



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Esther, Salvation, and Supper

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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A big part of my week is always engaging the texts out of which a sermon must come. The lessons come from what is called the Revised Common Lectionary - a three year cycle of readings. The Episcopal Churches had its own lectionary cycle – found in the back of the Book of Common Prayer, but we have adopted the RCL long with most western mainstream Protestant churches. What that means is that on any given Sunday, all three churches on the Green are reading the same lessons. Except possibly now - we are in Year B and all summer and for the rest of the fall, we have been two or three choices for the Old Testament reading.

One of the things that has been kind of fun lately is that the choices offered have given us readings that have not been traditionally heard in our church. Last week, we have that over the top ode to the "capable wife." This week, we have a reading from the book of Esther – a book that had been left out of our Prayer Book lectionary. So now, we have the chance to hear this important book. What makes it important?

Esther is, in the words of Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, "the oddest heroine in the Bible: a Jewish girl who wins a beauty contest, marries the gentile king of Persia, and ultimately uses her position to save the Jews from a brilliantly conceived program of extermination. Aside from the Torah, Esther is the bible's best-known book among modern Jews. Its story (is) read in the synagogue every Purim." What is Purim, you might ask? It is the most joyous of all Jewish festivals, taking place in the spring that celebrates the story of salvation from annihilation. They celebrate this story with gusto because their history has too many experiences in which they were not saved. So here's the story...

It has all of the elements of a good tale - a beautiful heroine, an orphan to boot, named Esther, a somewhat clueless king, a dastardly villain, Haman, and a courageous protagonist, Mordecai, Esther's kindly and clever guardian. The story is set in Persia, one hundred years after the Babylonians had conquered and sacked Jerusalem and carried much of population back to Persia as slaves. The king has a problem with his wife - she defied him and so of course, she was gone. It was decided that there would be something of a beauty pageant for queen wannabes. Enter Mordecai, who sends Esther, his adopted daughter, to the palace. Of course, the king falls in love with her and they marry, but not before Mordecai counsels her to keep her religion a secret. And now the drama begins...Mordecai offends the king's top adviser, Haman. After his promotion, everyone was supposed to bow down in front of him, but Mordecai refused to do so. Haman's response was some over the top rage. According to Rabbi Telushkin, "Haman considers it beneath his dignity to wreak vengeance upon Mordecai alone. Instead, he

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concocts a plan to wipe out all the Jews at once. Using arguments that have remained part of the arsenal of anti-Semites ever since, he tell (the king): "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws, and it is not in your majesty's interests to tolerate them." The king acquiesces and signs his name to Haman's extermination plan, both of them unaware that the king's new and beloved queen is Jewish.

Mordecai hears of the plot and urges Esther to intervene with the king. Esther is reluctant at first but agrees and her strategy involves a couple of big dinners and lots of wine and probably great attention to her appearance. In response, the king says, "tell me anything you want." Esther asks for her life and the life of her people as they are at risk from a very bad man. The king is drawn in and asks, "Who is he?" Haman is exposed and Esther's identity as a Jew is revealed. Eventually Haman is executed on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai. His sons were killed when they continued to harass and threaten the Jews throughout the provinces. The Jews rose up and defended themselves and in two days disposed of those who sought to exterminate them. The feast of Purim is a two day celebration in remembrance of their survival.

There are some things of note within this book, not the least is the woman as savior. It is the only book of the Bible in which the name of God does not appear. Commentators a quick to point out that the hand of God is seen in the actions of Esther, Mordecai, the king but there is no overt appeal to God for help. The people are the means of deliverance, not miracles.

Another important point made is that Esther has no problem keeping her Jewishness a secret - there is nothing that sets her apart from the Persian people with whom she lives. The fear of assimilation was another kind of threat to the existence of the Jewish people when they no longer had their homeland. It is believed by many scholars that it was during the captivity in Persia that the Kosher dietary laws, that became such a part of Jewish identity were put in place for that purpose - to set people apart, distinct from their captors. That and the telling of their stories were how they avoided annihilation by assimilation. Apparently the experience from which Esther's story came was told before the Jewish people worked actively to create a distinctive identity for themselves. Perhaps, the close call was their motivation.

Food at a banquet became the means of their salvation. Well, doesn't it for us as well? We gather every week to share a holy meal, one with so many layers of meaning that I could preach on it from now until the end of the year. But for now, as the church is struggling in a sea of cultural apathy if not actual antipathy, a struggle for meaning and identity, we would be wise to embrace our holy meal tradition and allow it to lift us.

The Eucharist is mysterious; it links us to our past and our future all in one moment in the present. The past is revisited in Jesus' last night with his companions, we relive his words and actions. This Eucharist makes him present with us as we remember and then present within us as we eat it with each other. In this we are saved from disconnect and despair. The Eucharist

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is our ever present call into a future when God's time has been realized – this holy meal is meant to be a prefiguring of the Kingdom come, when all are united. Again we are saved from complacent acceptance of the world as it is and hopelessness that it will never change.

The Eucharist has always been a tool of justice seekers. As with the early church when those from different classes and status ate at the table together – a shocking development. The meal does away with difference. It was a leap forward in America when black former slaves took communion with whites. It was another when people received blessed bread and wine from women. It is important that we keep this in mind every time we come to this altar rail; we always eat the same meal as those who are different from us. And we are saved from our self imposed isolation from them.

Eating what others eat is powerful. This month, the Mayor of Phoenix agreed to live on a food stamp budget for a week. His journal tells his story. By day 4 he was exhausted and having trouble thinking clearly. Eating as so many of his constituents do has brought him closer to solidarity with those who are poor than ever before. He knows something now that he didn't before because he ate as they eat. It was a kind of Eucharist for him and he's been changed, one might say saved. When you come to receive your holy food, know that it isn't just a bland form of bread and very sweet wine, it is grace, it is justice, it is remembrance and hope, it is celebration and it is salvation from many things. Taste and see that the Lord is good.

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