the outsiders, the Jews. Based on today's reading, you might argue that Mordecai is in a bit of a jam, seeing as he's about to be hung from a gallows 75 feet high.⁷ But Esther is Queen Esther because Mordecai got her into that role when the previous queen died. He told Esther it might be useful to have her as queen at a later point (Esther 4:14).

For everyone of faith, I want what Jesus describes in today's reading from Mark. Cast out demons. Fight poverty, wars, injustice. Care for orphans, widows and the foreigners among us. Do it in the name of Jesus or Yahweh or Allah or secular humanism or plain old being a decent neighbor like Mr. Rogers told us to be. I can work with that. Don't get in the way of anyone who's trying to get that done. Don't be a millstone around anyone's neck who is trying to keep hope alive in this world. Every month as part of our communion liturgy, I ask God to help us be the salt, light and leaven for the furtherance of God's will in this world.

Yet so much of the New Testament writing is about how people fail Jesus, how we drop the ball. Here in the story of Esther is a young woman in the court of a mighty king.⁸ She's valued more for her beauty than her brains.⁹ She has to risk her own safety to call attention to a desperate situation of a persecuted people.¹⁰ She has to stop hiding her faith to give the authenticity

⁴ Anderson, 831.

⁵ Anderson, 831.

⁶ Hopkins, 101.

⁷ Kathleen M. O'Connor., "Proper 21, Exegetical Perspective, Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 101.

⁸ Hopkins, 103.

⁹ Hopkins, 103.

¹⁰ Hopkins, 103.

required to power her message. She only has a few words at her disposal, and those words must be so well chosen.¹¹ We hear Esther speak. We get to see how history changes.¹²

Esther is confirmed in her faith. Maybe from the outside, it's hard to see. Maybe there was a long time when she looked like a Persian Queen and not like a Jewish girl. But when it was time to speak for her people, to further God's will in the world, she was the salt and light and leaven for her people. God doesn't need to send a miracle into the world when there are people like Esther, confirmed in their faith, who will step up and speak out. God may not be in the story of Esther. But God is in Esther. And that's confirmed in her story. That's why I wanted to use the story of Esther to celebrate confirmation today.

¹¹ Hopkins, 103.

¹² Hopkins, 103.