

November 13, 2016: Accidental Saints: Esther

*Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always. Amen.*

This week has been a complex and challenging one for many in our country. As we find in the week following ANY election, there are some who are celebrating, and others who are disappointed and discouraged. This year and this election has seemed to heighten all of these emotions with the added element of fear, divisiveness, and hatred that is brewing among the people.

We'll come back to talk more about this later, but it is in this context that we enter into our third week of our worship series learning from the Accidental Saints in our scriptures, and how we find God at work in "all the wrong people" – those we wouldn't expect to be role models of the faith, yet God uses them just the same, to do amazing things – to lead the people, to enact mercy and compassion, to risk their lives for the sake of others, and to be a beacon of hope in the midst of darkness. And so in the spirit of Accidental Saints, we begin digging into our scripture text...

I'm not sure how many of you are familiar with the story of Esther, much less the book of Esther we find in our Bible. This is unofficially a crazy book. It reads like a soap opera – it has it all. You've got powerful, rich, drunken men, a beauty pageant to choose a queen, lots of banquets and parties, corrupt politicians, and a potential genocide looming. So here's the very quick background of our scripture today... There is King Xerxes, ruler of the Persian Empire. He ousted his first wife because she wouldn't come to him one night when he called for her. He conducted a search and essentially a beauty pageant to find himself a new wife, and he chose Esther – a Jewish orphan who had just returned from exile who now lived in the care of her cousin Mordecai. King Xerxes right-hand man is a guy named Haman, who is a little bit full of himself and wants everyone to bow down to him. Most people do, except Esther's cousin Mordecai, who refuses. Haman becomes so incensed, infuriated, enraged that he determines that he will kill Mordecai, but not only Mordecai, but all the Jewish people. Now there's more to the tension between Haman and Mordecai than a refusal to bow down... there's an ancient, for lack of better term, tribal feud, between their family lines – and the hate brewing between them is playing itself out in this story.

So Haman goes to King Xerxes and he basically pitches this genocide – the extermination of Mordecai's people, as a revenue stream. "Once we kill them, we'll plunder all of their possessions, and you'll get all the spoils." The king signs the decree, the date is set, a news goes out, and the Jewish people go in to mourning. Esther chapter 3 verse 13 says this...

Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

Now, Esther has kept her Jewish background pretty close to the belt as her own secret. The king doesn't know that his new wife is one of those Jewish people he has just sentenced to death. While Esther hasn't been practicing her faith, she still identifies as Jewish in culture and family ties. When Mordecai comes to ask her to intervene, she is rightfully scared for her life – because no one knows her cultural identity, these decree wouldn't touch her... unless of course she outs herself as Jewish. If that wasn't daunting enough, Xerxes was not the kind of guy you could just pop over and strike up a conversation with – even as his wife - Esther only got to see him if Xerxes went to her or called for her. Mordecai's request that she intervene would mean her approaching the king uninvited. Even entering the King's presence uninvited risked the potential of a death sentence, let alone talking to him, but after urging from Mordecai, she was willing to put her life on the line to defend her people. "If I perish, I perish," she said. Let's hear how the Book of Esther tells this part of the story in chapter 4.

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them.

Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people. Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days." When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "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." Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Esther's first response, when asked to intervene is NO. NO, I'm not going to risk my life for this... but when Mordecai helps her to see her part in the bigger picture, that

"perhaps she has come into royal dignity for such a time as this," Esther reconsiders the role she is being asked to play. Asking to be surrounded in the power of prayer and fasting, she is willing to risk her life to play a part in something that is so much bigger than herself. She allows herself and her situation to be used as an instrument of God's work "for such a time as this." We don't know much about Esther, other than that she was beautiful and persuasive. She won the King's favor, shared with him her true identity and saved her people from the wrath of Haman.

Esther's story of Accidental Sainthood, of using the gifts you have, the support of the community, and applying it to the context you find yourself in is an important lesson of our faith for us to turn to today. Through Mordecai's urging, Esther realizes that SHE could be used for "such a time as this" --- so what about us? What time do we find ourselves in? What context surrounds us? And how is God calling us to use our giftedness and connections to respond in faith, for such a time as this?

We all know that our country is facing a really challenging time right now. Some are celebrating the Trump victory, and some are mourning it. It has been extremely toxic – the clear cut, abrasive division is unlike anything I've seen. People judging and confronting others who hold different beliefs than they do – in verbally and in some cases even physically violent ways. People are lashing out in fear, frustration, and hatred, and if we let it, my friends, this election could tear us apart.

Are some going to be unhappy with changes made in the coming years YES!

Are some fearful that their value has been called into question by those in power YES! But WE ARE THE PEOPLE who can hold one another accountable to love, respect, equality and dignity for all. We are the people – especially the people of faith – who trust that God will see us through – will bind up the places of brokenness in our hearts, lives, and world – and use US as instruments of peace, love, and justice in our world. We are the people, for such a time as this!

Here at the United Methodist Church of Red Bank, we are people who are passionate about inclusiveness, about justice, about caring for the environment. We are committed to living out the love we receive from God every day, and sharing it with a broken and hurting world. Today, this work is needed more than ever ---- but we cannot get so caught up in our mission of justice and stewardship that we give in to the divisiveness and hate that is brewing in our world. We must stop vilifying each other, our neighbors, our friends who hold different views as us, but instead live into God's spirit of love and forgiveness, the spirit of unity and hope for the future, whether we can see it or not.

United Methodist pastor, Rev. W. Craig Gilliam, who serves at JustPeace, a center for mediation and conflict transformation in our churches and society, shared some tips for finding healing and peace after election day. He speaks of how the divisiveness of the campaign has made many uneasy and anxious. And when we are anxious, we tend to rely on emotional reactions rather than reasoned responses, which we have probably all saw through our Facebook feed or the nightly news. In our anxiety, Gilliam reports, "We do each other harm in ways we didn't even know we had the capacity to do, or in ways we're not even aware we're doing it." One unhealthy way we cope with our anxiety is to retreat to safe places by finding people with whom we agree and limiting our connection

to others. We unfriend people on Facebook, limit our phone calls with that one uncle, and avoid certain people at church. Living in these "safe spaces," however, allows us to fool ourselves. "When I cut off from another," Gilliam notes, "I begin to create narratives about them." Those stories often include what we believe about ourselves and God. The false narrative usually goes something like this: They are bad. We are good. God is on our side. This, of course, is not true. The Bible tells us that all of us are created in God's image, all are loved by God, and have God's grace available to us. Now that the election is over, we need NOT to disconnect, sheltering ourselves from those who consider "other", but to reconnect. Where we once moved away, we must now move toward. "If I'm interacting with that other, if I'm sitting down looking at them eye-to-eye, if I'm listening to their stories," Gilliam says, "that very interaction helps make space for the alternative narratives and for the correction in the narrative I'm telling myself about the other."

Next Sunday after church, we are going to host a Gathering of Hope and Healing – a time to come together and talk openly, lovingly, in a safe space about our hopes and fears, the places where we've been hurt, or hurt others. We are all invited to share in this time of guided reflection and conversation, listening and learning from one another. I hope you would consider staying to participate in this opportunity for hope and healing next Sunday.

My friends, we have been called – with our passion for justice, mercy, and righteousness – for such a time as this! Would it be easier to jump on the hate bandwagon, or try like Esther to keep our heads down? Yes, of course! But the easy way is not always the right way or the way of faithful response. Instead, we are called on this day, in this time, to hope, love, and action – we are called, for such a time as this! May we, like Esther, respond with courage, respond with love, and join together to be used as God's instruments of peace, hope and love. May it be so. Amen.