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**Esther 4:14, NRSVue.**

*<sup>14</sup> For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."*

**Esther: *Our God Will Never Remain Silent.***

There is something that I have tried to talk about many times, in this church and in the two other Methodist churches I have served. But I was never able to quite verbalize this idea – at least not in my own mind. That is, I think, until now. It's a result of the Bible Study we held on Zoom in February. I decided to take on something more in depth, something that would require multiple sessions: an overview of the "history" books of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. I almost left two books out, Esther and Ruth, because they're not truly history books. They are both widely regarded as ancient Hebrew short stories that somehow found their way into Scripture. But since they are in the official list of Old Testament "history" books, I decided to include them. The list consists of: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, the Samuels, the Kings, the Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Together, they tell us the story of the entry of the Israelites into Canaan through the return from exile in Babylon. Ruth is supposed to concern an incident

occurring during the time of the Judges, around 1100 B.C. But we believe it was written hundreds of years later. Esther's story is situated during the reign of King Xeres of Persia, around 480 B.C., but was probably written a hundred or more years later. King Xeres was also known as King Ahasuerus.

It occurred to me in the middle of our Bible Study session that Esther is a beautiful metaphor for the presence of God in our lives – something that I have struggled to convey from this little pulpit. Very importantly, Esther is famous in large part because it doesn't even mention God directly, and the apparent indirect references to God are easy to miss if you are simply reading for the storyline. The Book of Esther, despite obviously being of dubious historicity, and despite being seemingly very secular in content, has been beloved by Jews over the millennia since it was written. And medieval scholars produced more commentaries on Esther than any other books, except for the books of the Torah. More ancient copies of it, created by hand, of course, have been found than any other books of the Hebrew Scriptures, including the five books of the Torah. But in Esther, God is never mentioned directly, and we hear nothing of prayer, the major Jewish religious festivals, the Covenant with God, or Temple worship. Because of this, there has been conflict over including it in the Jewish and the

Christian Scriptures. Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, vehemently hated it. More recently it has been heavily criticized for being violent.

So, why would we care about something that is apparently an ancient Hebrew short story, not rooted in history, not written when it claims to have been written, and is far from being traditional as a piece of biblical writing? Before we look at this, though, let me do something I do frequently during my messages in church. I'm going to talk about my childhood. As you know by now, I grew up Christian, loved being in my childhood church, and very much felt the presence of God in my life. It is this last thing that is the hardest thing to capture in words, to convey in a concrete fashion. Yes, I went to a Catholic school. Yes, we went to church every Sunday. Yes, I did pray – but ah, not that much. I didn't live and breathe God every day of my life. My faith, my trust in God, my sense that God was with me was subtle, something I didn't think about consciously very often. But it was quite real. Why? Let's look at the story of Esther.

It's a relatively short book, but not extremely short. It contains about 5,000 words and consists of ten chapters. It's very fast paced, very easy to read, and is centered around a woman named Esther – and how she single-handedly saved the Chosen People from annihilation by the Persian Empire. It is a melodrama. In Chapter 1, a King of Persia named Ahasuerus holds a few magnificent banquets.

He wants to show off the beauty of his queen, Vashti, but she doesn't appear when he demands it, and so he banishes her from the land. In Chapter 2, the search is on for a new queen. An important character emerges: a man named Mordecai, a Jew, and apparently a descendent of the father of King Saul.

Mordecai is Esther's uncle and her adoptive father. Mordecai was a captive taken from Israel by the Babylonians and is now serving the Persian king as an official, as the Persians have conquered the Babylonians. Between Mordecai's promoting of Esther to the king and Esther's great charm, she is chosen as queen. But the Persian king somehow does not know that she is a Jew. Also in Chapter 2, and very importantly, Mordecai and Esther save the king's life from two plotting court eunuchs. In Chapter 3, an advisor to the king, Haman, doesn't like the way Mordecai refuses to cow-tow to the king, and finding out that Mordecai is a Jew, Haman convinces the king to kill every single Jew. In Chapter 4 Mordecai prevails upon Esther to intercede with the king. In Chapter 5, there is another banquet, this time, a private one, sponsored by Esther, the queen. At her request, the king and Haman attend the banquet. Meanwhile, Haman has erected gallows to hang Mordecai. In Chapter 6, the king belatedly honors Mordecai for saving his life by having Haman, of all people, parade Mordecai around town in fancy clothes and on the king's horse. In Chapter 7, Esther uses her banquet as a favorable

environment to tell the king that she is a Jew and that his man, Haman, is about to kill Mordecai and all of the Jews. She is motivated entirely by her desire to save her people and does not think of her own safety in revealing that she is a Jew. But the king does not waver in his love for her, and so the king gets pissed and hangs Haman on the gallows that Haman built for Mordecai. The order to kill Jews all over the land has already gone out. But, in Chapter 8, the king issues orders allowing the Jews to defend themselves against anyone who tries to harm them. The Jews celebrate by creating a new festival, Purim, which honors the reversal of fortune for the Jewish people who are under the power of the Persian Empire. They feast and give to the poor in honor of this new holiday. In Chapter 9, there is a battle that spans 127 provinces across the vast Persian Empire, where the Jews kill 75,000 enemy troops, but the Jews do not take any plunder. They also kill the ten sons of Haman. In Chapter 10, the events of the war and the story of Esther and Mordecai is placed in the formal records of the Persian Empire. This makes the protection of the Jews an enduring law that will hold for all time.

No, it isn't the killing of 75,000 people, apparently all in one day, that makes the story of Esther, with its absence of the name of God, a spiritual story. Consider Chapter 4, where Mordecai and Esther begin their efforts to engage the king's powerful protection of the Jews. Here is verse 14 of Chapter 4:

*14 For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."*

Mordecai is speaking to Esther, energizing her to defend her people before the

king. Persia is a vast empire that has destroyed the powerful Babylonian Empire.

