



Pentecost 18
Proper 21 (B)

Risks We Can Take

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

The theme of God's people struggling to survive in a sophisticated, alien culture appears throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. This theme is central to the Book of Esther, which supplies today's first reading.

Today is the only Sunday in our three-year cycle of readings when we hear from this book. Thus, I draw your attention now to a key verse in Esther, even though it is not part of the passage we just heard.

The verse I have in mind comes from the fourth chapter. Mordecai, a Jew living in the Persian capital of Susa, is addressing his kinswoman Esther, who has become queen. He sends this message to her: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

"Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." I offer this verse for your consideration, not simply because it is a key to the story of Esther, but because it is a key to the story of each of us and to the story of every one of the people of God.

The Book of Esther is brief, only ten chapters, and is lively, engaging, even comic literature. Read it for yourself, and you will delight in its twists and turns. Very briefly the plot is this:

Mordecai, a Jew at the court of King Ahasuerus, exposes a plot to kill the king but is left unrewarded. The king must choose a new queen, and Mordecai arranges to have his young kinswoman Esther selected. She becomes the king's favorite. Esther learns of a plot to destroy all the Jews in the empire. It is the work of Haman, the prime minister, who bears a genocidal grudge against Mordecai.

One night, the king, who consistently appears passive and dimwitted, remembers that he has done nothing to honor Mordecai for saving his life. He asks Haman what should be done for the man the king wishes to honor. Haman, who is supremely self-centered, assumes that the king wishes to honor him. So, he proposes lavish compensation but is deeply humiliated when Mordecai receives the honors.

Meanwhile, Esther reveals to the king that Haman has already issued a decree in the king's name for the slaughter of the Jews. Haman pleads for his life with Queen Esther, falling down on her couch. The enraged king assumes that Haman is attacking his queen. So, he orders Haman hanged on the outrageously huge scaffold that Haman had prepared for Mordecai.

Esther then obtains a royal decree, allowing the Jews to defend themselves. They do so, and Mordecai and Esther proclaim that day as a great festival for their people. This story serves as the basis for the Jewish feast of Purim, where the defeat of Haman is often presented as a play amid a joyous carnival atmosphere.

So where, you may ask, does that key verse fit in, where Mordecai tells Esther, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this"? Let me tell you.

Esther has just found out about Haman's decree for genocide against the Jews and consequently the need for her to implore the king on behalf of her people. The tension in the story rises sharply when we learn that Esther, even though she is the queen, is still subject to a law that prohibits anyone from approaching the king without being summoned. Anyone who comes into the royal presence without permission is to be put to death.

Mordecai's response to Esther amounts to a challenge. "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, 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."

What we have here is an old story. Moreover, it cannot be understood as historically accurate. But the Book of Esther is sacred scripture. It is somehow the Word of the Lord to God's people today. How is this?

The truth is, fantastic though it sounds, each one of us has come to royal dignity. Esther came to hers by marriage to King Ahasuerus of Persia. Each one of us came to our royal dignity through our Holy Baptism, by which we became God's child and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven. So, each of us can arrive at a moment, perhaps many moments, when we face some threatening decision that requires holy courage on our part, a decision that will make a world of difference not only to us but to people around us.

I have another story for you, far more recent than that of Esther and completely historical, but one that involves a woman who, like Esther, was called upon to exercise holy courage at a critical moment and thus save a vast number of lives. G. Scott Cady and Christopher L. Webber tell this story in their book, *A Year with American Saints*.

In 1909, Lillian Trasher broke off her engagement to a man she loved so that she could answer a call to serve as a missionary. She opened her Bible and came upon a verse mentioning Egypt. On that basis, she went there, settling in a village near the Nile.

Shortly after her arrival, she was summoned to the bedside of a dying mother who asked her to care for her malnourished baby. Lillian took the child home, but because of the baby's incessant crying through twelve days and nights, her supervisor told her to take the child elsewhere. There was no other place. So, Lillian left with the baby. She managed to get just enough to live on by begging for food and clothes.

Over time, the scorn and ridicule of local people turned into admiration for her persistence and stamina. Gradually, support came from a variety of directions. Children kept arriving, too. By 1915, there were fifty children. By the time of her death in 1961, she counted herself blessed to look into the faces of twelve hundred children. The Lillian Trasher Orphanage continues. To date, it has cared for more than twenty thousand children.

It was to help that first baby and all the thousands of subsequent orphans to whom she devoted her life that Lillian Trasher had come to royal dignity as a child of God.

Each of us has our opportunities. They appear at home, at work, at church, in community service and public citizenship, and through every field of endeavor. Each of us has our opportunities. None of us is overlooked. Each moment of opportunity is lodged somehow in the thick fabric of our distinct lives, our unique sets of circumstances.

There are risks we can take. By the grace of God, we take them. These risks threaten us with death in one form or another – but they promise the world an unexpected resurrection.

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