

Simplicity of God's Expectations

Simplicity Of God's Expectations – Teresa Holden

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Pray, pray, pray, pray, pray, pray. That's the message that we get from James 5, as six times in as many verses the instruction is to pray. Are you suffering? Pray. Sick? Pray. Have you sinned? Pray. Are you in need of something? Pray. The simplicity of this instruction underscores what I believe unifies our lectionary passages, and that is this fact: in a crazy, mixed-up world, what God expects of us is clear and simple.

Similarly, in our Gospel reading, Jesus makes things simple. He tells his disciples not to overthink the fact that other people are invoking His name. Don't worry, Jesus says, *Whoever is not against us is for us*. What a wonderfully liberating view of the world. This signals for us that we should take heart in what we have seen occurring in Washington DC, New York and Philadelphia as thousands of people have participated in Christian worship surrounding the Pope's visit. Our traditions differ, but we serve the same Christ. Jesus' test is so simple: *No one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me*. This reminds me of something my friend, Debbie Somerville, once said: "We're gonna be surprised who's in heaven when we get there." Her point was that we tend to be judgmental and exclusionary about who has a pure enough faith to make it to heaven. Of course, we judge that **we** are on the right track, overlooking our own instances of stumbling, but others' failings are so obvious to us. Jesus says that we need to be focused on ridding ourselves of our own things that distract us from faith, rather than focusing on others.

Clarity of purpose also emerges in the book of Esther. The lectionary thrusts us into the end of Queen Esther's story. This young woman, who was orphaned and brought up in the home of her cousin, Mordecai, was caught throughout most of this book in a web of power and political structures that left her mostly voiceless. Yet, in the end, she acted decisively and with clarity on her own and the Jewish people's behalf.

Esther's story prior to our lectionary reading goes like this: the king, Xerxes of Persia, whom historians elsewhere have recognized as having a notoriously bad temper, banished his previous queen because she publicly disobeyed his wishes. She didn't come when he summoned her to display her beauty to a party of men at the end of a week-long celebration that was filled with drinking and rabble-rousing. Left without a queen, Xerxes gathered the most beautiful young women in all of Persia, from which he would choose his next queen. For all of her pleasing qualities, Esther emerged as his choice. But Esther is her Persian name; her birth name, Hadasseh, revealed her Jewish heritage.

Cousin Mordecai advised Esther to not disclose her Jewish identity, and he worried over her safety, waiting outside the gates of her royal dwelling daily to gain news of her. Clearly, King Xerxes was not one to be messed with, and Mordecai feared for Esther's safety. Nevertheless, Mordecai, himself, became the instigator of a serious crisis for the Jewish people in Persia.

So Mordecai frequently lingered outside the palace gates. There is some belief that he was not only waiting for news of Esther, but also he may have served in an official capacity as an

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accountant in the king's court, which would station him at the palace gates for other reasons, as well. In this position, however, Mordecai refused to bow and pay obeisance to Haman, King Xerxes' closest assistant. Apparently, it was a custom, if not a law, that all who saw Haman should pay homage to him when he passed. We are never told, but it seems the case that Mordecai's actions may have been informed by his Jewish faith. Mordecai's refusal to bow became an issue, however. Other members of Xerxes' court rebuked him. Haman, when he learned of Mordecai and his refusal to show ample respect to him, became incensed with an anger that lingered and ate at him. Knowing that Mordecai was Jewish (but apparently not knowing of his relationship to Esther), Haman approached King Xerxes and explained that Jewish people were a problem in the kingdom. He proposed that all of the Jewish people in the kingdom be killed, annihilated on a future date, 11 months in the offing. This would be publicized; the Persian people would have time to prepare for the attack, and they would become further motivated to participate in carrying it out because they would be allowed to plunder the belongings of the Jewish people. Xerxes, not knowing that Esther was Jewish, agreed to the plan.

Before we go on with this story, it's important to note the fact that the book of Esther is a highly contested book, one that Biblical scholars and theologians from a wide range of traditions love to hate. One of its problems is the fact that it is one of two books in the Bible that never, ever mentions God. (The other book is Song of Solomon—I'm so glad I'm not preaching on that, a book that is always better left to Ruth Huston.) Scholars also dislike Esther for opposing, contradictory reasons. She just can't win.

