

“Healing Power”

By Tim Hall – 30 Sep 2018 (19 Pent B, Proper 21)

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Let us pray... “O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.” Amen.

Our lectionary readings this morning are challenging, at best, with our Old Testament reading from Esther found to be particularly confusing. Often, there is a thread of theme that connects them which, as my wife Judy often points out to me, may be found in the Collect of the Day, which we just prayed. I plan to talk first about Esther and then finish up with our Gospel reading and our Epistle from James.

There has been quite a bit going on in the years preceding the passage we read from Esther this morning. According to the book’s introduction, King Ahasuerus rules over a great empire comprising 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. 180 days of wild celebration ensued on the formation of the empire. His first wife refused to come to him, so he “got rid of her.” Esther, the orphaned cousin of Mordecai goes into the beauty contest to become the King’s second wife. This involves one year of cosmetic preparation with all the other virgins... six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics for women. She wins!

Frederick Buechner, a 20th century American author and theologian, in his book [Peculiar Treasures](#), describes this episode.

King Xerxes of Persia, otherwise known as Ahasuerus, has the distinction of being the only person in the Bible whose name begins with an X. There's not much else you can say for him. He was a blow-hard and a show-off, and anybody with an eighth-grade education could wrap him around his little finger without half trying. Or *her* little finger.

There was Haman, for example. Haman was Xerxes' right-hand man and a raging anti-Semite. There was also a Jew named Mordecai, who lived in the capital, and one day when Haman came prancing by, Mordecai refused to flatten himself out and grovel in the dust like everybody else. It was the break Haman had been waiting for. He told Xerxes about Mordecai's insubordination and rudeness and said it was a vivid illustration of how the Jews as a whole were a miserable lot. He said if you let one of them in, they brought their friends, and Persia was crawling with them. He said the only laws they respected were their own, and it was obvious they didn't give a hoot in Hell about the king or anybody else. He then said that as far as he was concerned, the only thing to do was exterminate the whole pack of them like rats and offered the king ten thousand of the best for the privilege of organizing the operation. Xerxes pocketed the cash and told him to go ahead.

But then there was also Queen Esther, a good-looking Jewish girl who was both a cousin of Mordecai's and Xerxes' second wife. As soon as she got wind of what Haman was up to, she decided to do what she could to save her people from the gas-chamber. Xerxes had a rather short fuse, and you had to know how to handle him, but she planned her strategy carefully, and by the time she was through, she'd not only talked him out of letting the Jews get exterminated but had gotten him to hang Haman from the same gallows that had been set up for Mordecai. She even managed to persuade Xerxes to give Mordecai Haman's old job.

Unfortunately, the end of the story is less edifying. Not content with having saved their people and taken care of Haman, Esther and Mordecai used their new power to orchestrate the slaughter of seventy five thousand of their old enemies. The whole unpleasant account is contained in The Book of Esther, which has the distinction of being the only book in the Bible where the name of God isn't even mentioned. There seems every reason to believe that he considered himself well out of it.

However, the introduction to Esther in the New Oxford Annotated Bible, which was my study bible used during “Education for Ministry”, puts it this way:

Esther is the fascinating tale that provides the “historical” basis for a non-Mosaic festival, known as Purim. Thanks to the wisdom of Mordecai and the courageous efforts of Queen Esther, Jews throughout [this ancient] empire were saved from a subtly planned anti-Semitic pogrom.

Simple though its story and purpose are, no other book of the Hebrew Bible has received such mixed reviews from good, God-fearing people – both Jews and Christians – as Esther. Some have criticized the book for what it contains; others, for what it lacks.

The Persian king, for instance, is mentioned 190 times, but the God of Israel, not once – nor are such basic Jewish practices and institutions as the Law, covenant, prayer, [...] or Jerusalem. [...] As many Jews and Christians have lamented, the story evidences a vengeful, bloodthirsty, and chauvinistic spirit. Intrigue, deceit, and hatred abound, regardless of whether the spotlight is on Haman, Esther, Mordecai, or on their enemies.

Small wonder, then, that the book's canonicity was much contested.

Nonetheless, Esther is still a religious work. For although the Deity is not seen or even heard on its stage, God is standing in the wings, following the drama and arranging the props for a successful resolution of the play. Certain religious concepts are clearly presupposed [...], notably the concept of Providence. The author is saying that, as in the case of Mordecai and Esther, Providence can be relied upon to reverse the ill-fortunes that beset individuals or the nation, provided that such leaders – and their followers – actively do their part, acting wisely and courageously.

And, there is the grace that comes from the establishment of the Purim festival... that gifts of food should be given to one another and presents given to the poor.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is telling his disciples to be inclusive, not exclusive. Just because someone may worship and proclaim the Gospel differently from what we're used to, that's no

reason to reject them and to declare their gospel false. As a matter of fact, he says, “don’t be a stumbling block before any of these little ones who believe in me.”

Many of my most enjoyable experiences, when I traveled internationally to work with foreign militaries around the world, was seeking out and worshiping with other Christians. Whether at a large Anglican cathedral in Singapore, a tiny St. Luke’s Episcopal congregation in Hualien, Taiwan, or at St. Thomas’ Catholic Basilica in Chennai, India, there were two things I saw that stood out to me. First, that the way people worshiped was incredibly different from one place to another, which in itself was fun and rewarding. And second, that no matter how they worshipped the focus was on glorifying God and giving thanks for the teaching and sacrifice of our savior, Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We are all in this together, and the cross-cultural bonds of Christian devotion is an incredibly powerful and heartening experience! It’s just like that feeling we experience at the communion rail, where we share the gifts of body and blood with the saints of God, past, present, and future throughout creation.

Jesus then goes on to warn the disciples about sin, using several gruesome metaphors. The point I take away from these is just how destructive and debilitating sin is and that we should take drastic measures to rid ourselves of it.

Then he tells the disciples to **be salty** and “be at peace with one another”. Josette gave a nice summation of what this means in her homily from Feb 2017. Reflecting on Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount* from Matthew Chapter 5, she said,

“To liken ourselves to salt is to proclaim that we add flavor to the lives of those we touch. It’s to acknowledge our ability to preserve – or to save – others from corruption and death. In other words, what we do matters.”

This morning we finish up a month-long look at the Epistle of James. James is filled with practical advice on how to live a good Christian life. To help us be cognizant of “what we do”, so that it will matter for good, not evil.

He warns us that our tongues can get the better of us, so be thoughtful before speaking and do not speak evil against one another; that we should strive to rid our hearts of envy and selfish ambition; that our trials can make us stronger; to treat people equally... to truly love our neighbor without showing partiality to one over another; to be doers of the word and not hearers only.

This morning James concludes with more simple and straightforward instruction... if you’re hurting or suffering, pray; if you’re cheerful and life is going well, rejoice and give thanks. Then he goes on to explain how healing can be accomplished through Christ, through confessing our sins and seeking absolution and the prayers of others. But primarily, he says, continue to return to Christ and bring other sinners into the fold, for we find, through Christ, healing and salvation for all.

So there you have it... the thematic thread of our readings this morning: There is healing power in God's love for humanity. Be it to save us, by Providence, from destruction; to welcome all those that profess the love of God and the salvation in Christ, thus healing ourselves of destructive thoughts of envy and selfish ambition; and to keep ourselves salty so that we can be a help to others.

*Let the words of **our** mouths,
and the meditations of **all our** hearts
be acceptable in your sight, O Lord,
our strength and our redeemer.*

Amen