

April 7, 2024
“A Different Ending”
Esther 9:18-28 / John 20:19-29
Pastor Tim

If you were with us on Palm & Passion Sunday a couple of weeks ago, you know that we reflected not only on the heartbreaking crucifixion of Jesus, but on the painful reality of crucifixion ongoing. A reality that manifests, of course, in countless ways.

And within that reflection, we focused particular attention on the ongoing Israel-Hamas war; the war in Israel, the war in and on Gaza and the West Bank. On the violence and destruction and suffering unleashed by Israel on millions of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, in response to Hamas' brutal and unprecedented October 7th attack on Israel.

Exactly six months ago today.

Some 1,200 people killed in Israel that day, and hundreds taken hostage – some released, some killed and most still held hostage. Nearly 34,000 Palestinians killed – by violence or by unmet basic needs – in Gaza and the West Bank, more than a third of those children. Not to mention hundreds of aid workers, health workers, journalists, killed.

With tens of thousands more injured or missing. With millions displaced. With famine looming. With no end in sight.

Violence on top of violence.

And that on top of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with nearly 60 years of Israeli military occupation of the Gaza Strip and West Bank – including the past nearly 17 years of a complete land, sea and air blockade in Gaza.

Violence on top of violence on top of violence, for generations. Generational trauma. We lamented – and continue to lament – the seemingly endless, intractable cycle of bloodshed, destruction and human suffering. And with it the unsettling rise in antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence – including another act of vandalism outside Drexel's Jewish center on Good Friday – AND the rise in Islamophobia, anti-Muslim, anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab violence.

Violence on top of violence on top of violence.

In the face of such destruction and death, we long for resurrection and new life. On the heels of our Easter celebration of liberation and new life, we long for resurrection ongoing – for all people. For love and life to have the last word.

I mentioned at the start of worship that we are, this Sunday, sandwiched halfway between the Jewish celebrations of Purim, exactly two weeks ago, and Passover, which begins at sundown two weeks from now, April 22nd.

Most of us are familiar with Passover, the annual commemoration of the Israelites' exodus from Egyptian bondage, from slavery to freedom. And the context of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, his final meal with his disciples, and the suffering and violence he would experience.

I suspect that most of us, at least those of us who are not Jewish, are less familiar with Purim. If we're familiar at all.

The story behind Purim is described in the Book of Esther, read each year at Purim. What we read this morning, what Lorelle just read for us, legitimizes the celebration of Purim and the deliverance of the Jewish people from a plot to kill them.

We did not read the first eight chapters of Esther, which provide the background for the celebration. Allow me to quickly summarize:

- King Ahasuerus is king of the Persian Empire. He throws a huge banquet for the people – during which he beckons Queen Vashti to come before him, so he can show off her beauty before the people.
- Queen Vashti refuses and the king promptly deposes her – along with an edict “declaring that every man should be master of his own house.”
- Esther enters the story in the search for a new queen. Esther is an orphan, raised by her cousin, Mordechai, bearing himself the scars of foreign captivity.
- Esther is Jewish, though the king doesn't know it, and she is crowned queen after winning what amounts to a beauty contest.

- Mordechai discovers a plot to kill the king and tells Esther about it, and the two men who were plotting are promptly killed. The king eventually learns that it's Mordechai who saved his life.
- Meanwhile, the king promotes Haman to be his right-hand man – and Haman, infuriated that Mordechai, a Jew, refuses to bow down before him, plots not only to kill Mordechai, but to destroy all the Jewish people throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus.
- Haman and company cast lots – the Akkadian word, “Pur”, from which Purim derives – to determine the day on which they will carry out his plot. Haman convinces the king to issue a decree and make it official, which he does, no questions asked.
- Mordechai appeals to Esther, who is apparently not aware of the decree, to save her people. She eventually agrees to appeal to the king – itself an illegal act, and so a profound act of courage.
- She invites the king and Haman to a banquet of her own, and there tells the king about Haman's plot – and petitions the king to spare her life and the life of her people. There is no mention of the king's response to learning that Esther is Jewish. He promptly lashes out at Haman, and the gallows that had been prepared for Mordechai are instead used to hang Haman.
- Esther explains to the king her connection to Mordechai, and Mordechai is given Haman's role as the king's right-hand man.
- And while the king claims, by law, that he cannot revoke his original decree, Mordechai issues a new edict – with permission from and in the name of the king – for the Jewish people to defend themselves against any in Persia who would carry out the king's original decree – effectively foiling the plot and saving their lives.

