



## Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene      The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22](#)

[Psalm 124](#)

[James 5:13-20](#)

[Mark 9:38-50](#)

We have come together in a world drifting ever more and more awry. We come together before God seeking refuge from the storm that is raging here in Coeur d'Alene and Post Falls and Hayden and this region of north Idaho. Just this past Thursday, angry protestors swarmed around the Coeur d'Alene school district headquarters where the school board was to meet to consider measures needed to stem the tide of rampant COVID infections throughout the district's schools. And the protest, full of rage and bile, was against the deep threats posed by layered pieces of cloth. I have seen posts and emails, I have heard voices, speaking of their growing anxiety, fear, frustration, and dismay at the stubborn resistance and threatening behavior that has taken hold in this region by those who oppose vaccination and masking as the best possible protective measures we have, all in the name of a notion of freedom that is only reactionary opposition – its own form of slavery.

We come with our uncertainty, anxiety, fear, frustration, and confusion, to join together in prayer, to take in what we can from God's Word, to hold this world and this community before God, and to seek the nurturing strength of Christ's presence in bread and wine and in one another.

But. We do not know how to live now, in this place that is changing and shifting around us. Some of you have emailed me noting your deep concern and how unsure you are of how to respond. One said, "I want to put a sign in my yard, but I don't want to invite vandalism."

Friends, I wrestle with this myself. I have for months been wrestling with myself over the question of HOW to be present – and HOW to be a strongly different form of presence – in this community where there are mutated teachings of the Gospel of Christ, where there are false gods and seductions of distorted and mutated values. And, HOW to do that strategically, without inviting reprisal. I am attempting to work with my colleagues in other churches here to nudge forward in stating publicly our serious support and urgent encouragement of vaccination and of a season of protective measures. We are arriving at this a bit later than we should have. And we are deliberating over how to say what needs to be said, and wrestling with our own fears for ourselves and our faith communities.

So, that is where we are.

Today, in our ongoing journey through the Old Testament and the stories of kings and queens, we have skipped over centuries of kings of Israel and Judah after Solomon, to pick up the story of an unlikely Jewish queen of Babylon, Queen Esther. I want to begin here, with the story of Esther, and then bring us to the readings today from the letter of James and the Gospel of Mark.

So, get on board this story with me now.

How many of you know the story of Esther – Queen Esther in the Bible?

How many of you know about the Jewish festival day of Purim, that celebrates this story? Every year (in wintertime), Jews remember and celebrate the story of Esther and the way in which God acted through her and through Mordecai to rescue the Jewish people in Babylon from destruction.

So, let's go back in time. The people of Israel are now a conquered people, forced into relocation. They are making a life, displaced from their homeland of Israel.

We have as actors in this story Ahasuerus (the somewhat hotheaded and arrogant king of Babylon), Vashti (a prior queen who embarrasses the king by refusing to appear and be shown off at his party – and who then disappears into the background of minions of the king's harem), Esther (a Jewish woman made the new queen for her beauty and virtue), Mordecai (an uncle who is watching what is happening in public life and watching out for his fellow Jewish people), and Haman (a king's right-hand man who becomes bloated with his own self-importance and angry at any insult to his claims of adoration). This is where you hiss and shake your keys or rattle your noisemakers – whenever I say the name, Haman (hiss!).

Mordecai coaches Esther, and also finds favor with the king because he reveals hidden efforts at insurrection and prevents an uprising. So, Mordecai holds a critical place in this story, even though he seems somewhat in the background and becomes the target of Haman's hatred because he will not bow down when Haman rides by. When Haman nurtures his anger and his own rageful internal dialogue, he gives birth to a plot to kill Mordecai by public hanging for his "offense," and to unleash murderous terror on the Jews throughout the empire. Mordecai informs Esther (who is now queen and highly favored by the king), and calls on her for action in a critical time. He says to her, "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

"Perhaps you came to this position for just such a time as this."

