

December 9, 2018  
The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

Esther 4:1-17

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> 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; <sup>2</sup> he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. <sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. <sup>10</sup> Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, <sup>11</sup> "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." <sup>12</sup> When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For if

The book of Esther is a remarkable story that reads like a melodramatic novella. Curiously God is never mentioned in it. Nor is prayer. It's as if God is hidden, but not absent, within the unfolding story of Esther and how she is given the rare opportunity to save her people. Early Jewish Canons were unsure about including the book as it seems to be a secular, not religious, text.

It's set in the time of the Jewish Diaspora in the Persian Empire. In 722-539 BCE the Hebrew people were defeated first by Assyria, then by Babylon and exiled, or deported to a foreign land. In 539 BCE King Cyrus of Persia defeated Babylon and ended up sending the Hebrew people back to resettle the land of Israel. However many Hebrews instead of returning to the "Promised Land" remained in the foreign secular land, which had become their home.

The story involves Esther and Mordecai, two Jews who live in secular Persia. There the King (Ahasuerus to whom Esther is married) is a capricious buffoon who loves gold and pretty woman, ruler of an empire who is unable to talk to his wife, and even had one killed for not coming to him when he beckoned. He's served by a devious manipulator Haman, a megalomaniac corrupted by his insatiable thirst for power, and how he hates Mordecai because the latter won't bow down in obeisance when Haman comes around. To avenge the way in which he feels wrong he goes straight from a bruised ego to a plan for genocide of all the Jews – and a power grab for the throne.

In our reading, we jump into a conversation in chapter four between Esther and her cousin Mordecai. He reminds his cousin of the vocation, power and opportunity she has to act to save her people because of the position in which she has been placed. She hasn't earned this place, rather the implication is that God has brought her to this spot, extended this vocation to her that she might speak out and act up to advance the kingdom of God among the nations.

*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.*" <sup>15</sup> Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, <sup>16</sup> "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." <sup>17</sup> Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

### Luke 3:1-6

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup> as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;

<sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

#### QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- **What grabs your attention in these readings?**
- **How is God hidden and/or visible in these readings?**
- **How do you experience God as hidden and/or visible in life? How does that challenge – or nourish – your faith?**
- **How is the Spirit of God inviting you to act, speak or be through these scriptures in this season of Advent?**

The Jews read aloud this story of Esther at Purim (in 2019 it's March 20-21). It's a mardi gras-like liturgical festival in which the horror of repeated genocide and threats against the people of God are remembered through humor, costumes, a funny skit-version of the story; under which lies the ardent trust that God will provide for the people of God.

Luke is one of the four primary gospel tellings of the story of Jesus. It's written in advanced Greek, with more vocabulary depth than the other three gospels. It's thought to be addressed to those interested in Jesus who comes from Gentile backgrounds, native speakers of Greek, who might be less aware of the Hebrew Scriptures through which the story of Jesus is read.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the prophets regularly begin their writings with a time dating that specifies when they acted or spoke in relationship to the current leaders of the nation. We see that same thing here. All the great leaders of the known world are listed, in particular the Emperor – the top of the pyramid of power. Contrasted with them in this man John who lives in the wilds of the desert in the style of a prophet who calls people to change, rather than dictating it from a throne room. He seems to be not much in comparison, and yet Luke depicts him as the agent of God, the voice spoken of in the prophets (Isaiah 40). The hopeful vision quoted in verse 4-6 is sandwiched by a promise: "*Comfort, O comfort my people, says tenderly your God... your penalty is paid, [you shall soon know peace]*" 40:1-2 and a contrast between human and divine power: "*All the nations are as nothing before God; they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?*" 40:17-18.