

Who Will We Be?
Esther 4: 1-17
Advent 2, December 9, 2018
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This is the second week in Advent. We are on a four week journey preparing for the birth of the Christ child. We're following the Narrative Lectionary for Advent which comes out of Luther Seminary in St. Paul. The stories and passages are selected so that they fit together and build on one another.

Last week we read from the prophet Habakkuk, one of my favorite biblical names to say. One of the lines from our passage from Habakkuk last week was, "the righteous live by faith." The righteous live by trusting...in God...in love, in what is good, even when it is difficult to trust.

This week we have the story of Esther, a righteous one who lives by faith. She trusts when it is difficult to trust. This story prepares us for Mary's story. Mary will trust the news of God's purposes living through her and she will say, "here am I, the servant of the Lord," even though she has no idea what's next. This story prepares us for Joseph's story, who the Gospel of Matthew tells us is a righteous man, he wants to end the engagement with Mary when she is found to be pregnant "to not expose her to disgrace," but he is told by an angel in a dream not to, and he trusts and acts differently.

We can start asking ourselves, "in what ways are we being called to trust, in God, in love, even when it is difficult to trust?"

One thing that is unique about the book of Esther is that God doesn't speak, and God isn't mentioned in the book. Some scholars get nervous about this and debate the sacred status of the Esther story. But this story just seems like life to me. As we seek to live by faith and try to sort out what to do and what not to do, God's voice is subtle. God speaks through others, God speaks through moments of life that fit together in ways that cause us to take notice. God speaks in our hearts, in our guts, in our conscience. And we listen and discern and then we do our best to act. Sometimes what we must do seems so clear but other times, maybe most of the time, we do our best to discern what is loving or best, and we act in fear and trembling, not knowing how this will turn out, and we trust.

The setting of the book of Esther is the Persian empire. King Ahasuerus is on the throne. He's throwing an extravagant feast for all of his ministers and officials throughout the empire. The story tells us the feast lasts for 180 days, half a year. This king really wants to show off.

When that's done the king has another feast of seven days. On the seventh day, when he is merry with wine, the only thing he can do to show off more is to show off his beautiful wife, Queen Vashti. He calls on Queen Vashti to wear the royal crown and to parade in front of everyone to show off how beautiful she is and how great the king is. And Queen Vashti says, "no!" Amazing.

King Ahasuerus is enraged. He decides Queen Vashti will not be queen anymore, and he needs a new Queen. In enters Esther.

Esther is an orphan, her father and mother have died, she's being raised by her cousin Mordecai. Mordecai is among those who were, the story tells us, "carried away from Jerusalem during the conquest of Nebuchanezzar." Esther is a powerless one times three. She's a woman, she's an orphan, and she's a foreigner, a Jew in Persia. We don't expect God's purposes, or any kind of power, to move through someone like Esther.

Esther is included among the women who are sent to the king as possible queens. Esther wins the king's favor and devotion and Esther becomes queen.

An official named Haman is promoted above all other officials, and all the king's servants come before him and bow down. Except for Mordecai. We don't know exactly why. It could be because he's Jewish. It could be because Haman's ancestry suggests he's a natural enemy of the Jews. It could be because these are two guys in the royal court who don't get along. Anyway, he doesn't bow down, and Haman convinces the king to allow him to order the destruction of all Jews throughout Persia.

That's where our story for today starts. Mordecai tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth. Esther wants him to get it together and put some clothes back on. Mordecai refuses. He tells Esther to go to the king and make her case for the people. Esther refuses. She says everyone knows that if you go to the king without being summoned you die.

Mordecai challenges her, though. And isn't this how it often is with the subtle, persistent voice of God? We say no, and God won't let it go. Mordecai challenges her saying, "you won't be safe either. Who knows, perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this."

God isn't mentioned, but there's a suggestion of God's leading in the background; of Love setting up deliverance for the people; of the Sacred in our midst acting through an unlikely person, an orphan, a foreign woman who is in a position of power.

