

“Everlasting Hope”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
September 30, 2012

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

The Book of Esther is a very unique book of the Bible. It is rarely read or preached from as a part of Sunday worship; this is the only day in the three-year lectionary cycle when Esther is listed. It also is a book, at least in the Hebrew version on which our reading is based today, that does not include specific references to God. Instead, it is left to the reader to infer how God is acting within the life of the main characters and throughout the narrative.

What makes the story of Esther compelling, though, are the turns which takes place throughout the narrative, offering a sense of hope when it appeared there was nothing but hopelessness. The book has the Jewish people exiled in Persia, whose king, Ahasuerus, rules over all. I appreciated how John Holbert recounts, in his own words, the story line of Esther.

The tale is easily recounted. Ahasuerus holds a six-month drunken feast at the end of which he demands that his wife, Vashti, be brought before the inebriated mob to display her beauty to them. The king tells her to be certain to wear her royal crown, with perhaps the implication that that is all she is to wear. Vashti flatly refuses to be shown off in this repulsive fashion, and the enraged king, humiliated in front of his guests, tosses her aside. He is convinced by his courtiers that if news got around that the king's wife has rebuffed a command of her husband, well, all wives might get the idea that husband-rebuffing is just the thing. And we don't want that, do we, O Majesty? So, Vashti is summarily deposed as queen.

But after a time the king grows lonely and misses his wife. Again, the courtiers suggest a plan. Why not have a Miss Persia contest and invite all the most beautiful girls to the capital to compete for the king's affections? Ahasuerus likes this plan immensely, and so women are collected from all 127 provinces of the vast empire. Among them is the gorgeous Esther, who has been raised by her uncle Mordecai. They just happen to be Jews.

Meanwhile, Ahasuerus has promoted Haman to be chief among all of his officials. It's just like the foolish king to choose a most unpleasant fellow for a position of great power. Haman immediately demands that all persons who encounter him bow to his greatness. Mordecai refuses to do so, and Haman is so enraged that he decides then and there to murder not just the Jewish Mordecai, but all the Jews to assuage the slight he has received.

Thus, Haman becomes the spitting image of all those through Jewish history who have hated Jews for no reason whatsoever, except that they are Jews. Reading the history of Hitler's Germany sounds all too much like the history of the Jews in Persia; the maniacal hatred of Jews then and in the 20th century had no basis in fact whatsoever, but the result was the murder of six million, at least. And in the ancient

story, without Esther and Mordecai and ironically the Persian king himself, thousands of Persian Jews' lives could have been forfeited.

Haman's rage causes him to convince the unobservant king to sign an edict allowing Haman to destroy the Jews. But while Haman's terrible plan moves forward, Esther becomes the queen and is urged by Mordecai to tell the king to stop the coming slaughter. Esther warns her uncle about the unpredictability of her new husband, and Mordecai responds in words that have rung down through the years: "If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place . . . Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:14).

Esther takes courage in hand and approaches the dangerous king. He fortunately is having a good day (perhaps the wine casks have been hidden?), and he listens to her simple plea to come to a dinner with her. She invites Haman as well. And then she holds another dinner, once again inviting her king and his most important courtier. Haman is so thrilled to be asked to dinner with the royal couple twice that he can hardly contain his sense of privilege and greatness.

But at the second feast, Esther reveals Haman's plot to destroy all of her fellow Jews. The king is furious, but in typical fashion cannot decide what to do, so he rushes into the garden to try to think. Meanwhile, Haman throws himself physically on the queen's couch just as the king reenters the room. Immediately, the king is convinced that Haman has recklessly attempted some sort of sexual contact with his queen and orders Haman to be hanged on the absurdly high (50 cubits or about 75 feet!) gallows he had built for Mordecai. What goes around comes around, and Haman's neck is publicly stretched.

(This story) has served Judaism for centuries with a tale to provide hope in the midst of despair, and perhaps that is a far more important reason to reflect on it. All of us, in whatever exiles we are in, are ever in need of such stories when the flame of freedom is guttering and the spark of hope is dim. Who knows? Perhaps we too have come to our destinies for such a time as this? (<http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/To-Defend-to-Destroy-or-to-Hope-John-Holbert-09-24-2012>)

If there is one specific way we can relate to the story of Esther, it is being faced with a hopeless situation. There are plenty of situations in the world which seem hopeless – peace in the Middle East, overcoming debilitating poverty, managing a limited amount of natural resources for an ever-expanding world population. But for a moment, don't think globally; I'd invite you to think locally and personally. When are the times you have felt hopeless, when you have felt lost, when you have felt very far from God?

Perhaps it has been when you and your spouse have struggled in your marriage. A parent's illness, a child's struggle in school, financial stresses, intimacy issues – any of these or other things can cause a married couple to drift further apart. A hopeless feeling can overwhelm what had been a strong, healthy marriage.

Perhaps it has been seeing a loved one battle illness. Just when it appears he or she has come through the latest surgery or course of treatment, a test comes back with bad results. You begin to wonder how much more you and your child,

spouse, parent, friend, sibling can take. A hopeless feeling can overwhelm even the most positive of outlooks.

Perhaps it has been battling an ongoing struggle with unemployment or under-employment. It has been months, even years, since you and your family felt like money was not a constant worry. Now, the late-payment notices are more frequent, your child's education fund is not growing as you know it should, and you're not sure just how the next year, month, or week might go. If only the right door would open for you or your spouse, all of this anxiety would wash away. A hopeless feeling can settle in, for sure.

It was a hopeless situation for Esther and her people, as well. And yet, God acted through her to bring about hope and life. James Hopkins writes: *A young woman in the court of a mighty king, a young woman valued more for her beauty than her brains, a young woman willing to risk her own safety and security for the well-being of her people calls attention to a desperate situation. She has only a few words at her disposal, words that must be very well chosen. She speaks. History is changed. Esther gives an opportunity to nurture the embers of hope* (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 103).

How we view those hopeless moments in life speak to our belief in God's activity around us. Could God be speaking through a friend in the midst of our marital problems, giving us assurance and direction out of the darkness? Could God be providing you comfort and peace through a loved one who is willing to face their illness with dignity and grace? Could God be speaking to you through someone offering to help around the house or run some errands, as you seek to make ends meet? Is hopelessness all we see, or can we see a light at the end of the dark tunnel?

As you've heard me and Lisa say in the past, one of the most hopeless situations we face continually is meeting the needs of people coming from our community. We have been working with other churches and the Center for Congregations the last several months to see if there are other ways to approach this seemingly intractable problem. Our group met this past week with a leader from Tufts University in Boston, who is an expert in the process we have been studying and enacting to offer help and hospitality to those with great need in our community.

After our meeting this week, and after engaging in this learning experience the past few months, I have a greater sense of hope that these, and other intractable problems, can be addressed and solved. It all depends on our perspective. If we believe there is no hope, no chance, no opportunity for change, then hopelessness will reign supreme. If we believe that no challenge or problem is beyond God's reach or action, then all we have to do is listen, discern, and act in faith.

As we live faithfully as disciples of Jesus Christ, may we remain hopeful amid the most hopeless of situations, recognizing that God is always and forever working in our midst.

Thanks be to God. Amen.