

### *True Lessons*

A sermon on Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 and Mark 9:38-50 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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Jesus said, *Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can its saltiness be restored?*

This bible verse might seem confusing. Back in Jesus' time salt did not come in 1 pound packages like this. In Jesus' time salt was not refined. The salt crystals were still attached to other minerals in rock formations.

So people would take a chunk of rock like this that happened to have salt crystals in it and use it in their kitchens for cooking. When it came time to make a pot of stew the people would put the rock into the broth for a few minutes. Some of the salt crystals would dissolve into the water. Then the rock would be taken out of the water and put back on the shelf for the next time.

This would work for 20 or 30 pots of stew, but eventually all of the salt crystals would have been dissolved from the rock. The salty rock would have lost its saltiness. The rock sitting on the shelf in the kitchen would look the same but it would be useless.

So in a similar passage in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus says to his disciples, *You are the salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its taste how will its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot.* Jesus says, you are people God has created for the purpose of goodness. But be careful that you don't just look good. You must actually do good.

We have to remember the purpose of life. We have to remember the purpose of our being together. Sometimes people go through the motions of life but the essential ingredient is missing. The essential ingredient is not always easy to see, but you can tell when it is missing. And much more than salt in a pot of stew, the essential ingredient you must bring to the world is desperately needed. As God's children the essential ingredient you bring to the world is the power of truth and love and liberation.

The story of Esther is a story of truth and love and liberation. Our Jewish sisters and brothers know this story much better than most of us since they read the Book of Esther during their annual celebration of Purim. The Book of Esther tells about historical events about 500 years before Jesus' time. By this time a large community of Jews was living in Persia, or present day Iran.

One of these was a man named Mordecai. Mordecai seems to have been some sort of advisor to the king of Persia, King Ahasuerus. When Mordecai was a young man he adopted his cousin, the little girl who would become queen Esther. Esther's parents had died, so Mordecai raised the girl as if she was his own daughter. When Esther was a teenager King Ahasuerus was looking for a new wife.

Since Ahasuerus is the king a large group of beautiful young women from throughout the empire is brought to the palace. Mordecai makes sure that Esther is included in the group of potential brides. King Ahasuerus chooses Esther to be the new queen, not knowing she is a Jewish orphan.

After Esther is crowned as queen Mordecai overhears two of the king's assistants making a plot to kill the king. Mordecai reports the evil plan and the two men are apprehended, convicted in court and executed. Mordecai doesn't get a promotion or a raise in pay but his service to the king is recorded in official court records.

A short time later King Ahasuerus appoints a man named Haman to be his viceroy. A viceroy is like a governor but more powerful. Haman is extremely proud of himself and expects the king's advisors to bow to him. Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman and Haman is furious. Haman discovers that Mordecai is Jewish. In revenge Haman makes a plan to kill all of the Jews in Persia. Haman persuades the king to issue a royal decree to allow Haman and his army to execute all of the Jews in the kingdom on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Adar.

Queen Esther hears about Haman's plan to kill all of the Jews. Esther knows she must do something but her power is completely dependent upon the king's favor. She has not seen the king for many days. Esther cannot just walk into the king's quarters without an invitation. She carefully devises

a strategy to tell the king the truth of the situation. She invites the king and Haman to a formal banquet.

During the banquet Esther invites the king and Haman to a second dinner the next evening. Everyone agrees and heads back to their own quarters to sleep. But King Ahasuerus must have eaten too much because he cannot sleep. He finally gets out of bed and, in a fit of desperation, orders that the court records be read aloud to him.

Perhaps the king thought that the monotony of the legal proceedings would lull him to sleep. Instead the reading has the opposite effect. As the court proceedings are read aloud the king learns about the plot to kill him and of Mordecai's role in saving his life. The king learns that Mordecai never received any reward for his actions. He orders that Mordecai be dressed in the king's robes and escorted around the city on the king's own horse as a sign of his gratitude.

The king's realization of the importance of trustworthy partners brings him to realize his gratitude for Esther. During the second banquet the king promises to grant any request from Esther, 'even half of his kingdom'. Now it is Esther's turn to tell her story. She doesn't tell her story because she wants to be famous or the subject of an entire book of Holy Scripture. Esther's voice was probably shaking. It was risky for her to tell the truth that she is Jewish. Esther tells her story because, in the end, the truth must be told. Esther tells her story because, in the end, God's story is a story of truth and liberation and love.

Esther tells the king that she is Jewish and that it is she and her people who will be put to death as a result of the royal decree. *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!"* The king is furious with Haman and stalks out of the room, fuming with rage and unsure what to do, since a royal decree cannot be reversed. Meanwhile, Haman stays in the room with Queen Esther, begging her to spare his life. The king returns into the room to see Haman fling himself upon Queen Esther. *The king said, 'Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?'* Then the king orders that Haman be executed.

Since the king cannot revoke the royal decree he allows the Jews to arm and defend themselves. On the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Adar a great battle begins between the Jews and the sons of Haman others who wish to exterminate them. In the end over 75,000 soldiers were killed by the Jewish fighters.

The story of Esther and Mordecai has many lessons in it. But we have to be careful that the lessons we take from a story like this are actually true. For instance, you could take from this story that the good guys will always win the battle. You know that isn't true. You might think we have to rely on good kings and good queens. You know that isn't true.

But the story of Esther holds three lessons that are true and that are essential for us, especially this year and this week. First, there is always a struggle between good and evil. You might have times when you feel like Esther did when she was a little girl. When Esther was eight or ten she probably didn't feel like there was a struggle between good and evil going on in the world. It is really good, especially if you are a child, to not feel like there is always a war raging around you. But in the real world, somewhere in the real world there is always a struggle going on between good and evil. And eventually Esther found herself in the place where she was right in the middle of the struggle between good and evil. The struggle between good and evil is just part of life.

Second, when you find yourself in the middle of the struggle between good and evil you learn that the struggle is never easy and it is rarely glorious. Listen to the stories of women and men about the evil they have experienced at the hands of powerful people. The struggle is never easy. The struggle is not what we want. The struggle is dangerous, it can hurt you. But the struggle is reality and it is not going away.

Finally, the story of Esther teaches us that in the end, the truth will be told. In the end, we will be the ones who will need to tell the whole story. In the end, we must be part of God's story of liberation and love.