To get the Persian king to proclaim that the Jews have a right to exist and to

defend themselves would be an incredible accomplishment for Esther. But there

is a subtlety in these words of Mordecai that show us why the author of the Book of

Esther never felt it was necessary to explicitly mention God. Mordecai is saying

that if she remains silent and does not do God's work, her family, including

Mordecai and herself, will die, but *"relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews*

*from another place,"* meaning that God will see to it that his people are saved

anyways. The Jews will be protected if not by Esther, then by God. Mordecai also

says, *"Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this,"*

meaning that either way, God is in control. God will get this done either through

a human like Esther or through some other means. God uses many tools to

enforce his will. The hidden secret in this story is that the end was already

decided, by God, in advance. Followers of God will survive. There was never any

reason to worry about the outcome. God is happy to make use of us, but God is

not helpless without us. We can live calmly, knowing God is there for us.

Here are the next few verses from Chapter 4:

*<sup>15</sup> Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, <sup>16</sup> “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” <sup>17</sup> Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.*

Esther says, “*if I perish, I perish.*” She doesn’t know what the king will do when she tells him that she is a Jew. But she understands what Mordecai is saying. This is a moment where God will take charge. This is a spiritual moment. So, she orders Mordecai to gather all the Jews in the capital, Susa, which is in truth the winter capital of the Persian Empire, and have them fast from food and water for three days and nights. Only after making this apparent offering to God, will she dare go before her king and tell him what she has concealed from him – that she is a Jew and he is about to wipe out, all across the Empire, including Israel, his queen’s people. Mordecai, the uncle and the adoptive father, is now the one taking orders, and he does as she commands. She has the moral authority.

The book of Esther is powerful not because of the military story in it, the success of the Jews in killing off the faction of the Persian Empire that wants the Jews dead. It is after all, just a story, and even readers in ancient times and in the Middle Ages knew this. The book isn’t powerful because it rambles on about theology and the covenant with God, and how God will protect his people if they

continue to follow God and have trust in God. The depth of the power of this story, what has made it such a beloved part of Hebrew literature over the millennia, is the lack of the word “God”, of actual preaching, of theology, of the mention of the history of the Jews from Egypt to Canaan, or under the Judges and the Kings. The story, if we think about it carefully, makes the point that we are not in charge. We are not going to command God the way that Esther manipulates the Persian king. God is going to do what God does, independently of us. Yes, Esther can save herself personally, along with her uncle and apparently other relatives in the city. We always have the opportunity to save ourselves if we act. And just like Esther, we can go further and offer ourselves as the hand of God in protecting and saving others. But apart from being given the gift of acting in God’s name, God is still going to be omniscient, all powerful, a defender of the faithful, and a force within all believers.

That’s how I felt as a kid. This is what I have been trying to convey on Sundays. We have an incredible gift: the hand of God is always protecting us, even when we are not talking or explicitly thinking about God. We are saved by faith. Our faith leads us to live and act a certain way, like Esther did. But Esther did not have to beg God to save the faithful. We do not have to worry about God. It would be vain, even arrogant to think we could make God do anything.

Here is the beginning of Chapter 6, and I have edited this. This is the chapter where the king decides, long after the fact, to reward Mordecai for saving the King's life when two of his officials are plotting against him:

*6 On that night the king could not sleep, and he gave orders to bring the book of records, the annals, and they were read to the king. <sup>2</sup> It was found written how Mordecai had told about the king's eunuchs had conspired to kill the king. <sup>3</sup> Then the king said, "What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" The king's servants said, "Nothing has been done for him."*

This is the beginning of the change of heart within the king. Before he even knows that Esther is a Jew, he is moved to honor a Jew. Why? He can't sleep. Not being able to sleep, having dreams or nightmares, these are common literary instruments that we see in the Hebrew Scriptures to indicate that God is directing someone. Again, in a way that a modern Christian reader can easily miss, we are being told that all the while Mordecai and Esther are struggling to save God's people, God is calmly working to take of us. We can relax. God has this.

I've told you before that I loved my big the beautiful Gothic church in which I was raised, with its vaulted ceilings lined with gold, its brilliant stain glass windows, and its beautiful frescoes. The pews reeked of many decades of incense. Many of us remain very attached to the environment in which we first learned about the security offered by God. Different Christian traditions have very different sorts of churches. I have grown to love this archetypal Methodist

church, with its white exterior, modest bell tower, and what seem like hand carved pews. (Now ,don't tell me they were mass-carved with a mechanical engraver in New Jersey: I don't want to hear that.) I have met people who have told me about the little library in their childhood home where they studied the Bible with their parents, and how much that room looms in their memories. I met a middle-aged woman from the Philippines who went to church in a tent: she dreams of that tent to this day. When we bond with a physical house of worship, of a location we associate with God, we are bonding with that place where someone first filled us in on that incredible news, that God guards us.

One day, when I was a boy, I was given the honor of working a service run by the bishop. It was in a girls' reform school. I remember how rigidly they all knelt in the pews, totally silent, incredibly disciplined by the environment to which they had been sentenced. In the middle of the service, when I was handing the bishop the cup of wine, I tripped on my oversized cassock (I was a small kid) and spilled the wine all over the bishop. I was horrified. The girls did not let out the tiniest laugh. But the bishop smiled at me reassuringly. In that moment, the reliability of God was reinforced. It didn't matter if I made mistakes or if I made a fool of myself. God was my protector, my sentinel. As Mordecai told Esther: we might choose to occasionally remain silent, but our God will never remain silent.