

Sermon: Sept. 27, 2009

Scripture: Esther 7:1-6; 9-10
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

Sermon Title: Authors of our Own Destruction

Call to Worship: Psalm 124

Leader: Behold, bless the Lord, all you servants
Of the Lord, who by night stand in the
House of the Lord.

People: **We will bless the Lord and praise our
God because he stands with us day and night.**

Leader: Lift up your hands in the sanctuary,
And bless the Lord.

People: **We will lift up our hands in the sanctuary,**
(all the people lift up their hands)
And bless the Lord.

Leader: The Lord who made heaven and earth
Bless you from Zion!

People: **We receive God's Blessing and wait
Upon our Lord. Amen.**

**Hymns: #181 Come Sing to God
#344 Christ of the Upward Way
#404 Precious Lord, Take My Hand**

Prayer of Confession:

Gracious Lord, you have created us and wondrously made us. We are reflections of your image and we long to be like you: loving, just and caring. But sometimes we do not mirror your image. There are times when we are anything but: loving, just and caring. We have a tendency to focus on our own desires and our own issues. We have a hard time thinking about the needs of others when we are so wrapped up in our own needs. We want security and we want continuity, so we shy away from anything that puts our security at risk or reeks of change. Help us to understand that only You, the Creator and Sustainer of Life, do not change. Forgive us for our narrow vision and enable us to be more like You. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

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The story of Esther is one of the most prized stories of all the scriptures. It is a story that is filled with anomalies and contradictions. And yet it is a story that conveys a strong message of God's active involvement in the life of God's people. And it all revolves around a young girl who is plucked out of her Hebrew heritage and thrust into the intrigue of a Persian King and the court politics that almost destroyed her.

Esther was a beauty. The niece of Mordecai, a Jewish leader who had been deported under the great dispersion of Nebuchadrezzar, the Jews in Babylon struggled to maintain their Jewish identity. It was not easy. The temptation was always there to become a part of the population. Blend in. Adopt the local dress code and the local mores. Forget about the Jewish faith in Yahweh. Be like the natives. Still, many Hebrews remembered their roots and stuck out like sore thumbs. It was out of this faithful group that Esther came. Which makes the story even more fascinating.

King Xerxes had a passion for beautiful women. His harem was filled with them. Queen Vashti herself had come out of that harem. But she had grown old. Her beauty had faded. And she had become embroiled in the palace politics. She was no longer the favorite of King Xerxes. When he laid eyes on Esther, he knew that had to have her. The fact that she acquiesced and willingly became a partner to the King gives us occasion to pause. She violated all of the Hebrew restrictions against fraternizing with pagans. Above everything good little Jewish Girls understood that they were never to allow themselves to become enmeshed with Gentiles.

But Esther does. And it does not take long for the King to recognize her beauty and her regal temperament and so she displaces Vashti as the new Queen. One commentator on the story of Esther asks the question: *Can a good woman find a fruitful place in this depraved, conniving and confining world?*

Well, Esther did! Obviously, her place at the King's side indicated that she compromised some of her rigid religious beliefs. And her involvement in the court with all of its pagan practices meant that she must have made some compromises there as well. But when the chips were down, Esther stood up for her people and became the conduit by which God saved them from genocide.

So, the first point I want to make this morning that flows from the story of Esther is that life is not always a matter of making black and white decisions. I wish it were. Things would be so easy! If we had a rule book we could turn to that gave us the

proper mode of behavior in every situation that life throws at us. But that is not how life is. Besides, there are not enough library shelves to hold the rule books that would be necessary to cover every situation of life. Rather, God created us with minds that think and with spirits that can discern God's will, and then he throws us out there into the world to be Stewards. And when we are confronted with complex and perplexing living situations, we have the freedom to decide how to act. This means that another young woman may have decided not to enter Xerxes' harem because of her religious convictions, while Esther did. And we do not elevate one woman over the other as being more "Godly" or "righteous". Because we do not know the eventual outcome of our actions.... As with Esther, it placed her in a position where God was able to use her for the benefit of the Hebrew people. But all of this we know only in hindsight. So, when confronted with existential decisions about life... make our choices based on the best information and the best ethics and the best religious mores as we can muster..... and then we ask God to bless our decisions and forgive our mistakes.

Now, there is another lesson that comes out of Esther's life in the court of King Xerxes. And this may be the most important message that God is sharing with us through this story. Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. Sometimes we are the authors of our own destruction. Take for example Haman.

