

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*  
**Sunday closest to September 28**

**Proper 21**

**Year B**

**RCL**



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

Psalms 124

Mark 9:38-50

**The Collect**

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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

The king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, “What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have won your favor, O king, and 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. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.” Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?” Esther said, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high.” And the king said, “Hang him on that.” So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then

the anger of the king abated.

Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

## Psalm 124 Page 781, BCP

### *Nisi quia Dominus*

- 1 If the LORD had not been on our side,  
let Israel now say;
- 2 If the LORD had not been on our side,  
when enemies rose up against us;
- 3 Then would they have swallowed us up alive  
in their fierce anger toward us;
- 4 Then would the waters have overwhelmed us  
and the torrent gone over us;
- 5 Then would the raging waters  
have gone right over us.
- 6 Blessed be the LORD!  
he has not given us over to be a prey for their teeth.
- 7 We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler;  
the snare is broken, and we have escaped.
- 8 Our help is in the Name of the LORD,  
the maker of heaven and earth.

**Mark 9:38-50**

John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell., And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good;

but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?  
Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

## SERMON

I've been reading recently about the Puritans. Ruth Huddy Justice, at Paul G. Blazer High School, gave me a sanded and shellacked view of them, but I'm all grown up now and decided that I was ready for a more in-depth discussion of just what they were all about. Boy! Did I get educated! It was not all shoe buckles and corn pudding, believe me! What I learned was that the Puritans were strict Calvinists, which is to say that they were very certain that they knew how God works. That certainty grounded them – gave them something to stand on, you might say, and this lead them to do remarkable things, both good and frankly horrible.

This is a church which embraces the understanding of John Calvin, though some of you may not be aware of that, so the Puritans were our spiritual forefathers. Puritans and Presbyterians have the reputation of not being much fun. I think we're a pretty fun bunch. My readings

about the Puritans indicate that they weren't much fun, but we also need to keep in mind that they landed at Plymouth Rock in part because they had run out of beer on-board and needed to make some more. Still, their historical legacy remains, “If it's fun, don't do it.” That's not really fair, but it will do for this sermon because today we read from the Book of Esther, and that means I get to tell you the story of Esther and the Jewish festival of Purim which is quite a lot of fun and which our Puritan forefathers would NOT have liked, even a little bit. One of the ways to celebrate Purim is to get so drunk you can't tell “cursed be Haman” from “blessed be Mordecai.”

The Book of Esther is one of the oddest books in the Bible because it never mentions God. The characters in the story are Queen Vashti and King Ahasuerus of Persia; Esther, a beautiful Jewish orphan and her cousin Mordecai who raised her; and He Who Must Not Be



Named – Haman, the bad guy.

The plot goes something like this: King Ahasuerus thinks Queen Vashti is all of that and more, so he calls for her to come to a party and dance for a bunch of his drunk friends. Naked. Unsurprisingly, she demurs, which results in her getting fired as queen because the king's wise men advise him if you let her get away with this, what's to stop the other women from refusing to do what their husbands command? You get something like this started, and the next thing you know, they'll be wanting the vote.

The King now needs a new queen and so he demands that all the pretty girls in the kingdom should be brought in and he'll pick a new one. In Persia, it is good to be the king. Esther wins the beauty contest and becomes the new queen, but on advice of her cousin, Mordecai, she doesn't mention that she's a Jew.

Meanwhile, at the city gate, trouble is brewing. Two

of the king's eunuchs hatch a plot to assassinate the king. Mordecai hears of it and tells Esther. Esther tells the king, and the two would-be assassins are hanged.

About this time, the king appoints Haman as his majordomo. Haman has a great time being important, and demands that everybody bow down to him. Mordecai, the Jew, won't of course, and Haman decides to fix his little red wagon by convincing the king to kill all the Jews. Haman brings the same libel to the king that has been used to stir up trouble for the Jews since the beginning,

There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them.

Haman is so sure of his ability to get the king to do what he wants that he has already cast a lot for the day

and the month in which the Jews are to be killed. This is where we get the name for the holiday. “Purim” means “lots”. The king agrees. On the day Haman chose by lot, all the Jews are to be killed, **and** they are forbidden to defend themselves. To save the Jews, Esther must approach the king but to approach the king without being summoned is a hanging offense unless the king extends his scepter. Esther is terrified to risk it, but her cousin Mordecai tells her:

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.

Esther agrees to intercede, and approaches the king. As it happens, the king is in a great mood and extends his scepter to her. He generously asks her what she

wants and she invites both the king and Haman to a party. The party goes so well that the king says

What is your petition? It shall be granted you.  
And what is your request? Even to the half of  
my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.

Clever Esther answers modestly.