Yes, Queen Esther must have heard this and recognized the truth and weight of this. Perhaps I am here for just such a time as this. But hearing and accepting this as true doesn't solve the problem. It helps Esther see her responsibility and the importance of what she can do for her people in this moment. But knowing THAT I should do something and have responsibility for just such a time as this doesn't tell me HOW I should address the weighty issues and problems of "such a time as this."

How shall we take up the call of God upon us in this moment, for just such a time as this?

Lord, I don't remember praying that I might live in "interesting times." I like my sense of safety, my sense of predictability and restful security.

Esther moves forward with subtlety but clear use of her position and relationships, to build toward a right critical moment to be the whistleblower on Haman and his schemes. And, she does so with the self-appointed enemy of her people in the room. It is at just such a moment that Esther speaks and reveals the truth about what has been hidden and schemed.

"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.’

Haman was hung on the gallows he had built to hang Mordecai. Then, as Esther continued to present her appeal on behalf of her people, the king ordered that the Jews be provided with means to defend themselves.

This is what Jews celebrate at the feast of Purim (usually in February), remembering and telling this story of “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.”

Friends, there are terrors of oppression, horrors of insanity and evil possession in leadership and among people. There are real traumas inflicted and at times planned against people. But these are not moments to cower or cover. These are moments to rise – wisely, strategically, but purposefully – with the Word of God that speaks clearly to such moments and calls for correction, for repentance and change.

And we do not do this alone. God is with us. Think of this as we hear those verses from the Psalm for today, Psalm 124:

*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;*

*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.*

So, dear children of God, seek and claim the power of God to save! And be prepared to take up your part, your role, in God’s saving power. You may have an important part to play, even if it seems small, for just such a time as this. A letter of thanks from me to the mayor of Coeur d’Alene for calling people to get vaccinated resulted in ongoing conversation with the mayor and a prompt to draft a public statement with my clergy colleagues in the area who strongly support and encourage vaccination. Our documentary and discussion series aimed at rebuilding civil discourse about challenging matters is another action offered into our current community and cultural environment.

So, do not wait, hoping that the Lord will act someday. And live now, practicing now how to live. What does James say? If you are suffering or see suffering, pray. If you find joy or see joy, praise. If you are sick or see one who is sick, call for church leaders to pray and anoint. Confess to each other, pray for each other, pray like you mean it, bring back the wanderer. This is how we are to live, boldly and honestly and directly, with each other in our community of faith – here at St. Luke’s. And this is how we practice and gain the muscles and habits for how we are called to live in the world around us.

Do not wait. Go! Follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. Go in Jesus' name – and do not worry if someone tries to condemn or hinder or undermine you because you are not with their group.

And it is so important – especially in a time such as this – not to hinder one another, not to hold each other back from doing God's good work, not to cast stumbling blocks in front of each other or in front of those who seek to do as Christ does – to heal, to lift up, to protect, to calm the stirring of evil spirits. We have a call, all of us together and each of us, to witness to the love of Jesus and the healing, restoring power of God. Our physicians, nurses, medical workers, and mental health workers are doing just that, in such a time as they and we have never seen.

Do not even get in your own way! What is a stumbling block, anyway? Jesus' words in the Gospel passage from Mark today are difficult, challenging words. But they are in response to the disciples wanting to shut down the ministry of an outsider to their own group who was healing in Jesus' name. Jesus says, "Whoever is not against us is for us," and then tells the disciples that casting a stumbling block in front of others – or in front of themselves – is deadly. So, what is a stumbling block? It's that rock or bit of concrete or hunk of wood in the middle of an otherwise smooth path, where you are just moving along quickly and with purpose and with eyes ahead, that you bang your foot into and it interrupts your stride and you go toppling forward. Can you maybe glimpse times when you might have cast a stumbling block in front of someone who was moving forward with high energy and joy to do good work? Maybe a word that embarrasses or shames? Maybe an impediment in procedure or an overly legalistic judgment? Can you maybe glimpse times when you have done this to yourself – I know I have! – cast an impediment in front of yourself, hindered yourself by how you see things?

Go! Discern wisely, but you are called to act – so pray, and in God's name choose your path, strategize, and act! God is calling you, and God is moving with you. God will act with you.

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