Esther decides to fast for three days, and she tells the Jews to do the same. She takes time to listen for God, to wrestle with this leading, to sort out if she will act and how. It's uncertain, terrifying. To do nothing is a risk for her and her people. To do something is a risk for her and her people. But the only way for something good to happen is for Esther to do something. Now she has to listen for the leading of the Holy, then she has to trust. In the midst of fear and uncertainty like this, there are no clear answers and she has to trust.

Those three days are the Advent time in this story. There's waiting. Nothing has been born yet. Love is leading her forward, but Esther can only trust.

When the three days is up, Esther emerges with a clever, savvy plan. She can't go to the king, but she stands in a place in the court where she will be noticed by the king. The king notices her and invites her forward, asks her what her request is. This is her moment, but she doesn't mention her real business yet. She invites him to a banquet because we know he likes the parties. The king goes to the banquet and the king asks Esther, "what is your request?" Esther says, "This is my request, that you come to my banquet tomorrow (because I know you like the parties)."

In between banquets the king discovers that Mordecai had thwarted an assassination attempt on the king and by the time the king gets to the second banquet Esther is in as good of

a position as she could possibly be. When the king asks the question, “what is your request?” Esther says, “if it pleases the king, let my life be given me - that is my petition - and the lives of my people - that is my request.” And the king grants the request. And God works through Esther to deliver the people.

This story has helped me make meaning of my last few weeks. I've been at a couple orientation events for new house members. I've spent six days in all with first the freshman class (38 new members out of 134) and then the house DFL caucus. I realize that I've felt like I've been surrounded by Esthers.

First, there are 18 women in the new class of 38, I'm guessing 15 people younger than me, 9 people of color, and one openly gay representative elect.

When you are at these events your job is to get to know as many people as possible, so you start hearing everyone's story. Five new members come from families of refugees, Somali and Hmong. One new member, now an Assistant Majority Leader for the House Caucus, Hodan Hassan told us, “my mother taught me that I would have to work three times as hard here, because I'm a woman, I'm a Muslim, and I'm a Somali refugee.” Hodan is supposedly powerless times three too, but look where she is.

I was sitting at lunch, turned to the person next to me and asked “why did you run?” She said, “I'm an environmental scientist, and I work in energy policy. I couldn't stand back any longer.” We talked for a while. I turned to the person on my other side, and asked, “why did you run?” She said, “I'm a therapist,” and we started talking about the crisis in mental health that is touching so many parts of our society right now. She also mentioned that she was homeless for a while as a youth and understands the challenges that so many people are going through. Another young woman shared a similar story saying, “I was just talking with my Mom and she said, ‘I still don't understand how someone like you got elected.’”

I was talking with Mahmoud Noor from Minneapolis, he said, I ran because Somalis need housing and employment. I sat by Hunter Cantrell on the bus and he said “I first got involved in advocacy working against the marriage amendment when I was 17, and I talked to my

representative and my rep told me that gay people shouldn't marry. And I'm gay, and I filed that away and six years later I ran against him and beat him.

I shared my story too. I ran because I care about rural communities, and we have to come together and love our neighbors and the creation on which we depend. And there was some, "oh isn't that nice pastor, cute little pastor."

Who expects the church to insist that it's relevant right now? But we are standing there with others demanding a different state: with refugees, with the LGBTQ community, with people of color, with young people, with women. Each of these stories is a story of trust. None of us know what is in front of us, but we feel led to keep going forward.

I heard someone say yesterday that courage is contagious. Esther's story is a story of courage. And her courage must be strengthened by others.

In what ways are we being invited to trust in love, even when it may be difficult to see? In what ways are we being called to act, in our families, in our relationships, in our workplaces, in our community, as the church: in love?

It's Advent. We don't know what might be born. We don't know when new life might emerge from the womb. We're waiting. But we can feel love moving us forward. So we dare to trust. We dare to hope. And we keep going together. Amen.