

St. Paul's Congregational Church
September 30, 2018
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Mark 9:30 – 37;
For Such a Time as This
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

At many times in their history, the Hebrew people struggled with what meant to live as the people of God – when they were ruled by another empire or living in another country, the answer wasn't always clear. The Book of Esther, which appears only once in the lectionary – on the 21st Sunday of Pentecost in Year B, today, is a story about Hebrew people living in exile in the Persian Empire and the dilemma they faced trying to live faithfully in a different culture.

While it's not certain when Esther was actually written – scholars date it anywhere from the last days of the Persian Empire in the 4th century BCE to the time of Greek rule in the 2nd century BCE – it's clear that the heroine of the story, Esther, and her guardian Mordecai have assimilated very well into Persian culture.

When Esther enters the competition to become queen to King Xerxes, Mordecai advises her to keep quiet the fact that she is Jewish. When she becomes queen and Mordecai gains influence in the king's court no one seems to realize that they are Jewish. It is only when Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman, the king's chief official, that he is revealed to be Jewish.

In revenge, Haman plots to kill him and all the Jews. Mordecai turns to Esther for help. To save her people Esther must place herself in danger and stand with her persecuted people. It's not an easy decision for her but she chooses to acknowledge her heritage.

What we read this morning is the climax of the story in which Esther reveals Haman as an enemy of her and her people. It's a violent story, isn't it – Haman is killed on the very gallows meant for Mordecai.

Then, Esther, Mordecai, and all the Hebrew people celebrate their escape from death in a festival called Purim – still celebrated today – a celebration of the survival of the Jews, even in Diaspora. The festival celebrates turning for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday – with the instruction to make them days of feasting and gladness – and importantly, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

The fact that this book explained the festival of Purim was what allowed it to be finally accepted in the third century CE as one of the books in the Hebrew Bible, even though it's the only book in the Bible where God is not mentioned by name.

This book is the story of an ordinary woman of extraordinary courage and resourcefulness who saved her people. Like the ancient Hebrews, we too struggle to understand what it means to live as the people of God – this Book, this story, helps us understand that the people of God are those who take a stand and risk acting for God in the world. Just as Esther was an ordinary person who stepped up and did the right thing in order to insure the preservation of her people, so contemporary disciples of Jesus serve him in quiet but nevertheless quite faithful ways today.

No, we haven't heard God mentioned in this story at all, have we. It's a story about a woman who has put aside her own safety and spoken up for her people, saving them when they were in danger in a foreign land.

But this is a story about God – about the way God sometimes works behind the scenes lovingly and creatively to accomplish His purposes. How? Through the faithfulness and courage of ordinary people like Esther.

She was a real hero – even though a reluctant hero. She did a great thing for her people – even though she took small, hesitant steps on the way there. She didn't want to be a hero – there she was living in the palace, assimilated into the dominant culture, married a pagan king, blended in – her people probably thought she was so enmeshed in the pagan culture that she was no longer a Jew.

As a woman she had little power even though she was Queen. But she used it – she used what little power she had within the limits the culture put on her and did a great thing. She acted as a faithful Jew, a faithful daughter of Israel when the time came for her to show what she was made of and who she really was. The power of one doing the right thing.

I'm going to take a risk here – but I can't NOT do it. Initially I was not going to preach on the Esther story this morning – but on Thursday evening I changed my mind.

Our country has been torn apart these past weeks – I confess I'm a news junkie, though sometimes I think I should stick to my favorite NCIS reruns – but I've been keeping up with the process of confirming Judge Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court – and I'll be honest – I haven't been a fan. When the allegations of sexual misconduct against him surfaced last week, I was devastated. I've had conversations with a few of you and we've compared notes about how we're being affected by this news topped off by these dreadful allegations – and the rancor, bitterness, just plain nastiness

that we've heard – feeling sick, sad, depressed, angry, frustrated, exhausted – all of these things at once sometimes. On Thursday I watched the committee hearings from beginning to end – in tears often when Dr. Ford spoke – and again, different tears when Judge Kavanaugh spoke. The chaos of the afternoon session was almost too much, it was overwhelming for me, especially after Dr. Ford's testimony. If you or someone you know has been assaulted, has not come forward, has suffered for years – you know the courage she showed. You know the pain she felt. She gave so many people such a gift – at her own cost – but she did it. The power of one doing the right thing. In such a time as this.

