

A Sermon for Sunday September 26, 2021

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer:

“O, God, you declare your mighty power chiefly in showing mercy.”

What we do, what we say, makes a difference. The choices and decisions we make, make a difference. We are called to love one another. As we live into our call to love one another, God’s mercy and love for us is often revealed. How we live our lives affects not only our life, but the lives of those around us, our families, our communities and beyond. Whether our choices and decisions are small or large, insignificant, or clearly life changing, what we say what we do makes a difference. Who we love, how we love makes a difference.

When we think about scripture and the individuals named and unnamed who are the people who come to mind first? How many of them are men and how many are women? There are only two books about women’s lives in the Old Testament Ruth and Ester along with one in the Apocrypha, Judith. In the Old and New Testaments along with the Apocrypha there are thirty-four men named. Rarely are the books and stories concerning women’s lives found in our lectionary. I wonder about that. When their stories appear, they are not often the focus. Today we have Ester’s story. How many of us here have heard of Ester? How many can recount her story? In today’s story about Ester, as in many scripture stories which find their way into the lectionary, the harder more difficult parts of the story are left out of the telling. We human beings and our stories are more often than not are messy and difficult. They do not always show us in our best light.

Ester’s story takes place after the Babylonian Exile when some, but not all of the Jews had moved back to Israel. Ester’s family were some of those who had remained behind having built a life for themselves in Persia, modern day Iran. The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible says the book of Ester tells the story of the deliverance of the Jews won by Ester under the Persians and gives a reason for the institution of Purim, a symbol of the heroic resistance against persecution.

She was a young girl, an immigrant, caught up in the gathering of young virgins taken from their families in the kingdom of Persia. Her name was Hadassah which means “myrtle.” Hadassah was taken by the king’s men from her uncle, Mordecai, who had adopted her when her parents had died. The young girls all

knew about Queen Vashti who had defied the king by refusing to attend his banquet. Instead, the queen had her own banquet for women. This angered and worried the king who then called his advisors for their advice about what to do. Though women had some freedom and autonomy in the kingdom this felt a little too much. After all, what if every woman decided to defy their husbands. They advised the king that he should send the queen away and find himself another woman to serve as his queen. Therefore, the roundup of the virgins.

Hadassah came from a different culture than the others. She and her uncle were part of the Jewish community living in the kingdom. She became known as Ester in her new community. For a year she and the other young girls were prepared in the harem to be presented, one at a time, to the king. They were all supervised by the palace eunuchs assigned to the job. What was that like for her? She had to learn new customs, new rules of behavior. One of the eunuchs befriended her. He helped her to understand what she was needed to do and instructed her on what she needed to know for her survival and for her possible selection as the next queen. Her uncle had also taught her well. He knew that it would not be helpful to tell others that she was a Jew. So, she remained silent. Perhaps, that is what Jews did in Persia, they kept their heritage secret. It was the way to survive, and maybe thrive. Her uncle kept watch over her from a distance staying as often as he could by the palace gates.

When her turn came to be brought to the king, she was admired by him and eventually chosen to become his new Queen. She had new privileges, new responsibilities. All she had learned she carried into her new role. Those around her saw her as beautiful and quiet, one who knew and followed the rules; she was not at all like the former queen. Until . . . her story became bound up in the story of another, Haman, the new head advisor to the king. Haman was nothing like Mordecai or Ester. He was an ambitious and jealous man. At one point Haman comes across Mordecai at the palace gates. He insisted that Mordecai bow down to him because of his position as the king's head advisor. Mordecai refused. Haman furious returned to the palace determined to punish Mordecai. He discovered that Mordecai was a Jew whose practices did not allow him to bow. Haman decided to go to the king to ask him to have all the Jews in the kingdom killed because of their customs and refusal to bow to those in authority. The King issued a decree that all

Jews, men, women, and children will be killed. Haman had chosen the day for the executions by lot.

When Mordecai found out about the decree, he put on sackcloth and ashes. Mordecai and Ester have been in regular communication with one another through the palace eunuchs. He sends the news to Ester about the decree and asks her to intercede with the king to stop the slaughter. Ester at first refuses telling Mordecai that she has not been in the king's presence in some time. She tells him she would risk her life by going to the king without being invited into his presence. Mordecai insists. Reluctantly she says she will go the king. She tells Mordecai to go to their people and ask them to fast for three days while she prepares herself. Three days later she dresses in her royal robes and stands at the entrance to the king's chambers waiting. Was she frightened? Did she think she would be banished or killed for coming into his presence uninvited? Somehow, she had found the courage. The king invites her in. She tells him she has a petition she would like him to consider. First, she asks the king if he and his advisor Haman would come to a banquet at her quarters the next day. The king called Haman in and told him about the invitation, both said they would come. Haman runs into Mordecai again who still refuses to bow. Angrier than the first time, Haman had a huge gallows, seventy-five feet tall, built by his house to hang Mordecai from when the time came.

That night the king could not sleep. The next morning, he called in his advisors and asked them to bring their records to be read to him. In them they found that Mordecai had notified the king of a plot to take his life. The king asked them if Mordecai had been rewarded for this? They said no. The king called for Haman and asked him what should be done for someone who had been of great assistance to the king. Haman thinking the king was talking about him, said he should be rewarded with royal robes and a horse. The king then commissioned Haman to do that for Mordecai. Haman fumed as he did what the king had commanded.

Banquets in this time period usually lasted more than one day. On the second day of Ester's banquet as the king, Ester, and Haman were enjoying themselves, the king asked Ester what her petition was. Ester started by telling the king that she was a Jew and that there was a decree put out to kill all the Jews. She

asked that the king revoke the decree. The king clearly upset by her news asked her who had done this. Ester pointed to Haman and said Haman had. The king ordered Haman to be hung on the very gallows he had built to hang Mordecai. The king also stopped the decree. Ester had saved her people. Mordecai was given Haman's job. Ester had a holiday declared and they all celebrated.

What does this story have to say to us? There is no overt reference to God in the story. Ester does not ask the people to pray she only asks for them to fast as she prepares herself. Still, this story, a seemingly simple story, managed somehow to find and keep a place in our scripture. It is a story in which a woman found the courage to step out and step up for a people at risk, in doing so she risked her life. Through Ester and Mordecai's actions God's mercy is present and saves the lives of an exiled community of Jews.

We do not have to be a queen who saves a whole community. We can make a difference with one piece of trash picked up off the beach. We can make a difference one soup ladle of soup served at a soup kitchen for the homeless, one piece of clothing donated to clothing bank, one lunch packed for Food for Kids, one hammer blow on a Habitat House, with one book read to a child or one children's book donated, an hour spent mentoring a teenager, by using our own bags at the grocery store, turning up the air conditioning or opening a window, turning off a light when we leave a room. Small things done together with others make a difference. Each of us in small ways make a difference.

One last story, a familiar one I suspect. There was a couple walking the beach who noticed thousands of starfish scattered across the beach ahead of them. Standing in the midst of them they saw a figure lean down pick one up and toss it out into the water. Then lean down and do it again. As they got closer, they called out to him. Why are you doing that? There are so many. What difference will it make? The man looked down picked up another starfish and tossed it out into the water. "It made a difference to that one."

What will we do?