

<i>Date Preached</i>	26-Sept-2021	<i>Date Initiated</i>	14-Sept-2021
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Prop 21, Yr B

" 'What is your petition, Queen Esther? ... What is your request?' "



As you may have gleaned from the brief reading we heard a few minutes ago, the story of Queen Esther of Persia is one of the most *remarkable* in the entire Old Testament. It is a historical novella set in fifth-century Persia,¹ where many Jewish exiles are living. The overall arc of this short book tells of Queen Esther's outwitting jealous, petty royal officials; saving the Jews in Persia from annihilation; and, ultimately, her people's defeat of the Persians who meant them harm: a signal event that gives rise to the springtime Jewish festival of Purim, which is still celebrated today.² The events told in Esther are remarkable—not unlike the Judas Maccabeus' restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem and the miracle of the oil, which, similarly, gives rise to Hannukah. And, it must be said, in a Bible largely devoid of female heroes, it is also remarkable that Esther is the vehicle of not only her people's rescue ... but also their *victory*. Perhaps most remarkable of all, however, is that the Book of Esther contains no references—*not a single one*—to God.³ The plot is complicated and full of twists and turns, but they result from human foibles and ingenuity rather than divine intervention or guidance.

It would be a mistake, however, to say that God is *absent* from the story of Queen Esther. She does not simply wake up one day and start acting like a hero. Rather, Esther discerns the role God has called her to, in that time and that place, by taking up a series of opportunities ... maybe we'd call them "openings" ... *and* by listening to the sage guidance of her Uncle⁴ Mordecai. Through a process of seeing and listening and reflecting, Esther patiently and painstaking comes to understand God's will for her life.

- When King Xerxes' (whom our reading calls Ahasuerus) wife is banished,⁵ Esther perceives that she should enter the running to replace her—however unfathomable it may be for a Jewish exile to seek the queenship of mighty, Gentile Persia. And Esther

¹ Although the book itself was probably written a century or so later, in the fourth century BCE.

² As a historical novella (a work that is set in a historical context but does not record actual history), the Book of Esther is regarded by most scholars as fictional. There is scant historical evidence that points to the occurrence of the events Esther details.

³ Because of its seeming God-less-ness, the Book of Esther was one of the very last to be accepted into both the Jewish and the Christian canons of scripture.

Interestingly, when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, the translators added several sections to the Book of Esther that, among other things, sought to make explicit God's presence and activity in events described. The Anglican tradition (as captured in the Thirty-nine Articles) recognizes the Hebrew Book of Esther, without these edits, as part of the canon of scripture. The 'improved' Greek version we regard as apocryphal: that is, helpful for "example" and "instruction" but not the source of valid doctrine.

⁴ By birth, Esther is Mordecai's niece, and Mordecai then adopts her as his daughter, as well.

⁵ Queen Vashti had, quite justifiably, refused an order to come to court and allow herself to be ogled by all the men there.

listens carefully to Mordecai, who advises her how to best all the native competition.

- Later, when Mordecai refuses to bow down to King Xerxes' evil lieutenant Haman, Haman not only has Mordecai sentenced to death but also persuades Xerxes, beyond all reason or proportion, to allow Haman to destroy all the Jews living in Persia. Esther, mindful of the customs of the royal court, is inclined not to intervene with her husband the king, for no one speaks to him unless and until summoned into his presence. But, again, Uncle Mordecai offers Esther canny—and pivotal—advice about when it may be right to bend the rules. "Who knows?" he asks her. "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:14).
- And when Esther does brazenly approach Xerxes, he magnanimously offers not once, but twice, to grant Esther anything she desires. And Esther does not politely decline or make a token request. No, she *seizes* the generous openings the king gives her. She sets in motion the plot to have Haman executed, for plotting to kill the Jewish people; and she also effectively un-does the edict authorizing the extermination of the Jews in Persia, thus saving her people from annihilation.⁶

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In the annals of Israel's history, Esther has a place among heroes like Moses, Joseph and David. But *unlike* them, Esther gets no burning bush in which to see God; has no brilliant dreams and or God-sent prophets to announce God's plans to her. Although scholars, both ancient and modern, remark—often with alarm—at God's absence from the Book of Esther, I think that's a superficial reading. Her story is replete with nudges and tugs from God, as she listens to the counsel of others; identifies unique openings for action; and take risks others might think naïve or foolish.

God's quiet push-and-pull ... God's subtle vibrations and almost-silent invitations: Esther perceives them in the opening to become queen, and she takes it. She hears them in the gentle encouragement and sage advice her uncle gives her. And Esther most strongly and selflessly knows them when Xerxes offers her anything she asks for, "even half my kingdom." Given the keys to an empire and all its wealth and power, Queen Esther instead opts to undo Haman's depraved injustices and save the innocent lives of her own people.

Through these small, subtle course-of-life happenings that don't have God's name stamped all over them, God is every bit as much at work in Esther's life the same way God works in ours: quietly, indirectly, maybe even somewhat equivocally ... in ways that aren't self-evidently divine, but rather need to be perceived; in ways that we don't grasp immediately, but have to put together

⁶ The plot is a bit more convoluted (and retributively violent) than I can go into in a brief sermon. In actuality, Xerxes does not lift the death decree against the Jews, but he allows Esther and Mordecai, in Xerxes' name, to issue an additional decree that allows the Jews to defend themselves and kill all who threaten them. After Mordecai rises to great power, the Jews then, with full royal license, strike down "all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering and destroying them, and [doing] as they pleased to those who hated them" (9:5).

The celebration that ensues gives rise to the joyous (even circus-like) Jewish festival of Purim, which is not mentioned in any other book of the Jewish Bible. Indeed, the Book of Esther, which is a very late entry in canon of Jewish scripture, may be a story that was constructed to explain the 'Jewish' origins of this feast, which may have been a Babylonian or Persian holiday that Jews in the Persian Diaspora had adopted as their own.

and work at interpreting. This is, I think, the very real, everyday work of faith: to reflect on what happens in the everyday-ness of our lives and discern in that the wonderful ways in which God is guiding us.

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What are the pushes-and-pulls ... the subtle invitations ... of God in all of our own lives that God wants us to discern? Who are our Uncle Mordecais? Where lie the openings in our lives to do what God has in store for us?

- What compliments do we often receive about a certain skill or a particular knack we have that might be God's subtle invitation for us to put them to use for the church ... or to help others?
- What issues do we find ourselves reading up on ... or debating ... over and over again—education? the environment? race-and-poverty?—that might be God's quiet, persistent call for us to begin doing something about them?
- What sources of dissatisfaction, concern or even pain in our lives—a job that's become unbearable; a house that's no longer a home; the ending of a relationship (whatever the cause)—might be opportunities God is putting in front of us to start us on a fresh path ... a new chapter in our lives?
- What signs in nature have we noticed ... what series of remarkable coincidences ... what moments that send a spark or a shiver right through us ... may be God's tapping us on the shoulder: pointing us toward the closure of a wound ... the comforting of a grief ... or the opening of a door?

Yes, we can mark all these things down as random occurrences ... as isolated events without any connection to God. But why would a God Who loves us ... a Jesus Who seeks us ... and a Spirit Who surrounds us ... *not* use every available means, however subtle, to communicate with and guide us? to show us compassion, offer us grace and tell us God's hopes for us?

So if, like the Book Esther, God seems absent to you, let your heart become the partner of your eyes and your spirits become your third ear. For then your path—the path of God *for you*—will become as clear as it did for Esther.



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