**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**18th Sunday after Pentecost**

[Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp21_RCL.html#ot1)[Psalm 124](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp21_RCL.html#ps1)[James 5:13-20](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp21_RCL.html#nt1)[Mark 9:38-50](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp21_RCL.html#gsp1)

**The Enemy Within**

One of my favorite WWII movies was the 1957 “The Enemy Below.” You may remember it, too, especially the two best looking male movie stars ever to touch a young girl’s heart: Robert Mitchum and Curt Jurgens. Perhaps, this is why this girl’s heart was so impressed way back then. But I’ve since watched the movie again, this time, marveling at the suspense, the drama and the wonderful acting of these two master performers. Jurgens played the part of German submarine commander, Captain Von Stolbert, and Robert Mitchum played American Captain Murrell, in charge of the USS Haynes, an American destroyer escort. The Haynes finds a German U-boat in the middle of the Atlantic, and thence the drama begins between the two ships, casting the depth of experience of each ship commander.

When to strike, if to strike, understanding the possible costs and benefits of the timing of each decision. The only thing I would change abut this move, is possibly the title. Was there not an enemy above as well? Who is the enemy from each particular perspective? As Jesus says, “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.” Don’t think for a minute that some of the sailors on that U-boat weren’t praying to the same God as were those sailors sailing above. One thing is for sure, all were heroes, entering into their own particular stories as the drama of the situation around them unfolds.

Perhaps the movie should have been called The Enemy Within. Then we could all relate even more to the hesitancy, the premonition, the intuition, the calling upon past vows and sentiments, the pulling upon experience, the job one is called upon to do in the name of war…but at the end of the day, holding the balance of the lives of others in one’s hands, as the movie reveals. At the end of the day, the point of this story, and the story of Esther, and the teaching of Jesus are not about annihilation of the enemy without, but recognizing and admitting to the enemy within, and where honor, values and love win the day.

The phrase, the enemy within isn’t new. In the 18th century, Anglican priest, Augustus Montague Toplady, spoke to the power of external temptations and inner weakness with which we all tussle.

*“Lord, thou knowest our weakness, and the temptations to which we are exposed, our danger for the enemy of soul, and from the present world, which is full of snares, and, above all, from the enemy within, our vile flesh and deceitful hearts, so apt to betray us into sin.”*

Based on a story of human emotions, human disciplines, moral decision making and ethics, not to mention true respect for those same characteristics in another, it isn’t too difficult to layer this 1957 movie drama upon the stories we have heard today in the story of Esther and in the words of Jesus, to find universal truths about humankind and ourselves throughout history and into this moment in time. In short, when we search for the enemy, we must always ask ourselves: who are the hero’s and who are the enemies we perceive to be outside of our own moral beliefs, and who are the enemies that live within each of us, working always to pull us away into perspectives we want so much to resist.

Today’s scriptures are filled with their own drama, with those who’s courage and faith lead them to heroic deeds and with those who’s deceit, jealousy and hatred lead them to the lowest form of morality.

We find Esther, halfway through her complete story, which I urge you to read, from beginning to end as a good read. It’s a short read, but filled with drama, suspense, like an Old Testament version of a good whodunit novel. There are twists and turns, and you really cannot guess the outcome of the story unless you really take time to read to the end. Something, our Thursday Bible study group might enjoy reading some cold, rainy evening this winter. The Book seems a bit out of sync amidst Old Testament history and the voices of the prophets.

The part of the story we are hearing today is happening in a world that is anything but holy in the far sector of the Persian Empire. It is as secular as the world we face each day and we find Esther and her people of Judah, living within the boundaries of this secular culture with all it’s own self-serving values and perspectives. You will find no mention of God, of Torah, the exile of the Jewish people, no miracles or prayers, with a mention of fasting as a pious practice. The only way the story seems to tie itself to the rest of the Hebrew Bible is that it revolves around the fate of the Jewish people and thus it’s story was deemed worthy for inclusion in the canon.

The four main characters are each powerful with their own presence to be reckoned with, and we meet them here at this particular part of Esther’ story. But, first, here’s a brief back story.

Born an orphan, Esther being very beautiful and, one might say, a bit of an opportunist, now sits at the seat of power, as Queen in the Persian court of King Xerxes. Xerxes seems to be a macho kind of king and, regrettably deeply anti-Semitic, which is not helpful, since Esther is Jewish, a little detail of his wife, with which he’s unfamiliar. He’s simply a pushover for Esther, and she wisely chooses her moment to make her case before him. More on that in a moment.

