

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Sunday, 27 September 2009, on Esther 7:1-6,9-10; 9:20-22, Proper 21. To God be the Glory.

Even when we'd rather not, we must listen. Listening is an essential tool for a spiritual life. I've been talking and writing a lot the past three weeks about my desire to listen to you, to hear from you. And I trust that as our relationship unfolds we'll develop the capacity to listen to one another, always, and that our capacity to listen will lead us to holy, justice-seeking actions. We have to listen.

Today you and I are invited to listen to a text that is only given to us every three years. And for most of us, it's a text that we've never heard in church before today. Roger Nelson preached a sermon this past summer explaining that the Episcopal Church's three year table of readings changed in 2007. Most Sundays we wouldn't be able to tell the difference between the old lectionary and this new one, but not today. Today we listen to a woman. Her name is Esther. And the excerpt is a peculiar hodge-podge of verses from chapters seven and nine. There's no context. All we get is the King telling Queen Esther he'll do whatever she wants; then a character named Haman is hanged; and the whole thing ends with another central character, Mordecai, writing to the Jews in Persia and encouraging them to celebrate what we now know to be Purim.

But I think we should listen to the whole story. For starters, it's a great tale. If you like adventure and action novels, you'll love Esther. If you like stories where the underdog wins, or where women are the heroines, you'll love Esther. If you like stories that aren't explicitly about God or theology, you'll really love Esther because God is never mentioned. If you secretly like soap-operas, but don't want to confess that in sophisticated company, then Esther is for you. Read the Book of Esther, listen for God.

The story's protagonists are two Jews named Esther and Mordecai, who hid their religion and ethnicity from the public eye of Persia. Mordecai was Esther's uncle, and he was the one who insisted that they stay in the closet about being Jewish. Esther becomes the Queen to the Persian King after a search committee notices her beauty. Trouble begins when Uncle Mordecai refuses to kneel down and pay honor to the King's prime minister, Haman. We met Haman in today's reading. He's a bad guy. When Uncle Mordecai gets the third degree he explains to Haman, quite openly, that he's Jewish and that he would only bow to God. Haman is furious about Mordecai's refusal, and decides to kill not only Mordecai but all Jews everywhere. And Haman gets the king to issue an irrevocable decree to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews – young and old, women and little children. So Uncle Mordecai persuades Esther to intervene and says to her, "Don't think you'll survive this. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, your people shall die." And then he says, "And besides, who knows, maybe you have come to be Queen for just such a time as this." Esther does intervene, and she uncovers the wicked Haman who is literally hoisted on his own patard, a set of gallows he had built for Mordecai. It's Esther's courage, her capacity to listen to others, that brings salvation to God's chosen people. Without Esther there would be no Feast of Purim. Read Esther, listen for God.

I didn't read Esther until I was getting ready for seminary. There is another woman who led me to Esther. You'll come to know her in various ways through my preaching and teaching, and maybe one day from her own self. Let's hope.

Her name is Judith Craig. She's a retired bishop of the United Methodist Church, and was the third woman to be elected bishop in that tradition. It's not an exaggeration to say that she's a giant in my spiritual journey, and that without her intervention with her colleague bishop in the Episcopal Church, I would not be here today. In 1984 Judith was working as a pastor in Cleveland, Ohio. She was nominated to be elected a Bishop, but was unsure and exceedingly skeptical about it. The scene is a college in Duluth, Minnesota, where UM clergy and lay people from all over the midwest are gathered to elect and consecrate three new bishops, from 15 nominees. In the middle of the balloting, plagued with doubt and fear, Judith passed a note, through some pages, high schoolers there to volunteer, to a friend and supporter, a wise, old lay woman from Ohio who had been influential in nominating and encouraging Judy. In the note Judy said she was withdrawing; the church wasn't ready; she wasn't ready.

The woman wrote back to Judith on the back of a piece of scrap paper and it read: "If not you, then who? If not now then when? Read Esther."

Judith was elected on the subsequent ballot and went on to serve as a bishop for the next 16 years before her retirement ten years ago. And that story is what sent me scurrying for the Bible to read the Book of Esther. And that woman, who listened for God in the voices of other people, would go on to urge me to listen for God's call.

We have to listen because God works through humanity, through community, to bring about Christ's reign of justice and of never-ending love. We probably won't be tapped to deliver God's people in the same way that Esther was, but we must act, with profound hope, as if we are enjoined with God to bring mercy and love.

Read Esther, listen for God. For who knows, maybe you have come to this place for just such a time as this. If not you, then who? If not now, then when? Read Esther, listen for God.

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