One group calls her story a fairy tale, too good to be true. (As though being taken captive by the king, without any say in the matter, in order to become a part of his harem is a situation that is too good to be true.) Feminist theologians critique her willingness to fit into the expectations and plans of all the men around her. In fact, some claim that the book of Esther made it into the Bible precisely for this reason, because it presents a woman behaving like women should, or so they thought—and that is submissively. Our lectionary selection from Esther calls this claim into question, as we see Esther charging Haman, this highest official of her husband, the king, with murderous intentions, a charge that results in his death. That action seems fairly assertive.

Despite the fact that God's name is never mentioned in this book, it contains an undertone of faith in God. This emerges most clearly in an exchange between Mordecai and Esther, which was carried out by Esther's crown-appointed emissary who delivered messages between the two of them. In this exchange, Mordecai urged Esther to go to King Xerxes, in his inner court, and request the physical salvation of her people. Esther resisted this suggestion, explaining to Mordecai that no one was allowed to enter the inner court of Xerxes without being beckoned. One of two things would happen. Either the person would be killed on the spot, or Xerxes would touch his scepter, indicating that the person was welcomed. In her mind Esther had a 50/50 (or even less) chance of survival. Mordecai's return message reminded her that either way she was not safe, yet he had an unwavering faith in the survival of the Jewish people. He said, in Esther 4:14, *If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?* Mordecai believed that God would deliver the Jewish people, and he thought that this was the very reason for which Hadasseh had ended up in

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the position of queen. He had a steadfast faith in God's faithfulness. Esther responded by asking that the Jewish people fast on her behalf—fasting is generally done accompanied by prayer as a way of entreating God.

When it came to the actions that Esther took next, the plan was one that she herself devised. She did enter into the king's inner court, and he touched his scepter, welcoming her entrance. But rather than entreat the king right then and there, Esther instead invited him to a banquet, one that she requested Haman's presence at, as well.

Haman was thrilled with excitement, but his bubble of joy was burst when he passed by Mordecai outside the palace gates and once again noted Mordecai's refusal to bow. We can imagine Mordecai standing on the street staring intently at Haman in the midst of people who all were bowed to the ground, not daring to look at Haman. Mordecai's insolence was more than Haman could bear, and, with his wife, he hatched a plan to hang him the very next day from a very high gallows, where everyone would see.

In the meantime, however, King Xerxes, unable to sleep, had his assistants read through the court record books to him. There it was recorded that much earlier this man, Mordecai, had turned into the palace the report of a plot he had overheard to kill the king. He had, in fact, saved the king's life, and Xerxes learned that Mordecai had never been rewarded. The next day, as soon as Haman reported to the palace, Xerxes asked him what he should do for someone who had brought delight to the king. Haman thought the king was speaking of himself, and he told Xerxes all of the things that he would like—a white horse, the king's royal apparel, a crown. Xerxes said, "Wonderful! Would you make sure that Mordecai, outside, gets all of those things?" (This part of the story reminds me of a scene that would occur in *Seinfeld* in an interaction between George Costanza and George Steinbrenner.)

Things, obviously, were about to only get worse for Haman, as Esther at the banquet announced to Xerxes the wrong that Haman intended to inflict upon the Jewish people. By the end of the day, Haman was hanged from the gallows he had planned for Mordecai and his plan to annihilate the Jewish people was reversed. Mordecai, according to the Biblical account, began immediately to lay the groundwork for the Jewish holiday of Purim that continues to be celebrated today in honor of Esther's intervention for the salvation of the Jewish people.

Maybe, in the end, aspects of the Esther story sound a little fantastical. Some historians don't believe that these events really happened, although others believe they have found evidence of Esther and Mordecai in ancient texts. So, what if the book of Esther weren't true? What would it metaphorically be conveying to us? I think it says a few things. First God honors the faithful steps taken by anyone, including people who don't have power and whose voices are muted. Second, the simple steps that we are called upon to take to be faithful people aren't always easy steps. Just putting one foot in front of the other sometimes takes a lot of courage. At times the outcome appears so iffy that we feel we are hanging by a thin thread of faith. But God honors the simple steps of faithfulness taken by anyone. Pray, pray, pray, pray, pray, pray.