Yesterday when I got home from the church, I put on the news just as the Judiciary Committee was about to vote. It looked pretty grim when I started watching – but it became clear that something was happening when the vote was delayed. I hope you saw the clip of Senator Flake's encounter with protestors, two women survivors, holding the door open of the senate elevator talking to him as he looked them in the eye and listened and heard them – you could see the pain on his face - this became part of his motivation to reach out to his close friend from the other side of the aisle to try to find a way to bring some healing to this terrible situation, regardless of the cost he might pay in this crazy political climate these days. He did it anyway. I don't know how this whole difficult situation will come out but I'm feeling a whole lot more hopeful than I did before. The power of one doing the right thing. In such a time as this.

Esther is the story of an ordinary woman of extraordinary courage and resourcefulness. Dr. Ford is an ordinary woman of extraordinary courage. Senator Flake is an ordinary man of extraordinary courage. They stepped up. They spoke out.

The people of God are those who take a stand and risk acting for God in the world.

The realm of God is being advanced and preserved through the good work of ordinary people like us. That's the way God works – God doesn't do it all: God enlists and strengthens ordinary people like you, like me, to do God's good work.

We're not likely to be forced to give our lives for our faith like Detrick Bonhoeffer did – it's more likely you'll be at a dinner party and someone will make a comment putting down someone else, or a group of people, or advocate some behavior that's less than Christian - it's then that you will need to find a way to speak up and speak out for what you believe.

Maybe we live in a world more like Esther's than we would like to admit – Esther was a stranger in a strange land. Maybe some of us are

beginning to feel like that a little – we live in a society that too often doesn't feel very Christian, that doesn't feel very faithful, that doesn't feel like we're called to be concerned about "the least of these." We don't think about "What does the Lord require of us" when we're faced with injustice, with bigotry, with hateful words, when we witness or overhear oppressive behavior or words.

Maybe we feel like, "I'm just one person – what can I do?" We're such a small church – what can we do?

Each one of us can do a lot. This church can do a lot. As you may know, the Food Bank will be moving back to their new space in October. This has been a wonderful opportunity for this church to do a lot – last Wednesday we fed almost 60 families! In spite of what are mostly minor inconveniences to us, this has been a powerful ministry we've enabled in our space to this community. Friends, this ministry has grounded me in amazing ways – working the elevator for those who can't manage stairs, laughing with the children over which vegetables they'd try, listening to a woman who is now living alone after her husband of 50 years recently died, showing hospitality to our guests and the awesome volunteers from Family Service. I shall miss those times very much - our light has shined brightly here in Nutley – we're still here after 125 years and now we're looking ahead to new opportunities for ministry. What's next for us once we no longer have the outreach here of the Food Bank? Our Midday Music recitals and the upcoming Halloween Spooktacular concert are exciting opportunities to feed our souls and those of our neighbors. The Intergenerational Halloween party in October is another opportunity. How will we continue to do God's work? How will we continue to serve our community? How will we live out the Purim festival including days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

How will each of us participate? In such a time as this.

In our gospel reading we hear Jesus' practical guidance to his followers on discipleship in every-day life. The story of Esther is yet another in the Old Testament emphasis on seeking to serve God in everyday life, in everyday relationships and in all our interactions. Just as Esther was an ordinary person who stepped up and did the right thing in order to insure the preservation of her people, so do contemporary disciples of Jesus – all of us – serve him in ordinary and faithful ways today.

Each of us comes to some point in our lives – either at work, at the office, at school, at the Shop Rite, or at a dinner party where there is the opportunity for you to step up, to speak out, and it is as if old Mordecai says

to you what he said to Esther, “Who knows? Maybe the Lord is calling you for such a time as this.”

May we hear that call. May we respond to that call. So may it be.
Amen.