

What an exciting morning. We join together to praise God in celebration of the gifts of women. We also offer thanks and praise as we recognize the preschool's anniversary and the wonderful gifts it has offered in the lives of this community's families.

Our text today from Esther is not one that receives a lot of air time in the Presbyterian Church. In fact, I feel that I should make a confession here. I only read the book of Esther for the first time, myself, about a year ago when it was assigned as a part of my Old testament class. Many times the book is simply overlooked, although there are certainly those who strongly disapprove of it, even going so far as to suggest it be removed from the Bible. Martin Luther found the book so offensive, that he declared it to be filled with "Pagan naughtiness" and commented that he wished it did not exist.

Esther reads like no other book in the Bible. In fact, it shares many components with popular romance novels found in bookstores today- a young, beautiful heroine, a wicked scheming villain, a wise father figure, and an inept, laughable ruler. In the story good triumphs, evil is destroyed and all ends happily. But beneath this lighthearted surface, the book of Esther explores much darker themes- racism, threats of genocide, gender roles. The seemingly simple story carries a strong message that we can easily understand.

The story of Esther begins with King Ahasuerus who, despite ruling over all the land between India and Ethiopia, is, to put it frankly, something of a drunken buffoon. After drinking too much wine at an elaborate banquet, he sends for his wife, queen Vashti, to come parade her beauty before the officials in attendance. Vashti refuses to obey and the king, fearing that he might look foolish for having a wife who won't obey his every command, banishes her forever. Ahasuerus then begins the process of searching for a new queen. He commands that all the beautiful young maidens in the kingdom be brought to the palace where the one who pleases him most will become queen.

Living in this same palace was a Jew named Mordecai. He was the guardian of his

orphan cousin, Esther. When the king issues his order, Mordecai turns Esther over to the custody of the palace, but continues to check in on her. When Esther meets with the king, the king immediately falls in love with her and declares her the new queen, unaware of the fact that his new queen is Jewish.

Although this would seem to be a great turn in the lives of Esther and Mordecai, their situation quickly grows more treacherous and complex. The king appoints a man named Haman as the highest ranking official in the land. Haman expects all people to bow to him and is outraged when Mordecai refuses. When he learns that Mordecai is a Jew, he decides to unleash his fury on the entire Jewish population. Haman coerces the king into ordering all the Jews in the kingdom destroyed. Mordecai, along with all the other Jews, laments his fate by wearing sackcloth and ashes. Esther, unaware of the king's plot, attempts to comfort Mordecai and discovers the planned massacre of her people.

Esther is put into a unenviable position. Although she is queen, she has no power of her own and faces the same harsh penalty as anyone else should she try to approach the king without being invited first- death. Despite Mordecai's insistence that she not reveal her identity, Esther comes before the king. Esther, rather than immediately disclosing the true intentions of her visit, invites the king and Haman to dine with her. After some wine, the king asks Esther what she wants, so pleased with her that he offers her as much as half of his kingdom. Esther invites the two men to dine with her again, promising an answer to his question. Unfortunately, as Haman left the meal, he passed Mordecai who once again refused to bow before him. Haman, enraged has a seventy-five foot gallows built in order to kill Mordecai the next day.

During the night, the king, struggling to sleep, reads through the royal records and discovers that Mordecai had done a great service to the kingdom by exposing a conspiracy against the king. The king calls Haman to him and asks how to best reward a loyal servant.

Haman, assuming the king must be referring to Haman's own fine deeds, begins listing such honors as wearing the king's robe and crown while being announced throughout city as the glorious recipient of the king's praise.

We can only assume how Haman must have felt when the king, agreeing to these suggestions, instructed Haman to personally carry out these orders for Mordecai. As if this weren't humiliating enough for Haman, when he returns for Esther's next dinner, she exposes Haman as an enemy of her people. The king storms from the room in fury and Haman throws himself at Esther's feet, begging for mercy. The king returns and, seeing Haman in his awkward state, assumes he is attempting to seduce the queen. The king immediately orders Haman to be killed using the same gallows he had built for Mordecai.

After Haman's death, Esther pleads with the king for the state of her people. The king offers Mordecai Haman's estate and tells him that Mordecai may decide the fate of the Jewish people. Mordecai issues an order allowing the Jews to defend themselves and sends messengers throughout the country protecting the Jews. Mordecai and Esther found their courage rewarded and received praise and celebration from the Jewish people.

