



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 19, Proper 21 – Year B
September 30, 2018

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

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

The book of Esther does not contain a direct mention of the name of God. Many have asked through the centuries why this is so, or where God is in the book. This is an important observation to make because any skeptic could make a clear case that God is absent in the modern age as well. We must be the interpreters that reveal God in Esther's story, as well as in the world today.

At the moment when Esther is asked what she requests of her King, we can see God's will prevail. It is rare that anyone is offered half of a kingdom by the king himself, and even more so when that person would not ask for riches, but only for a life of peace for their religious family. Then, the one who worships only his own power turns out to die upon the very device that he planned to use in his domination of others. In this passage, as in the book as a whole, human instinct to dominate is proven to backfire. The uncommon notion to protect the weak prevails. This prevailing intuition—which is at the same time life-giving, selfless, and sacrificial—is the fingerprint of God on our lives, as it was for Esther and Mordecai, directly named or not. Its fruits prevail too, much longer than any personal gain could have; the Feast of Purim that began in this story continues today through generous giving and the celebration of life.

- Risking oneself against governing forces on behalf of others seems foolish. Why does God urge us to put the needs of the poor above our own? In other words, what are the rewards that outweigh the immediate risks?

Psalm 124

This psalm ends by repeating the answer to the great question of Psalm 121: "From where is my help to come?" Again, we are reminded that our help is from the LORD, who created all that is (earth) as well as all that we can only hold in faith (the heavens). This psalm uses vivid imagery to acknowledge the painful feeling of helplessness. In the face of angry attackers and engulfing waters, the experience of helplessness is almost overwhelming. But here, we are given a promise of escaping our trap like a fleeing bird, perhaps a dove that appears after we emerge from those waters, and that guides us to safety. And the reminder: our savior is the one who created the waters in the first place and can make drowning seem like new life.

- What are some of the more common, but faulty, answers to that great question, "From where is my help to come?"

- Which are the usual suspects that we mistakenly turn to as our help, but eventually find empty?

James 5:13-20

James encourages all believers to take our faith into our own hands, and here in the final verses, into each other's hands. A parishioner once said that one of the most difficult mission trips to embark upon is the "3-foot mission trip" – where you see someone looking troubled just down the pew from you in church. He said that this missionary work turns out to be his favorite type, reaching out to friends and strangers alike, face to face, to offer comfort and friendship. Is this what we mean by the phrase "priesthood of the laity?"

James also asks us to call upon the elders for anointing and healing, which I'm sure is to strengthen us for these 3-foot missions. We receive these very actionable requests: "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another," and "bring back a sinner from wandering." These missionary opportunities are abundant and among the most uncomfortable. That may be a sign that they are also the most urgent and productive as we usher in God's reign. It is our very own hands, feet, faces and voices that have the power to make Jesus known to those in need.

- Perhaps Elijah is mentioned here to bring our awareness to tangible results of prayer. Do you have stories of tangible impact from prayer and/or from the "priesthood of the laity?"

Mark 9:38-50

My grandfather is known to have said, "My purpose in life is to get to heaven and take as many people with me as I can." Here, Jesus gives us a piece of that roadmap. First, the well-known, "Whoever is not against us is for us," warning us to avoid looking for reasons to make enemies. Then, a dramatic and thorough drama about the more perilous parts of the journey. There may be temptation on the way, but stay the course and sacrifice anything to persist in the journey. Winding up in heaven without an eye, hand, or foot is still better than wandering around for eternity. In fact, wandering so far off course so as to cause sinfulness in a child is worse than a painful death itself.

After all that, it's the third piece that is the hardest to interpret. Taking salt to represent a purification, preservative, or maybe a binding contract, Jesus says that we will all be purified and preserved eventually. We will soon be bound by an everlasting contract. So, it's best to start here and now, to purify ourselves to prepare for this journey. "Be at peace with each other" – this must be the way to properly train for an expedient trip, no detours. Perhaps Jesus is hinting that the best way to get to heaven is to start living now like we are already there.

- The phrases used here are about entering into life and the kingdom of God, not heaven. How would our choices and behaviors change if we believed that heaven could actually begin in this life?

The Rev. Darren Steadman was ordained as a deacon in June of 2018 after graduating from Virginia Theological Seminary. He is a native of the Shenandoah Valley and serves at Christ Church Episcopal near Richmond, VA. Before accepting a call to the priesthood, Darren was a classroom teacher and spent most summers working and playing at summer camp.