

Bible Study
Proper 21, Year B
September 27, 2015

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

“Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” (Mark 9: 40-41)

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

One of the most joyous occasions in the Jewish calendar is the festival of Purim, when the Jewish people remember the story of Esther. Esther is one of many stories where the Jewish people faced a mortal threat, yet were delivered by God through a chosen emissary who would thwart the powers that threatened their lives. In this story, Queen Esther is that emissary.

Out of resentment toward Mordacai (Esther’s cousin and adopted father), Haman (the chief minister of the Persian king) convinces King Ahasuerus to order the genocide of the Jewish people. The origin of Haman’s evil desire is pride, as he resents Mordacai for not bowing before him outside of the palace gate.

Mordacai tasks Esther (Ahasuerus’s new queen) to convince the king to delay this order and to spare the Jewish people. Although Esther is anxious about this task she sets out to complete it, and this is where our reading begins. In the end Haman is hung from his own gallows and the Jewish people are spared from attempted genocide.

To this day, Jewish people around the world celebrate God’s deliverance as told through this story with costumed festivity, food and wine, the giving of alms, exchanging gifts, reading the story of Esther, and offering prayers of thanksgiving to God. I once heard this and many other Jewish holidays that commemorate their history in biblical tradition this way: “They tried to kill us, we won, let’s eat!”

- In what ways do we commemorate the saving works of God?
- How can we, beyond celebration of the Holy Eucharist, joyously celebrate some of the beloved stories from scripture that have become important to our tradition?
- How does the story of Esther speak to you?
- What tasks have you been anxious about and how has God strengthened you to perform them?

Psalm 124

This psalm is appropriate for following a reading from Esther. With beautiful poetry that likely was used liturgically as a call and response prayer, perhaps with some liturgical drama, this psalm praises God for always standing with God’s chosen people through hardship. This psalm acknowledges that we can do little without God’s grace; that without God, the people of Israel would have been defeated by their enemies. But because God is good and remains with the chosen people, they have been delivered from destruction. While it is possible that this psalm is post-exilic, this language suggests that the psalm may have been written prior to the exile, as psalms written during the Babylonian captivity are often psalms of lament and post-exilic

psalms, while giving thanks to God for deliverance, do not share the same triumphalism that is expressed in Psalm 124.

- What hardships has God gotten you through?
- How have you noticed God's presence with you in the midst of challenges or conflicts?
- How do you give thanks to God for remaining with you through the good times and the bad?

James 5:13-20

In this portion of his letter, James writes about the goodness of God experienced through the power of prayer. Those who suffer should pray, those who are cheerful should praise God, those who are sick should have the community of the faithful pray for them while anointing them and laying hands of healing upon them. Through all this God will hear and answer their prayers in God's own way with holy wisdom. James says that the prayers of the righteous are both powerful and effective; they work. God hears us and responds. But sometimes it might not be the response that we expect.

- How do we deal with unexpected answers to our prayers?
- Does that challenge our faith or make us more aware of the mystery of God?
- We know that God's ways are not our ways. How do we bring that knowledge into our prayer life?
- How can these experiences develop wisdom?

Mark 9:38-50

"Whoever is not against us is for us." The Gospel admonishes us not to set up stumbling blocks in another's path to God. This is the well-known, macabre-sounding reading about amputating our hands and plucking out our eyes when they cause us to sin. Of course one way to interpret this is as a metaphor for eliminating behaviors and practices from our lives that lead us toward sin. When a novice brother or sister in Anamchaha Fellowship, one of the Episcopal Church's new dispersed monastic communities, is being clothed in his or her Habit, the aspiring novice is asked to prepare a list of distractions, habits, and behaviors from their past life that he or she wishes to leave behind when entering the new life as a religious. These are behaviors or practices that inhibit us from living most fully in relationship with God, others, and ourselves.

- What behaviors or practices do you wish to leave behind today?
- What are some stumbling blocks you have run into – either those that have been set up by others or those that you have set up in the way of others?
- How do you live into Jesus' statement that whoever is not against us is for us?

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