

Sermon on Esther 7:1-10 and Mark 9:38-50**Susan Verbrugge****Blacksburg Presbyterian Church****September 27, 2009**

Esther is a beautiful, young, Jewish woman. She is plucked from her everyday life and thrust into something beyond anything she probably could ever imagine in her wildest dreams. She enters into a story that would make for a great soap opera, maybe even be able to replace the long-running Guiding Light. The story has intrigue, violence, sex, and maybe even a bit of rock and roll.

The story begins before Esther enters the picture. The king, Ahasuerus, is having a spectacular bash at his place. The wine is flowing. The laughter is bubbling. The band is rocking. The only problem is the men and the women are partying separately. So, the king has an idea. I'll just command my queen to come in here. That way all these guys can see what a stud I am because I have such a beautiful wife. So, he sends his servant to fetch Queen Vashti to parade her beautiful self in front of the cronies. Vashti refuses.

Well, no one refuses the king. No one...not even the queen. In his rage, he orders the queen thrown out of the court forever. And, he arranges for his people to search far and wide for the most beautiful virgins in the land to come to his harem. When this is done, he hosts a beauty pageant...maybe Miss Middle East. After a bit of pampering, some mineral treatments, cosmetic touch-ups, and a test run of each young girl by the king, the pageant is held. Esther, niece of Mordecai, wins. She is crowned new queen of the land.

Soon after, Mordecai learns of a plot to kill the king. He alerts the authorities, and the plot is foiled. Mordecai's role in the foiling of the plot is recorded and respect for him increases.

At the same time, Haman, chief advisor to the king, decides that everyone should bow to him at the city gate. He is right hand man to the king, after all. Mordecai refuses. Haman becomes enraged. Knowing that Haman is a Jew, Mordecai plots against all the Jews. He

persuades the king to sign a decree that all Jews should be killed on a certain day. Mordecai learns about the plot and works with Esther to figure out how to stop it.

Esther is scared to reveal herself a Jew for fear of what it will mean. She would much rather keep silent. And, she knows that if she goes to the king without his beckoning her, she could be killed. But Mordecai says to her, ““Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, help will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” So, she carries through with their plan. She goes to the king and invites the king and Haman to come to dinner. At dinner, all she requests is that they come again the next night to dine with her.

In the meantime, Haman builds a gallows to hang Mordecai for the Jew is becoming too popular in the land. The next night, Esther pleads for her life from the king, revealing to him that she is Jewish and along with all her people, will have to die because of the edict handed down days before. The king orders that the instigator of such an edict be killed, hanged on the very gallows Haman built for someone else.

Haman is killed, along with thousands of Haman’s people, and the Jews are saved. Esther’s story is celebrated thereafter by the Jewish people as a woman who put her very life on the line to save her people.

A total soap opera...but one we can learn from...one that speaks to us over the millennia...one that shapes our faith.

For you see, Esther didn’t lose her saltiness, just as the Gospel of Mark urges us. Mordecai wouldn’t let her turn away. With his help, she musters up enough courage to let her voice be heard, to use her position to speak out.

Mordecai’s words have been haunting me this week. “For if you keep silence at just such a time as this...”(Esther 4:14).

Mark's words have been haunting me. "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" (Mark 9:50).

The reason these words have been haunting me is because of conversations that I've had in the last few weeks with some of you and with others outside of this church. In a nutshell, the conversations have centered on who we are called to be, as Christians, in the face of the ugliness and violence that are around us and who am I supposed to be, as a pastor, in response to the viciousness I continue to hear about.

When a fellow minister and his family are bludgeoned to death by a young man, possibly because the words of violent songs echoed in his reality, how am I supposed to respond? When someone carries an assault weapon into a town hall meeting, what should I do? When a preacher in Arizona preaches death to Obama from the pulpit and in the media, what do I say? When a friend tells me this week that she recalls a time in the recent past when a man, commenting on a killing spree in D.C. said, "I'm not worried about it. It's just niggers killing niggers. Just one less nigger in the world", how do I respond?

I suppose we could just all sit back and shake our heads and talk quietly among ourselves about how unfortunate all this is. We could keep silent for fear of offending someone. We could wait until tomorrow to see what might happen.

But, this week, our good friend, our faithful sister, Norrine Bailey Spencer, died. She was young. And, I was again reminded that tomorrow isn't promised to any of us.

And, these words from scripture keep haunting me. Silence and inaction feel very unsalty to me.

So, I stand here before you, like Esther, having no clue what path I'm being called to, but knowing that I am placed here for just such a time as this. And so are you.

And, I stand here saying that we can't lose our saltiness. We can't be bland, washed out people who give lip service to our faith in a loving, grace-filled God. When we encounter

racism, hatred, violence, ugliness, we are called to speak out, to make our voices heard. I don't know in particular what that might mean for you or for me.

But, I do think in God's love, it means having some backbone. Having some backbone doesn't mean returning ugliness for ugliness or violence for violence. But, it does mean standing boldly against such words and actions. It does mean making our voices heard through God's love, in confident, strong voices. It means working toward a different way. It means listening in humbleness, not listening with half an ear as we come up with what we are going to say next. It means asking hard questions and being willing to grapple with finding the answers to those questions, especially when it comes to speaking up for those who aren't ever heard.

We're pretty good in this church at writing checks. We're pretty good at finding programs where we can "do" something. Both of these are important and wonderful, and I pray we can find more ways to continue to do each one. But, I wonder...where and how we can make our voices heard. How can we, as Christians, say boldly and loudly, "We are Christians, and we will not stand or speak or act with violence, hatred, ugliness. We are Christians, and we will speak out for those whose voices are not heard. We are Christians, and we love you with God's love."

For just such a time as this are we here...Amen.