

**“Salted With Fire”****Rev. Maeve Hammond****Esther 7:1-10, 9:20-22 & Mark 9:38-50****29 September 2024**

It seems the lectionary decided to hit us with some complicated texts and messages this week. And, what makes them complicated? For me, and probably for some of you, I am both fascinated by and disturbed by the portrayals of violent, fiery justice in the Book of Esther and the Gospel of Mark. In our Christian tradition, and what you hear coming from me at the pulpit, our God is a gentle, compassionate, merciful companion who walks beside us in the joys and troubles of life. Yes, this is true: God is all of these things. But, Scripture passages like these remind us that God’s Word, our sacred text, is also filled with images that feel less than compassionate—at least, in the way we modern humans understand compassion. Instead, I, at least, read in these passages a swift retribution that intends to draw a stark line between good-and-righteous and evil-and-sinful and cut off the latter half.

What happens in these texts? Let’s begin with the Book of Esther, a very short story set in the Hebrew Bible about a Jewish woman during the reign of the Persian king Ahasuerus. Esther becomes a participant in a beauty pageant to find King Ahasuerus’s next queen (a topic for a whole other sermon), and she wins the crown. The only catch? She has to hide her Jewish identity. It’s not safe for her to reveal her heritage and who she really is. When Esther’s uncle, Mordecai, refuses to bow to the king’s viceroy, Haman, the plot really gets moving. Mordecai finds out that Haman, feeling rejected and disrespected, plans to kill all of the Jews in the Persian empire—just because Mordecai didn’t bow to him! When Mordecai tells Esther that Haman must be stopped, she makes a plan of her own. At a banquet, Esther reveals herself as a Jew. She says to her husband, the king, “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.” (Side note: I love that line that Esther says, “*let my life be given me,*” also sometimes translated as “*let my life be granted me.*”) Esther implicates Haman and reveals his murder plot

to the king. In a rage, King Ahasuerus is so overcome by this news, he leaves the banquet hall. Though Haman begs and pleads with Esther to spare his life, she remains silent. Haman is hanged, the king's anger is abated, and Esther saves the Jews of the Persian empire.

Esther's story is one of good versus evil. Who is clearly the righteous, courageous, and faithful leader who saves her people? Esther. Who is clearly the insecure, immature, and bloodthirsty villain who brings about his own downfall and death? Haman. Haman's own sinfulness—his desire to dominate and destroy over a petty slight—leads to his demise. When King Ahasuerus realizes Haman's sinfulness, he feels compelled to cut him out of his kingdom—permanently.

What similarity does Esther's story share with the passage from Mark 9? Jesus says in verse forty, "Whoever is not against us is for us." The inverse of this statement, then, would be "whoever is against us is not for us." Here, Jesus begins the similar theme of distance, separation, and cutting off that we find with King Ahasuerus and Haman in the Book of Esther. Jesus tells us to push away and destroy whatever it is that causes us or causes others to sin. If we teach someone to sin, well, we should probably be thrown into the sea with a heavy object around our necks. If our hand, foot, or eye causes us to sin, no problem, it's time to cut them off and rip them off, lest those parts of us overtake our whole body and send us to the unquenchable fire of hell. What?

I don't know about you, but these passages—particularly the reading from Mark 9—are the type that I would want to skim over and not think too hard about. But, that's not what the Bible calls us to do. The Bible calls us to take all of us into us and find meaning in even the most challenging and confusing texts. I have a few questions for you all. Should we take what's happening in these texts literally? What do they say about justice, and how can we today learn from them? And, finally, where do we find hope in their teachings?

While I don't theologically think we should take the words of these passages literally, I do think we can take their themes seriously. In both texts, the message is to remove yourself from

the harm of others and the harm you do to yourself. If Esther hadn't stopped Haman, though I obviously don't agree with the means of murder, his petty cruelty and self-importance could have led to the destruction of an ethnic and religious community in Persia. If, in Jesus's examples, someone continued to live with and be influenced by a source of harm and mistreatment, their whole body, their whole life, could be corrupted. I can absolutely understand this sentiment: cut off the bad and leave the rest to thrive. If a piece of your bread is rotten, do you throw away the whole loaf, or do you just throw away the bad piece?