We also have Haman, a top gun in the Xerxes leadership circle, and he, too, hated the Hebrew people. And then, there is Mordecai, a sort of Rosa Parks of his day. When Haman came by, Mordecai refused to prostrate himself before Haman, as Jews were supposed to do when Haman walked by. Haman was incensed and told the king about the incident and how Mordecai’s defiance and rudeness was just symptom of the whole tribe of Israel. His answer was to suggest that the entire population of Jews should be exterminated.

Haman offered to pay the king ten thousand talents of silver if he could round up an army to eliminate the Hebrews. The king was impressed, and told Haman to keep his money but to go ahead and do the deed.

Now the plot thickens and brings us to today’s scripture. The beautiful Esther just happened to be a cousin of Mordecai and is now married to Xerxes. After drinking, what was probably more than a little wine, Xerxes becomes even more besotted with his beautiful wife and offers her anything she wants, even half his kingdom. She reveals Haman’s plot to annihilate her people. It would have been better to be sold into slavery than to be slaughtered, she pleaded. Remember, she went on, that Mordecai saved your life and Haman is the traitor and, with great courage, she reveals her Jewish identity to the king. Meanwhile, Haman is going ahead with plans to kill all the Jews, and he has erected a scaffold from which to hang Mordecai.

But then comes a twist in the plot, along with several other twists, and in the end, it’s Haman that is brought to justice. The dastardly Hamon’s plot is upturned, and it is Hamon who is hanged with his own noose, and Mordecai takes over Hamon old spot in the leadership and the Jewish people are preserved.

Phew…

Mordecai recorded all this and sent word out to his people. (To find out the rest of the story, you are going to have to read the book yourself. It’s a quick read, and you might very well find yourself faced with the same question with which we began this reflection. Who is the enemy and where does the enemy reside – outside or within. This much is for certain. One begins to realize why God isn’t in the scene at all…and when you read the rest of the story, it won’t be difficult for you to figure out why. As theologian, Fred Buechner said, “There seems every reason to believe that (God) considered himself well out of it.”)

So what do we learn from this story, and what is the point Jesus is making with his equally shocking and bewildering twists and turns of phrases?

First of all, let’s think about minority traditions and customs in our own time, and their need to be careful, to be wise in how they go about living within the realm of the majority. We think about the persecution of Christians in the early church, and we must understand from that experience, the fear and oppression known by those who dare not identify themselves as other within our society or the societies on the world.

Most of all, as Christians, we must always remember that while it seems that the enemy is in control, often the great reversals that occur, and we have seen them, too, in our own time, are beyond the control of the evil forces, and beyond our own. In the book of Esther, even though God isn’t present in words, the powerful reversals are there, and one can easily sense a power at work which is far greater than any of the powers cited in the story.

So we are left to ponder our own identity as Christians in a culture that demands our thoughts and actions to be in step with the culture’s way of thinking that shapes the ways we are to live our lives: competitiveness in sports, politics, championships and countless other signals of success. Each of us is left to ponder the degree of our courage to step forward and reveal our identity as one who follows a liturgical year that holds historical meaning and truth for how we live our lives today.

Jesus makes the answer clear for us. Let those who use my name to assist another carry on. Do not stop them. “Whoever is not against us is for us.” (Mk.9:40) Jesus continually teaches us to minister against the powers of evil, but his teaching examples never fail to reveal his message to us to reach out in love to our neighbor, and to love one’s enemies as well. We don’t love in order to find reward, but to simply serve out of love and in the name of Christ. His words we heard today on our lack of loving, seem harsh and physically repulsive to us as those parts of our bodies that we rely on most are brought into focus in a deeply disturbing and shocking way.

And our thoughts fly back to Hamon, and all the evil ones we can recall, and inevitably to the enemies that lie deep within our hearts, showing themselves at the most pressing times. It is the enemy within that makes victims of us all. Like Hamon, we can fall from power simply due to our unkind, or even, hateful treatment of others. Our feet can take us to places we shouldn’t, and our hand can move in regrettable ways as the eye sends out a less than friendly message. These are the actions that Jesus wants to amputate.

The story of Esther and the machinations of all the players took place long before Jesus came to teach humankind how to clean up our act, and perhaps those who fought to keep her story in the canon were correct in their discernment of its value. The story has within it, all we need to know in order to learn to love, not hate. It was left to Jesus to come among us in order to drive home the point. So far, we’re proving ourselves to be poor listeners and even worse learners. Perhaps it is time we took a good look at who we are and how we are in this world, filled as it is with what Jesus would call the “little one.” The marginalized and those outside the mainstream as the world would have it.

Maybe it is time for the Church ©, to unite its own forces for good, and create the greatest reversal of all time: to listen and obey the word of God and have the courage to face the enemy without and the enemy within, take a stand before the world we live in and all it would destroy that is of God, and fight both with nothing else but simple love.

Amen

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

September 26, 2021