

Carol M. Strickland
First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
26th Sunday of Ordinary Time, September 27, 2015
Texts: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 and Mark 9:30-37

Once Upon a Time

Open the morning paper, scroll down your newsfeed, turn on the tv news and you quickly feel the darkness in the world. A Syrian father fleeing war cries out that his baby is sick but he cannot get any help. Two women suicide bombers kill a policeman and a couple of civilians in Cameroon. A disgruntled former reporter guns down fellow journalists in Roanoke. We live in a grim world. Perhaps the Brothers Grimm were aptly named because the Fairy Tales they collected all acknowledge this fact about life: there is darkness in the world, and it is real. Fairy tales are stocked with witches, evil step mothers, giants, goblins, and other assorted wicked characters.

Today our text comes from The Book of Esther, which is, I believe, a fairy tale. However, you'll have to wait a bit before I read our text because it is the climax of the story, and you must hear the beginning before you hear the end.

Most scholars agree that while The Book of Esther is set among the Jews living in the diaspora in Persia during the reign of King Ahasuerus (i.e. Xerxes) in the 5th century BC, it is fiction. The characters come right out the costume closet beginning with Esther. She is an orphan who is raised by her older cousin, a kindly man named Mordecai. Thanks to winning a beauty contest, for she is the fairest maiden in all the land, Esther is chosen by the king to be his queen. Mordecai tells Esther to keep the fact that she is a Jew under her hat in the royal court. Presumably it is dangerous to be a reminder of the Living God in a pagan culture.

The villain of the tale is Haman. We get the first inkling of his evil nature when the narrator identifies him right off the bat as the son of Hammeda, the Agagite. Agag, you see, was the king of the Amelekites, who were historic enemies of the Jews. Well, Haman was promoted by the Persian king to be the highest ranking official in the land. The plot gets rolling when Mordecai (Esther's cousin) refused to bow down to Haman and give him honor. This outraged Haman—so much so he planned to have Mordecai killed. But upon learning that Mordecai was a Jew, Haman hated to waste his fury on just one Jew. So he plotted to eliminate not just Mordecai but all the Jews throughout the kingdom. In order to find the most propitious day to accomplish this evil deed, he cast a lot called "Pur." It landed on the 13th day of the 12th month. Haman approached the king with his genocide scheme to get his blessing. He said that there were "certain people" scattered about the kingdom who were different from everybody else. Sound familiar? Worse, they disregarded the king's laws and were a threat and should be destroyed. Haman even offered to finance the operation. The king signed off on the massacre, and bulletins were sent far and wide to announce the fateful day. While Haman and the king sat back and had a drink, the Jews of Persia reeled at their impending doom.

Mordecai put on sack cloth and ashes and hung around the king's gate mourning the tragedy that was planned. He got word to Queen Esther that she should intercede with the king on behalf of her people, the Jews. "Are you crazy?" she replied. "Remember, this is an Oriental potentate we are talking about, and anyone who approaches him without first being invited loses

their head.” Mordecai sent her back a message saying that she was silly to think she was going to survive this pogrom, even though she lived in the palace. “Who knows, maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this.”

So Esther screwed up her courage and stuck out her neck. She approached the king and, lo and behold, he gave her an audience. Not only an audience, he said to her, ““What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.”

She asked for the king and Haman to come to dinner. So they did. As they pushed back from the table and sipped the dessert wine, the king said to Esther, “Now, What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.”

“You and Haman come back for dinner again tomorrow night and I’ll ask you then.”

Haman was tickled pink to be invited to another private party with the king and queen. But he told his wife, he just couldn’t enjoy it while his enemy Mordecai was still hanging around. So she said to him, “Build a 75 foot high gallows and first thing in the morning get the king to order Mordecai to be hanged on it.” Haman liked her idea and had the gallows built.

That night the king couldn’t sleep so he got up and read the record books. (That’s what I do when I get insomnia—read old session minutes.) While reading he discovered that he had failed to honor none other than Mordecai for the favor of saving his (i.e. the king’s) life earlier. Well, when Haman came by to talk to the king about executing Mordecai, before he could speak up the king asked Haman, “What would be an appropriate gift for someone the king wants to honor?”

Thinking the king was speaking about honoring him, Haman answered that he should receive a robe from the royal wardrobe, a horse from the royal stable, and have a prince to parade him around the city square. “Great,” said the king. “Please arrange all this for Mordecai.”

