

Hidden no more



The Collect

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

First Reading *Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22*

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.

The Epistle *James 5:13-20*

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Gospel Mark 9:38-50

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

"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."

Everybody needs a witness.

Words of Primo Levi, Jewish philosopher and Holocaust survivor etched into stone as a citation above the heads of visitors to Washington's national Holocaust museum. Levi's words have been reverberating for me this week, as have those of another pivotal voice of that dark night of the soul of human history, Elie Wiesel, whose book, *Night*, gives the account of his experience of the horrors of Auschwitz. In his preface to the book's new translation, Wiesel offers to the reader a reflection on the moral imperative incumbent upon the witness, as the voice that, in the end, must be heard.

He writes,

'Deep down, the witness knew then, as he does now, that his testimony would not be received. After all, it deals with an event that sprang from the darkest zone of man. Only those who experienced Auschwitz know what it was. Others will never know. But would they at least understand? Could men and women who consider it normal to assist the weak, to heal the sick, to protect small children, and to respect the wisdom of their elders understand what happened there? Would they be able to comprehend how, within that cursed universe, the masters tortured the weak and massacred the children, the sick, and the old?...and having lived through this experience, one could not keep silent no matter how difficult, if not impossible, it was to speak.'

Everybody needs a witness. You are mine, and I am yours. Yet how might we hope to speak of that which so often is rendered invisible?

It is a question that our scriptures address directly today, especially in the conclusion to the Book of Esther that we hear this morning. Esther is in many ways a survivor's tale, one whose prescient account of the attempted extermination of the Jewish people has for centuries kept alive in the theological imagination the fact that the chosen people of God have also been marked, over and over, for their own destruction. Yet Esther is also a book about a woman's tenacious survival in the world of sinful and life-denying men.

If you are not familiar with the story or were to read it again, you would find, I believe, chilling parallels between this ancient biblical text and the accounts we have heard this week from witnesses on our television and computer screens. For one thing, Esther is a story soaked in alcohol, beginning with a stupendous 180-day banquet thrown by the king for his officials where the first chapter describes *'drinking...without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired'*. Although an attempt is then made by the king to parade the Queen, Vashti, she is powerful enough to refuse to be displayed before the men of the court, yet not so for the other women of the kingdom who by royal decree are

commanded to *'give honor to their husbands, high and low alike'*.

The character for whom the book is named, Esther, then enters the scene as the king seeks to replace his non-compliant wife with another, and so selects Esther, who as the chapters of the story unfold has to navigate the capricious world of male power and battle for her people's survival, especially with the courtier, Haman, who having felt insulted by Esther's uncle, Mordecai, for failing to rise at the gate as Haman came before him, then plots to kill all the Jews in an act of exaggerated ethnic vengeance. We might consider this often overlooked ancient tale of palace intrigue as sheer farce if it were not so telling an indictment of our own place in time.

This week has been a story of political parties to be sure, never short of the farcical themselves, yet it has also been about a man and a woman who were once a boy and a girl. It is here that I believe we must get behind the headline news and the politics of it all, and ask ourselves about that boy and that girl, and the relative silence regarding the fact that the events that have been debated this week have also been about what happens behind locked doors among teenagers in America

fueled by alcohol and cultural understandings of sex and power that are profoundly wrong.

As a country and as individuals we so desperately need to have that conversation. Yet the shadow of Esther falls not only on the life we have modeled for our young as a society; it also casts itself upon the life we keep hidden from one another as adults. Consider, if you will, an event soon to be close to home as this city prepares to welcome the Super Bowl next year. I wonder if you are aware that sex trafficking spikes when football comes to town? According to the nonprofit *Out of Darkness*, every month, 7,200 men purchase sex from a minor, or that 65 percent of men who purchase sex with female children in metro Atlanta don't live by dark alleys or crime-ridden streets but in the suburbs.

The individuals bearing witness to US Senators this week also bear witness to us; to you and to me. As a person of the Christian faith, my theology teaches me that sexual violence is not merely an individual phenomenon, it is what biblical scholars call a structural sin, a disordered way of life that, if we are honest, renders society complicit in cultural values that continue to see the glory of God's creation in human beings reduced to a

commodity, an object, with bodies subjected to desire, and violence, and the most despicable of human sin.

Yet also present in the heart of all of this entirely necessary intersection of our faith and the state of the world we live in, is the other element that this remarkable story of Esther has to teach us: she survives. As things unfold in the part of the story we hear this morning, by her courage and tenacity Esther is able to deliver her people from destruction, and the power of women, at first paraded for the pleasure of men at the beginning of the story, returns a word to the power of men, and it is Haman and not Esther's people who hang from the gallows. Such a reversal has reverberated through the generations, as the tale of Esther is taught from synagogue to church, from the survivors of attempted holocaust, to each who have suffered at the hands of others. For in the end, Esther is a story of hope, even in the apparent absence of any way forward for such hope to exist.

So how might we be encouraged by Esther to forge our own way toward hope?

First, it seems to me, that we have to embrace truth-telling. Whatever your thoughts and feelings have been watching the Senate judiciary committee this week, the hope that we have come to know and trust in as the church is that there can be no life-giving future among one another without truth. Truth begets reconciliation. It is our confession that opens the way for us to be able to receive absolution. So, we must be prepared to have the most challenging of conversations with one another, with friends and neighbors, with victim and perpetrator. Emmanuel Levinas, Jewish philosopher, calls it the 'ethical imperative of the other', the irreducible voice of the person before us whose life we simply must attend to.

For those who have been subjected to the violence and abuse and dehumanizing power of others, such testimony will be profoundly hard to offer. Knowing that, and somehow seeking to understand how great that burden must be, our second task is to have the courage as people's truth is offered to us, to learn to listen deeply. As we learn, you and I will need books like Esther, that remind us that the objectification of the female body has been a centuries-old sin, a legacy men must own if we are to find our way out from its bondage over us.

Truth-telling and deep listening, incredibly hard at the best of times, but when we are dealing with such profound woundedness such things seem nigh on impossible. And I know that for some here, footage you have seen this week of a woman bearing witness to the suffering she underwent at the hands of men evokes deep and terrible wounds. Should you wish to find solace and comfort in this community, now or in the days to come, I want you to know that we are here for you, and that we won't stop being here for you. Yet our capacity to speak into one another's lives is not ours alone, for our journey toward hope is grounded in a power whose name we meet in today. For we preach Christ crucified, power not as domination and destruction, but as a love that gives itself away and in doing so has the capacity to transform all of our deaths, large and small into the emergence of new and grace-filled life.

Might we find a way to be seasoned by such a self-giving love, and become salt for a world that often seems to have lost its sense of taste? Might we be encouraged to find a way to allow God's grace to be at work in our lives, as it was at work in Esther's, even as that power remained unnamed and perhaps even unknown? For the one who has loved you from the

beginning loves you still, and wills for this broken and hurting world, healing.

Such a hope looks like an impossible miracle, yet ours is a story, from the cross to the empty tomb, of a resurrection life that persists, that finds a way through, even at the corner of death. It's the story of our faith and it is your story too. Be one another's witnesses, dear saints of God. The world needs your courage and it needs you to hold fast to the hope that is set before you, trusting that in the end, love wins.