What I have a harder time with, though, is this question: What caused the rot in the first place? Yes, we can blame Haman's revenge plot on his own emotional immaturity, but we also need to consider the other factors. Haman was appointed to a position that gave him almost unquestionable and unmatched power, besides that of the king. This is a structural problem. The kingdom was organized in such a way that the whims of the few can destroy or empower the lives of many. Of course, we must mention what undergirds the structure of the kingdom: anti-Semitism, xenophobia, bigotry, and misogyny—the reason why Esther was even brought to court was through a beauty contest. These are the reasons why Esther was afraid to reveal herself until she was certain she had gained the king's trust. This is why Haman felt so justified to kill not just Mordecai, a subversive, but all of the Jews in the Persian empire. The unquestioned status quo of power and cultural and ethnic bigotry: the two building blocks of Ahasuerus's kingdom. In terms of Jesus's words in the Gospel of Mark, we don't know what the hands, feet, and eyes were doing and what harm they were causing to the individual and to others. We don't know how the rot got started there. But, based on what we have learned from the Hebrew Bible and what we know about Jesus from the Gospels, I would venture to guess that they also don't stray too far from status-quo power and bigotry.

And, another question that I have for the authors of these texts: How do we heal once the rot has been cut off? I'll say that again, *how do we heal once the rot has been cut off?* Once Haman has been killed, will Ahasuerus change the structural order and power of his kingdom?

Or, will he just hire another viceroy? Once the hand is cut off, who is suturing up, bandaging, and cleaning the arm? Who is healing the body?

[Pause]

A couple of weeks ago, I virtually attended the Southern New England UCC Conference's third annual Justice Summit. This year's theme was Politics as an Act of Faith. The opening remarks of the summit felt like going to church. The speaker said, "it is good to be The Church with you, "we are on holy ground, "we are binding our prayers together," "be the change the world so desperately needs." And, in this Christ-centered language, a certain phrase stood out to me: "the work of justice is the opportunity for all to thrive." *The work of justice is the opportunity for all to thrive.* We can kill Haman. We can cut off our hands. We can make swift and stark decisions in righteous anger. But, doing so comes at a loss—a loss of a life, a loss of a part of who we are, a loss of the chance to bridge and transform. Is there a future where the Persian empire is a safe place for ancient Jews to exist? Is there a future where restorative justice, not punitive justice, changes the course of Haman's life? Is there a future where an individual can recognize the rot in their hand before it becomes widespread, before they have to lose it? Is there a future where this part of them can be saved, not discarded and wiped away, by being tended to, by being treated, by given the air and medicine to heal on its own? I'd like to think so.

[Pause]

The last two verses of Jesus's teaching in Mark read, "For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." *Everyone will be salted with fire? Have salt in yourselves?* You may have heard before the counterpart to this message in the Gospel of Matthew 5:13: "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot." Or, for my musical theater fans out there, from the *Godspell* version: "You are the salt of the earth. But, if

that salt has lost its flavor, it ain't got much in its favor. You can't have that fault and be the salt of the earth!" To help me with the interpretation of this message, I looked to other preachers.

Laura Jean Truman is a queer writer, pastor, and former chaplain, whose work has appeared in the *Patheos*, a website called the "world's homepage for all religion," and the anthology

*Preaching as Resistance*. On the topic of Mark 9, Truman writes,

"Be salt, and be at peace. Salt preserves. ...It's about how we are salt, and that salt is to be used to preserve peace, not chop each other up into The Ones Who Stumble and the Ones Who Don't. It's about how our peace preserves the world....[Ask yourself,] What in my life is making it harder for people around me to see how much Jesus loves them?" ("Before You Pluck Out That Eye...[Mark 9]" 2017)

Here's how Nadia Bolz-Weber, renowned theologian, author, and pastor, puts it: "In other words, the salt of the earth...are just the people who happen to be standing in the need of God. And standing in the need of God is standing in the way of blessedness in a way that already having it all together never has been" ("Salty." 2022).

The salt inside of us is this: our humility, our interconnectedness, our truth above our ego, and our need for God. *Our humility, our interconnectedness, our truth above our ego, and our need for God.* Can we allow God to intervene in our lives and transform us dramatically, passionately with the fires of justice and the salt that preserves peace? Can we find the tools to treat the rot at the onset, to bridge rather than exclude, to heal rather than kill, to structurally alter power and remove bigotry? Can justice not be a swift and stark "us vs. them," but rather a means of compassion, restoration, reparation, and long-lasting change? I'd like to hope so. Beloved friends, may God be that fire for us. May, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "the arc of the moral universe...[bend] toward justice." May we start healing. May we heal willingly. Amen.