Picking up his jaw from the floor Haman left and did as the king ordered. This is where our text for the morning picks up. Attend to the wor of the Lord as I read it from The Book of Esther: *Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22:*

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, “What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” Then Queen Esther answered, “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. Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high.” And the king said, “Hang him on that.” So

they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as 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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

So, this fairy tale that began once upon a time ends happily ever after for the Jews. To this day they commemorate the happy ending with the Feast of Purim (named after “Pur,” the lot cast to determine the day of the massacre that did not happen). The holiday of Purim is celebrated with children dressing in costumes (especially of Esther and company), much merry making, and gift giving to the poor.

My children were raised on a diet of fairy tales. Snuggled in their beds, they heard about Jack slaying the giant, Cinderella riding to the palace in an enchanted pumpkin, and Gretel shoving the witch into the oven. Their heads were populated with elves and fairies and characters who lived in cottages and castles. One time when we were at our mountain cabin, Xan came running in and announced that Anna had wandered off “deep into the forest.” Just Tuesday we took Anna to see the Broadway musical *Beauty and the Beast* at the Classic Center. Beneath all the spectacle-- the marvelous singing and dancing, the exotic costumes, and the elaborate set complete with confetti blasted into the audience—was the moving story. It’s the story of love so powerful that it turns the tables on selfishness and violence. By the end of the tale, the stuck-up, mean beast becomes a noble prince, and an odd, village girl becomes a wise princess.

Have you ever noticed that the plots of fairy tales turn on dramatic reversals? Those who are strong and powerful wind up vanquished while the third son, the clever child, or the humble cobbler winds up on top. In the book of Esther, Esther is an underdog three times over. She’s female. She’s orphaned. And she’s a Jew living in the Persian Empire. Yet she is the heroine. Meanwhile wicked Haman, who is #2 in the kingdom, is hoisted on his own petard, as it were. We love fairy tales because there is great truth in them—gospel truth. It’s the truth that in the end, justice is done. It’s the truth that good is stronger than evil. It’s the truth that everything may not be as it seems at first, but God is in the midst, working out divine purposes for the restoration of all things.

Mary, Jesus’ mother, sings about this truth before he is even born. In her song, the Magnificat, she sings about dramatic reversals.

[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones
 And lifted up the lowly.
 He has filled the hungry with good things

And sent the rich away empty.ⁱ

Jesus told stories with fairy-tale-like reversals. Like the one where a beggar spends the hereafter in Abraham's lap while the rich man who ignored him on earth languishes in misery. Or another where a poor widow gets the better of a powerful judge. Or another where the breast-beating tax collector wins God's favor but the self-important Pharisee is left holding the bag.

One day when his disciples were arguing about their own greatness, Jesus told them that the first will be last and the last, first. And just to be sure they got the point, he took a child—a *little* child who would have ranked dead last in the *Who's Who* of the day—and embraced her. This was all just after he spilled the plot of his life, the so-called "Passion Prediction" which Matthew, Mark, and Luke record three times each so that we can't miss it, namely:

The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands,
And they will kill him,
And three days after being killed, he will rise again.ⁱⁱ

That tale—death followed by resurrection—is the greatest reversal of all, the biggest surprise ever! The one put to death as a common criminal turns out to be the King of Kings who is raised from the grave in glory. So it's not the execution order of Pilate, the conniving of the religious establishment, or even the betrayal and desertion of his friends that wins. The powers of darkness do *not* prevail. As the title of the book my Sunday school class is reading proclaims, "Love Wins." Love wins: this truth is at the heart of the Good News.

Of course, as is all too obvious as I noted at the beginning, life on this side of heaven does not always end happily ever after. We might be tempted to think that violence, abuse, and despicable acts are getting the last word. However, in spite of this temptation, we trust that God's goodness is greater than evil's power. We profess that God in Jesus Christ has won the war on sin and death and evil though there are still skirmishes ongoing which we must face.

So where do we fit in this cosmic fairy tale? I daresay we are the Esthers and Mordecais of the play. We are the Harry Potters, the Bilbo Bagginses, the Lucys who discover Narnia. We are the unlikely one who is called to be courageous, who must be plucky enough to stick our necks out, who must see that perhaps God has orchestrated us to be where we are for "such a time as this."ⁱⁱⁱ We are on a journey learning that the willingness to be last and to lose everything is the magic key. We are citizens in a kingdom built not on might but sacrificial love. We are saints who may not look it, saints who are given gifts by God we may not even realize and opportunities to use them to help and do good. We are part of God's story, a story too good *not* to be true.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

ⁱ Luke 1:52-53

ⁱⁱ Mark 9:31

ⁱⁱⁱ Esther 4:15