This is my petition and request: If I have won  
the king's favor, and if it pleases the king to  
grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the  
king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet  
that I will prepare for them, and then I will do  
as the king has said.

The way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

Haman is pretty pleased with himself, but the matter of  
Mordecai not bowing is still eating at him.

Haman added, 'Even Queen Esther let no one  
but myself come with the king to the banquet  
that she prepared. Tomorrow also I am invited  
by her, together with the king. Yet all this does  
me no good so long as I see the Jew Mordecai  
sitting at the king's gate.' Then his wife Zeresh  
and all his friends said to him, 'Let a gallows  
fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning

tell the king to have Mordecai hanged on it; then go with the king to the banquet in good spirits.' This advice pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.

That night the king can't sleep so he orders someone to read to him from the accounts of his court because nothing will put you to sleep faster than a law book. Instead of sleep, though, he finds out that Mordecai is the one who ratted out the two eunuchs who had planned to assassinate him and he further learns that no reward has been given to Mordecai. The next morning, wanting to right this wrong, he asks Haman what should be done for someone who has done a good deed for the king. Haman naturally thinks he's talking about him so he lays it on pretty thick.

For the man whom the king wishes to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and a horse that the king has ridden, with a royal crown on its head. Let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most

noble officials; let him robe the man whom the king wishes to honor, and let him conduct the man on horseback through the open square of the city, proclaiming before him: “Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor.”

To Haman’s horror, it's not Haman who is to be honored, but the hated Jew, Mordecai and Haman is the one who is going to have to lead him around town.

After a day spent leading Mordecai’s horse around the city, Haman is in a grand mood for the party that Esther has prepared, but it’s going to get worse for him. This is where we look in on the proceedings in our passage for today. The king asks

‘What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.’

Remember, the king doesn't know she is a Jew.

Then Queen Esther answered, ‘If I have won your favor, O king, and 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. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.’

Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, ‘Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?’ Esther said, ‘A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!’

I said that Esther is an odd little book and so it is because you would expect, from everything else in the Hebrew Scriptures, that the people of God would have called out to God, who would save them by a mighty act of power ... but that’s not what happened. They mourned, they fasted, but remember ... there is no mention of God in the book save this one, oblique, comment from Mordecai

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.

Is this not just the most interesting thing? "God", he seems to be saying, "has arranged His creation so that His people will survive, though you might not even see His hand in your salvation. God has plans and ways He hasn't shared with you."

The Puritans were very sure that they understood God's will in the world, and saw themselves as the guardians of it, much as John did in our passage today from Mark.

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

Jesus, however, knows better than John that the ways of the Lord are beyond us, and replies:

But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one



who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.

When something unlikely happens which we have prayed for we call it a miracle. When something unlikely happens which we have not prayed for, we call it a coincidence. If we take seriously Jesus' words:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

then we have to acknowledge that we are sustained within the love of God every minute, whether we perceive it or not. It is when we insist that God act in ways pleasing to us that we get all tangled up. When we take seriously God's assurance that He has plans for us, to do us good and not harm, it is then that we reach the peace that surpasseth all understanding, literally. It is the peace that comes upon us when we abandon our need to

capture God in the box of our understanding in favor of trust in God's mercy.

Jesus and Mordecai offer us a truth that is no less true if it comes from a Christian source or a Jewish source or even a Buddhist source, so I would like to leave you with a thought from Pema Chodron:

It's not impermanence per se, or even knowing we're going to die, that is the cause of our suffering, the Buddha taught. Rather, it's our resistance to the fundamental uncertainty of our situation. Our discomfort arises from all of our efforts to put ground under our feet, to realize our dream of constant okayness. When we resist change, it's called suffering. But when we can completely let go and not struggle against it, when we can embrace the groundlessness of our situation and relax into its dynamic quality, that's called enlightenment, or awakening to our true nature, to our fundamental goodness. Another word for that is freedom—freedom from struggling against the fundamental ambiguity of being human<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> From “Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change”, Pema Chodron

Mordecai told Esther that relief and deliverance would rise for the Jews from another quarter if she did not act, but then he said, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Who knows, indeed? It is the humble admission that God has plans for us that He hasn't shared with us, to do us good and not evil, that gave Thomas Merton his famous prayer:

MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are

ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Purim means “lots” as in to cast a lot, or to assign your fate to a random event. But if every hair on your head is counted, if no sparrow falls to ground without God's notice, are there really random events? Mordecai's answer, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to your current state for just such a time as this” cuts the ground out from under the Puritans' certainty that they knew how God must act, the certainty which empowered them to do some pretty horrible stuff. When God acts as we wish Him to do, we call it a miracle. When God acts as He knows best, we call it a coincidence. Go from here and rededicate yourself to being one of God's coincidences.

AMEN

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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