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Title: The Playbill: Esther and Mordecai on Faithful Living,

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Rachel Matthews

Scripture: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22

Other lectionary texts in Year B: Ps. 124:1-8, James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-50.

¹So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ²On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." ³Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me — that is my petition — and the lives of my people — that is my request. ⁴For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king." ⁵Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" ⁶Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

⁹Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." ¹⁰So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

9:20Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, ²²as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

The Playbill: Esther and Mordecai on Faithful Living

I have put you in a unfortunate spot. I apologize. Spoiler alert! The scripture for today starts at the conclusion of this dramatic, violent, comedic, burlesque theater called Esther. (Yes, burlesque and, yes, it is in the Bible.) You have missed all the nuances, all the intrigue, all the drama! The book of Esther is read at its entirety every year in the Spring at the Jewish feast of Purim. "Pur" means "lots," which is an ancient game of

chance used to help the king make decisions. During Purim, the story is read amid laughter, dancing, music, food and drink and gifts are given to the poor.

It is only when you hear the whole story do you see God's redemption, the truth in the midst of the fiction. The truth is given to us sideways like a lot of wisdom literature. God's name is not even mentioned in the earliest Hebrew versions of this story!

I am sorry you missed the beginning when the Persian King Ahasuerus and Queen Vashti are throwing gargantuan parties for the officials, ministers and the governors of the provinces of Persia and Media and their courts. We are meant to see the revelry, the opulence, the excess, the power.

You missed the royal scandal when the King asks his Queen Vashti to join him and all his friends after 7 days of drinking. She knows better. She tells him no. How embarrassing for the King! In its misogyny the scene sets us up for understanding how such a king can be taken advantage of. He likes to party.

So, the King banishes Vashti from his sight. (Good for her!) He sends out a decree to find another queen.

And, you missed the search for the new queen. Enter the faithful Mordecai, a faithful servant, a Benjaminite Jew and servant of the King, a man who in the past had saved this very King from a plot to kill him by two of his other servants. Mordecai is a good guy. He is faithful to his God and faithful to his king. But, like many good guys, his good works go forgotten

much of the time. His heroism toward the King was written down but forgotten. It will be important in the grand scheme of things but not until later.

What seems to be important in the beginning is that Mordecai just happens to be the older cousin to a beautiful young woman named Esther. In his work at the palace he hears about this application to become queen and encourages Esther, who was really like an adopted daughter, to apply. Mordecai warns her to keep quiet about being a Jew. Mordecai is faithful to Esther in all the ways the time period allows him to be. He teaches her use her smarts and be wise. Shhh. Scandal, intrigue, and secrets...This is all really good theater. And good theater helps us survive oppressive circumstances.

You missed the oo's and ahh's when the beautiful and courageous Esther becomes the Queen. She is the one who pleases the King even more than the other seven beautiful young maidens who have been chosen to replace Vashti.

This is not a Me-too Movement play. It is a misogynistic, racist, and rude story just like many of our action movies and comedies today. And yet, the exaggeration, the caricatures and the stereotypes in this play make it impossible to miss the point. As theologian Carol Bechtel puts it: It is hard to live a faithful life in the midst of an unfaithful culture. (Carol Bechtel, Interpretation Esther, p.10) She says,

“It is a book after all, about the struggle to be faithful in the midst of an increasingly unfaithful culture. It is a story of courage, faith, and deliverance. It is the story of men and

women working together with a God who is not always obvious, but who is always gracious. In sum, it is a powerful word for the present...made even more powerful for its being written down.” P.84 Interpretation: Esther, Carol Bechtel

This point is true for the Jews like Mordecai and Esther amidst the Persians as is told in the story. But this book is in our Christian canon. There are all kinds of controversies about this book being in our canon, our Bible, but it's there. Why? Because it is just as hard to live a faithful Christian life in the midst of an increasingly secular and unfaithful culture as it is to live a faithful Jewish life in the midst of a Persian culture. So, this is an interfaith story, isn't it?

I will say it again, it is hard to live a faithful life in the midst of an unfaithful culture. How do you survive when you are not a powerful person? Is there a better way to live than not? How do you live a faithful life in the midst of an unfaithful culture or at the very least, a culture that is different and does not support you? This past year has given us opportunities to ask these questions again and again. Last week Rob Dalhaus from CU at Home was asked at our Faith in the Real World series, how do you know the decision you make in faith for “just such a time as this,” a phrase Mordecai tells Esther in the book, is really what God wants; how do you know it's not just your ego?

What would you say? I think the answer is not in a dogmatic teaching but in an aha experience that only life, the arts and wisdom can show you. My take may be that it is more

situational than dogmatic. Hum... we really do need to hear the whole story! So let's go on....

Cultural references to Jews and Persians and Amalekites, kings, slaves and court officials develop the characters in Esther quickly and encourage us to rally around our heroes. We are clear early on that this King is pompous and weak and ripe for being taken advantage of by Haman, a sniveling, arrogant Amalekite and hater of the Jews. He is an evil man. He is the antagonist of the story, who appears early on the scene to deepen the plot.

Haman weasels his way in quickly to become the right hand man to the King of Persia. And, when he does, he has everyone in the court and all of Persia bow down to him. The power just goes to his head. The audience knows there is something not quite right about this. This is the person with an ego who thinks only of himself.