While I was in school, I worked part-time as a nanny and I spent one year taking care of a three-year-old named Jack. Jack, like most three-year-olds, did not enjoy sitting still and I was constantly seeking out new activities to entertain him. One spring afternoon, I suggested that we go for a walk in the woods behind his house to see if any of the wild blackberry plants were blooming. We walked carefully among the thorny brambles and soon found the small white and pink flowers. Jack was in awe and spent what seemed like hours just gazing at the tiny blossoms. On the way back home, I asked him what he thought of the blooms. He smiled and spoke startlingly profound words, saying, "Everything is blooming and becoming itself!"

What an amazing concept, the idea of something blooming and becoming its true self. I look at Esther and see a woman who is blooming and becoming herself. Over the course of

the story, we watch her transform from a silent, pliable girl into a strong decisive woman.

Esther has often received a great deal of criticism from feminists who hesitate to dub her a hero and side rather with Vashti, the strong-willed queen who refused to submit to her husband's orders. I admit that reading this story from my own post-modern, feminist perspective, I can find it difficult to understand Esther's actions as heroic myself. The story shows a modern audience what seems to be a timid woman submitting to a man and then begging for his help. We must remember, though, that Esther was not your average 21<sup>st</sup> century, college-educated, career woman. In fact, she could hardly be called a woman at all as she was only a teenager when the events in the story took place.

In Judeo-Christian culture, a culture that is admittedly male-dominated and patriarchal, women have been constantly marginalized and oppressed. Lacking public power, women have historically been able to gain individual strength only by successfully exploiting the male power structure around them, as Esther does. Esther is a human heroine for a human situation. Her actions are a model to others who are marginalized and powerless.

Here's an interesting fact for you. According to Strong's concordance, God is mentioned 4,473 times in the Bible. Here's another interesting fact. Not one of those mentions is in the book of Esther. That's right, in this book there isn't a single mention of God, prayer, the temple, or even any clear examples of religious activity. How are we supposed to see God at work in this story when God isn't even mentioned?

The absence of God's name does not mean God is absent from the story. The book of Esther was written for Jews living in exile and it's unlikely that the ancient Jewish reader could encounter a story of Jewish deliverance and see it as anything but the action of God. God performs miracles, but the miracles in the book of Esther are not seemingly magical acts like the parting of the sea or the transformation of water into wine, but the miraculous force of God working through people to bring about justice. In that light, we suddenly become aware of the

fact that we are surrounded by miracles every day.

The real miracle in this story is God's enabling people to act as agents of change. Often, life finds us in situations where we're capable of taking action on behalf of some oppressed person or people but with possible negative consequences for ourselves. Esther's consequences are clear and absolute. She faces death. The consequences for us may be less absolute but no less devastating; the loss of a job, family conflict, embarrassment, just to name a few. It's difficult in such times to overcome the self-centeredness of our everyday lives in order to discern God's call.

This week I discovered Paola Gianturco's amazing book, *Women Who Light the Dark*. In it, she documents the work of women around the world who tackle the problems that darken lives. These women may lack material resources, but they possess a wealth of an even more precious resource: hopeful imagination. And their imaginations light the dark. We learn about a Kenyan woman named Norah who started a group that helps provide wells to communities in need of clean water. We learn about a Slovakian woman named Jolana who works to educate and empower the marginalized Roma people. We learn about a woman named Susan who has fought for the rights of disabled women across America. We can all probably think of the names of women who have fought over the years to bring justice and hope. Harriet Tubman, Dian Fossey, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks, Eve Ensler. At the risk of great personal sacrifice, these women all used their gifts and answered the cry for freedom. God uses these strong women who have the courage to break social barriers and act in spite of danger to humble the mighty and bring hope to the meek.

In our lives, it is unlikely that we will hear the voice of God echoing through the night as the prophet Samuel did. As in the book of Esther, God's actions aren't always overt and obvious. The work of God may be subtle and difficult to discern. Unlike Samuel, we must hear God's voice in the call of the oppressed. While most Christian communities rarely retell

Esther's story, in the Jewish faith, the book of Esther is read annually during the festival of Purim. Esther's courage is celebrated. Her story is told to remind us not just of one person's actions but to remind us that God is on the side of the oppressed. Esther's example may give us courage to reach beyond ourselves and act of behalf of others, placing our trust in God.

I praise God for the fact that I live in a time when I, as a woman, am allowed to speak before you and will someday play a leadership role in ministry. I praise God for the women of this congregation and the wonderful gifts they bring to this community. I praise God for the gifts of the preschool, a place where children can bloom and become themselves. May we never forget the the courage of Esther, the courage of countless other women who have faced danger in order to bring about change. May we as a church hear the cries of women around the planet and answer their call with the same courage that we might create a more just world.

Amen