Haman was one of King Xerxes' chief advisors. You might say that he was the Secretary of State. He had a lot of power and influence with the King. One of the little sidebars to this story is just how out of touch Xerxes was to what was going on around him. He was more interested in keeping his harem happy, than he was in the affairs of state. Kathleen O'Connor, Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary notes that the book of Esther "*delights in making subtle fun of the Persian Empire, of the king – a monarchical buffoon – and of the empire's ridiculous, rigid, and unalterable law. The King is a weak ruler, blind to moral character of others and ignorant of his people, and he has come under the sway of the "wicked Haman..."*"

Haman is a wicked, prejudiced and spiteful individual who is using his position to push his own agenda. Haman delights in the power which the King has given him. You can almost see Haman as the "man behind the throne". So, when he discovers that there is a Jewish Elder who will not bow down to the King, he uses that as an excuse to eliminate this disruptive class of people who are living in their midst. He has the King sign an edict which declares death to any who will not bow down to the King. Then, to make his point, he has an immense gallows built in the courtyard of the palace. This will be where that traitor Mordecai will be executed. Even the dimensions of the gallows is comical. Seventy-five-feet high! Why so high? You can hang a person if you can get his feet just six inches off the ground. Perhaps it was Haman's way of demonstrating his authority. Make it big, he told his carpenters! Or perhaps he wanted the citizens outside the palace walls to see the penalty meted out to those who failed to follow the King's orders, which were really Haman's orders.

It reminds me of the story of Deacon Brodie, one of the members of the town council in the city of Edinburgh Scotland back in the 1700's. It seems that Deacon Brodie was a well respected city father. He sat on the city council and was a practicing engineer. So, when the city council decided that they need to build a new gallows, Deacon Brodie to design and build it. They situated the gallows in the town square right outside of Edinburgh Cathedral.

Little did the town council know that in the evenings, after dark, Deacon Brodie was a night burglar. He had been a welcome guest in the well to do homes of the community and therefore knew the lay out of each house, so in the still of the night he pillaged each home. This went on for a number of years. Until, at last he was caught red handed. When the story was printed in the Edinburgh Newspaper, someone sent a copy of the article to Robert Louis Stephenson who used it to write the story of Dr. Jeckell and Mr. Hyde.

Oh, did I tell you? Deacon Brodie was the first person executed on the gallows, which he had designed and built!

Sometimes we make our own Hell! Sometimes we become the victims of our own misadventures. It was sure true of Haman. He thought he was beyond reprisal. He laid his trap with cunning, only to discover that he was caught in his own trap. When Esther discovered what he had done, she had to make a decision. Would she go to the King and disclose that she was Jewish and that Haman's decree condemned her along with the others. Or, did she keep her mouth shut and enjoy the advantages of being the King's consort? What should she do?

What she did was to lay a trap of her own. She threw a party for the King. Not one party, but two. At the first party she asked the King to come to an even greater party and to bring his advisor, Haman. And then at the second party she asked the King to spare her life. The King was surprised, to say the least. He did not know her life was in danger. It was then that she disclosed that someone in the court had conspired to have all Jews in the Kingdom executed. The execution edict had been issued and the troops were already on their way to round the Hebrews up. So when Xerxes discovered that his beloved Queen was of Jewish origin, he sent out a countermanding order which gave the Jews the right to kill anyone who would attack them. That stopped the slaughter dead in its tracks. And when Esther disclosed to Xerxes that it was Haman who started this whole thing rolling, the King ordered that Haman be executed on the very gallows which had been built for Mordecai.

A final thing to note about this story is that nowhere in it does it mention God. This story was included in the Hebrew Scriptures not because of its direct reference to God, but because of its indirect reference to God. Throughout the entire story, it is implied that the Spirit of God was at work. But it is never stated. Throughout this entire story the Spirit of God is seen at work in the life decisions of this young woman, whom many folks would scorn because she made so many compromises with the Hebrew Traditions.

The end of the story is that we are able to see in the real life of an individual how God is at work. Think about your own life. Decisions are not always crystal clear. Sometimes we have to choose between the lesser of two evils. Sometimes we have to know when to speak and when to be quiet. And the only way we can know these things is by the gentle leading of The Spirit of God.

We, like Esther are called upon to speak out when it really matters. And when does it really matter? Not when we are in danger.... But when others are in danger. When the disenfranchised and the underlings of life are beset and troubled. Remember the words of Christ: "Whoever has done it to the least of these my brethren, has done it unto me." The Christian Ethic that drives us, that leads our spirits as we make the decisions of life is always "other directed". You do not have to beat others over the head with "God Talk" in order to win them to Christ. You simply have to live lives that publicly state that there is a greater force at work in you. Nowhere in Esther are you pummeled with God language, but you know God is at work. That's how it should be for you and me. Amen

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