Mordecai who is a faithful Jew, who bows to no God but the Lord God, does not bow to Haman. And, Haman hates him for it. For the audience Mordecai is a hero. He follows the commandments, "Thou Shalt have no other God before me," without even using the name of God.

This infuriates Haman. So, when the King and Haman are playing lots (Pur), Haman wins a wish from the king. The king asks Haman for whatever he wants. Haman thinks about Mordecai not bowing to him and wants to destroy Mordecai and his entire nation, a people who are from a different culture than he is. He gets the King to decree to destroy the Jews

throughout Persia. This is a genocide in the making. Haman is clearly a petty, evil man. He brings his family in on his plot. He starts building a gallows to hang Mordecai on visible for the entire community to see.

Behind all the decisions being made up to this point, we recognize that there is another power at work in this story that seems to put the characters in the right place at the right time to lean the outcome in the direction of salvation and redemption for the powerless. So although God is never spoken of in our version of the story, Esther is in the right place at the right time in the court and Mordecai encourages her to do something to help her people. This is her time to save her people. And, right here in the story is where we identify with the character of Esther. Have you had a point in your life that, at that moment, it is your time to do good in the world?

In a dance that only theater can do well, we see the final scenes quickly working in tandem leading us to our scripture text this morning.

Esther starts planning how to get the King's attention to make her request to save her people without setting off his anger. She decides to have a banquet, She uses her beauty to get his attention. She invites the king and Haman to her banquet.

Haman starts building his gallows to kill Mordecai and destroy the Jews.

Then, the King, in a seeming random but divine intervention, has a sleepless night and reads in his own history books about

Mordecai and his heroic acts of saving him way back when from the bad actors and decides to honor Mordecai.

The King asks Haman the next morning what he would do to honor someone who has done good for the King. Haman thinks the King is talking about honoring himself and tells the King what would be great for himself.....Oops!.....the King says he is talking about Mordecai. Haman knows, and we know, his time of power is unraveling.

And so we come to the scripture we read today. The banquet happens. Esther has the King's attention and makes her request. She does it in such a way as to trap Haman. She says, "If I have won the King's favor, let my request be that my life be spared and that of my people. We are to be destroyed, killed, annihilated. If I had been sold to slavery, I would never have said anything, but to be annihilated, that is a different matter."

The King is surprised, incensed that someone would kill his beautiful bride and her people. "Who made this decree? Who did this?" cries the King.

With some help from the court and Esther, the spotlight lands on Haman. He wails and falls on the Queen's lap to beg for mercy which incenses the King even further because it looks like Haman is attacking Esther.

Haman is led away to hang on the gallows he prepared for Mordecai. We get a sense of two kinds of justice at work: 1. His hate did himself in and 2. That old code an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is satisfied.

What follows is violent but satisfies the ancient code of justice. Haman's family which conspired with him is killed. And, an annual remembrance is created, the festival of Purim. And, God's people celebrate. They are saved. And we have this story in writing as a remembrance of an old code, a justice and wisdom that seems to be built into our pores. You can hear them sing the psalms,

¹If it had not been the LORD who was on our side
— let Israel now say —

²if it had not been the LORD who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,

³then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us; (GO TO VERSE 8)

⁴then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;

⁵then over us would have gone
the raging waters.

⁶Blessed be the LORD,
who has not given us
as prey to their teeth.

⁷We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped.

⁸Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

(Psalm 124:1-8)

Mordecai and Esther have shown us how you live a faithful life in an unfaithful culture. It is not easy. You do things that both follow the rules and bend them. You lift up the powerless and topple those who are after self-gain. There is courage. The voiceless find a voice out of necessity. And, God is honored even when God's name is not spoken.

As a Christian, I think we read the book of Esther through a lens that can highlight the power of God's love at work in the world even in the midst of death and destruction and which includes reconciliation and forgiveness. We might not have killed everyone in Haman's family that was associated with him. We have other more humane ways of bringing about justice. We see in Christ that God's love for God's people, all of God's people, is the greater good, greater than the law of the land, the justice of swords, the justice of kings and governments or even religious dogma. Senseless oppression, innocent victims of violence, whims of the ego that undermine life are unacceptable in every government and every faith. Men and women of faith, Mordecai and Esther, you and I must come together at just such a time as this to love humanity and the world that we live in, "working together with God who is not always obvious, but who is always gracious." (Carol Bechtel)

It is as my work as mission coordinator that I hear the stories here in town and in the world for which the story of Esther is God's Word for the present. There are thousands of people in our world, millions, our neighbors, who are senselessly oppressed, innocents who are caught in the crossfire of economic egos, and people who are just forgotten in the

revelry of other people who already have their needs met. Indeed, all of creation is often taken for granted in our drive to be the most important. We must work together to redeem the hate and end the violence that comes from this. Esther's story helps us remember to do this work. That is what Jesus taught us too. "Forgive them for they know not what they do." That happened on the cross. But, even before he was killed and especially after he rose again, we see how reconciliation is possible in his care for the poor, the leper, the widow, and the foreigner. We must reach out together to heal the broken, cure the sick and free the imprisoned.

The whole story is right here (point to Bible) and right here (point to Heart).