That's Purim in a nutshell, but that's not all. The Book of Esther continues with the first half of Chapter 9, which describes a brutal response by the Jewish people against their Persian enemies, those who had – as verse 2 suggests, “sought their ruin.”

The annihilation plot against them is not just foiled but turned around, met with the vengeful mass killing of more than 75,000 of their so-called enemies. Verse 5: “So the Jews

struck down all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them.”

The story turns ugly. Violence on top of violence, on top of the threat of violence.

Some of you are familiar with Rabbi Arthur Waskow, founder and director of The Shalom Center right here in Philadelphia. Rabbi Waskow a longtime, and I mean longtime, Jewish activist for justice and peace.

He writes of this turn in the story, “For many of us, Chapter 9 is a shameful part of our people’s mythology, depicting the worst elements of retaliatory bloodthirst. Some individuals and communities choose to skip over these disturbing descriptions, while others read the text in a whisper or with the melancholic Eicha/Lamentations trope to express their pain over the suffering of the innocent. Additionally, there are those who remind themselves that the text is not a historical account but rather a fantastical tale of a powerless people.

“But what if,” he writes, “there was a different way to navigate this painful chapter? An alternative to unbridled retribution, that replaced violence with hope? That uplifted transformation over reprisal?”

It is that question, in the all-too-real and heartbreaking context of ongoing crucifixion happening right now in Gaza and the West Bank, in Israel and Palestine, that inspired Rabbi Waskow to launch The Shalom Center’s “Chapter 9 Project.” An invitation to “writers, dreamers, and seekers, to reimagine Chapter 9 of the Book of Esther as an exercise in dreaming new worlds, new responses, and new endings into existence.”

And so he asks, WWED – What would Esther do? In contrast, say, to the foolish men in her life – King Ahasuerus, Haman, Mordechai.

Even as WE ask, in this season of Easter and ongoing, what would Jesus do? What would resurrection look like? New life from a seemingly endless cycle of death.

Reminding ourselves, as we reflected together last Sunday, Easter Sunday, that we are the rest of the resurrection story. Mark's account of the resurrection ends in fear, but as Easter people, we are called to live out a different ending.

We are the rest of the ONGOING resurrection story.

In that spirit, I've asked Alisha to read one of the alternative endings included in the Chapter 9 Project – this from Rabbi Tamara R. Cohen (read more at theshalomcenter.org):

And on the 13th day of Adar the world as it was was overturned and the enemies became

anemonies, red and purple sprouting freely from fertile soil.

And the trees for hanging became trees for climbing.

And all the foolish kings turned their scepters into pogo sticks.

And the masks became mirrors — each soul freeing itself and in so doing helping another free herself.

And joy and gladness for some became joy and gladness for all.

And Vashti waltzed with Esther and they shed tears together for the women and the queers and

the children whose beauty had been claimed, commodified, used for a purpose other than to

bring delight and wonder to themselves and their Creator. Behold, they took back their bodies.

And Mordechai's breasts filled with milk once again and all the under-nourished children of the

earth were suckled and satisfied.

And in the center of Shushan, the people turned to their neighbors and vowed to never again

command a person or group to bow to a power not in line with their own knowing.

And the children of Shushan — the Jews and the Persians, each knew themselves to be free as

wild horses and all around them the chant rang out "this is how it will be done for the one that

God desires to honor.”

And throughout the lands letters were sent affirming that every child and indeed every sentient

being was one that God desires to honor.

And the people unfurled the scrolls and shed tears, for the grief they carried was very great.

And their friends brought packages of food to offer them comfort as they honored their dead.

And they wrote additional scrolls to preserve the memory of the way their world had been.

And the Day of Lots grew pregnant with healing as the great kaf joined the pay, reish, yud, mem.

And the gragger gave way to the shofar, and the drowning out of names ceased. And the tekiyot

at first were the cries of Sarah and the cries of Hagar. And then the fast gave way to the feast.

And then the only palace was God's palace.

And in the courtyard the people gathered to remind one another in the name of Mordechai and

Esther, “you are here for a purpose, your fear is not stronger than your courage, you can indeed

stand up for your people, and insist that there is enough light, happiness, joy, dignity and honor

for all. And there was.

May it be so.