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Pentecost 19

In our scriptures, God is hardly ever as straightforward as God is here in Samuel. The elders come to the prophet Samuel asking for a King. After all, they want to be like all those other kingdoms around them who are kind of kicking their butts and taking their land right now. Up until now, this new nation of Israel has resisted kings. They have had judges and prophets responsible for interpreting God's direction the people. That had been working okay. Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt and Joshua helped them to enter the Promised Land. But now they're having trouble keeping their claim on this promised land. So they come asking for a King to rule them.

And then Samuel, the prophet, goes off to have a conversation with God about all of this. And God is clearly annoyed. They have a king in him, he says. But they keep rejecting him and serving other gods. That's why things aren't going well for them. And don't they know what kings are like? And Samuel reports to the elders, these words of God, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹² and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵ He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶ He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle^[b] and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves."

But the elders insist. They want a king. They want to be like all the other nations. But guess what? If you keep reading first and second Samuel, the king thing doesn't work out so well. Saul, the first king, is a disaster and even the famous David is tragically flawed. Remember the story of David and Bathsheba? If you continue reading in First and Second Kings, you'll see that it never really gets better. Just as God warned, the kings enslave people, take their own people's land and anything else they want, abuse women, create false idols, and do other awful things.

You know that adage, "Power corrupts. And absolute power corrupts absolutely." The kings of the Old Testament are proof of how true that is.

I am reminded of a famous Old Testament King whose story we get in the Book of Esther—King Ahasuerus, who was actually a Persian, not an Israelite King.. This story is a great satire about the whims of the powerful and how people are damaged by their power. The story of Ahasuerus and Esther begins with a blowout party where the wine flows freely and the plot of the story is set in motion when the king has had way too much to drink.

It is set during the Babylonian captivity when the Jewish people had been exiled from Jerusalem and forced to live under the rule of Persia.

To celebrate the wealth and splendor of his kingdom, King Ahasuerus threw a big party. I mean a BIG party—a party that went on for six months in the kingdom and ended with seven days of festivities in the city of Susa, the fortified city of the King. At the end of the party, when the king was quite drunk, he sent for his queen, Vashti, wanting to display her beauty before all the men of his court. He asked for her to be brought to him wearing the royal diadem. Now, some traditions hold that he wanted her to wear ONLY the royal diadem—nothing else, when she came before the men. Vashti, knowing the impropriety of this request, and not wanting to be put on display for her husband's friends refused to appear before him.

Furious at her defiance, the King consulted his advisors as to what he should do and ended up commanding that Vashti never come into his presence again and stripped her of the royal title. As his advisors explained, any treatment less harsh might have meant that women throughout the kingdom would start disrespecting their husbands. They couldn't let that happen.

This put Ahasuerus in the position of needing a new queen. After much pageantry and fanfare, he chose Esther, a Jewish orphan under the care of her uncle Mordecai.

Haman, the evil villain of the story, is the king's highest official. Haman and Mordecai, Esther's uncle, are bitter enemies. One day when Haman was riding through the city gates on his horse, Mordecai refused to bow down before him, citing his Jewish faith as the reason. Haman, enraged, quickly plotted to kill not only Mordecai but all of the Jews in the kingdom, and he easily convinced the King to issue a decree commanding just that.

Mordechai realized that only Esther, whose Jewish identity has been hidden, but who bears the favor of the King, can save the Jews in the Kingdom from being massacred. Esther is understandably scared to intervene with the King, but Mordechai insists that she cannot stay silent and says to her,

"Don't think that just because you live in the king's house you're the one Jew who will get out of this alive. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this."

So Esther mustered up the bravery to approach the king without invitation. She hosted a feast for the King and Haman. At the feast, Ahasuerus offered to grant a wish to her. And, of course, she used that opportunity to request that the lives of her people and her own be spared. The king, ever clueless as to what was really going on in his kingdom was furious to discover that his queen's life had been

threatened. When he demands to know who was responsible, he discovers that Haman was behind the plot.

Haman doesn't get out of this story alive. He is hanged on the very gallows that he had built to kill the faithful Mordecai. The king goes on to decree that all the Jews should be saved, and a national holiday, a day of merrymaking and feasting, was initiated to remember the saving of the Jewish people in Persia. This is the celebration known as Purim.

But despite his decree and saving the Jews, King Ahasuerus is no hero. His arbitrary decisions about life and death have tragic consequences.

The book of Esther is a satire. It's not history. And it's certainly not an instruction manual on how to live a godly life. After Esther and the Jews are saved from extermination, Esther and Mordecai get permission from the King to exact their revenge by slaughtering more than 75,000 non-Jews in the kingdom. And, one must ask.... Why do the people of Susa get punished for the whims of their king and his trusted advisor, Haman? After all, they were not the ones who made the edict to have the Jews in the kingdom killed.

But that's what satire does. Satire uses hyperbole to show vices, shortcomings, and abuses and to ridicule and shame those in power. The childlike and dangerous behavior of King Ahasuerus reminds us that the leaders don't act in a vacuum. Their schemes, particularly those designed without any thought of whom they will injure, have far-reaching consequences.

Satire comments on the ways things are. Points at the way things should be. And isn't afraid to take aim at the powers of the world.

Esther's story shows us how precarious those without power are, especially when so much power is concentrated at the top. Her story is a call for us to consider the ways in which some women and others deemed less valuable in our society continue to live vulnerable lives.

Esther's beauty won her a place on the throne, but it never made her safe. She was still always in danger of the whims of the king. And we cannot forget Vashti, the first queen. When she refused an order from the king, she was cast away.

In both cases, Esther and Vashti served as objects--not in charge of their own destinies, even their own bodies, but at the mercy and whims of men with power. And yet, even in their vulnerability, they found agency, and their actions changed the fate of many. We cannot forget either of their stories. In this tale of the salvation of the Jews in a foreign land, it took both the bravery of Esther and the defiance of Vashti to change

the course of history.

If the Book of Esther is a satire that calls us to see more clearly the social and political evils of our own day, then we must not forget what Mordecai said to Esther. You cannot stay silent...

“Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this.”

Where are the places in our lives where we need to display the bravery of Esther, to speak up instead of being silent? What moments in our modern times require the defiance of Vashti, risking our places of comfort and privilege to say no to that which is wrong and demeaning?

And as we listen to the voices of Esther and Vashti calling to us from this story, we must listen for the voices of women and other marginalized peoples in our own place and time. During this Pride month, when we support and celebrate the LGBTQ community and insist on their full acceptance into all aspects of society, we cannot forget the ways they are still marginalized and harmed. We cannot turn away from the stories that ask us to take a stand on the side of those without power.

As people of faith, we are asked over and over in our biblical stories to hear the voice of the oppressed. Of the weak. Of the powerless. We must make space for those voices. And we must never remain silent about the ways in which those voices are calling out for change. Amen.