

Sermon for 29 September 2024 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124 (UM 846); James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Sermon

Today we begin with a book that never mentions God, a book that founded one of the most free-wheeling Jewish holidays... Purim...and one that faces the moment of extremity lots of us, and lots of people throughout history, either have experienced, or are now going through.

It's just another sign of how powerful and accessible Holy Scripture can be, for our reflection, and our growth as individuals, and in groups as well.

Esther likely represented the Jews in ancient Persia, those who didn't return home after Persia conquered Babylonia and the exiled Jews could go back to the land of Israel. It invites us to identify with immigrants, abusive governments, bullies, and how powerless people hate and behave.

That's all I can say in a sermon. Go read it, with a good commentary, and put it in your list of devotional guides that you go back to all your life. You don't have to agree with all its points. It's not one-sided. Like Job, and Ecclesiastes, it can sensitize you to opinions you don't hold ... which you, we, all need in living with Jesus.

Psalm 124 is great for those days, and years, when you look back and think, "How did I ever get through that?" Scripture's not for sissies, as the old saw goes. It's useful for people who do something and then never do it again, even if they thought God led them at the moment.

James is still at his pragmatic best, insisting prayer changes things, and that nobody ever finishes learning how, or trying it together as well as alone. Try it. Do it now, more.

But the reading from Mark today is so brutal and ugly that it's scary, even disgusting. I remember at Sheppard Pratt how news got around that one young fellow in a locked ward showed up at mealtime with a bandaged eye, and we heard he'd wounded himself with a fork. "If thy right eye offendeth thee, pluck it out," as the King James Bible puts it. What is Jesus getting at here ... or what got Mark to put that story in his description of Christianity?

How bad do we get with ourselves and each other, in the church? Last Sunday we were supposed to take care of little children, and even be like a little child. This Sunday we're threatened. What's the point here?

I guess we can stop and say you don't leave all the bad at home when you follow Jesus. I'm reminded that people talked last Friday about Nancy Webb at an on-line reflection on her about how intense her devotion to handicapped people was, and to down-and-out folks, and

those who were excluded, LGBT's and the whole list of outsiders... and here she was blind herself, and how powerful her justice sense was.

Is that what's being said here? That following Jesus, getting baptized, means that's your focus, always? Not the powerful. Not the sighted, or insiders, but the ones he focused on, over and over ... that that's salvation in itself, getting those folks in church, struggling against the ever-present push to elevate and exclude and ... dear God, how do we do that? It doesn't come naturally. When we find ourselves doing it, we feel so ashamed, so hopeless ...so angry, and then so overwhelmed with what a second chance feels like.

Does that happen here? Have we watched a relationship overcome exclusion, either by us or to us? Here in church?

That's the point, at least for today. What's happening in the rescue line here, now? Do we feel it? Are we praying for it? We're so familiar here ... are we renewed, and renewing?

Let us pray.

Heavenly one, reach down where we are and spread the good news of loving today. Set our minds upon Jesus. Blessed assurance, come be mine, and my neighbor's alongside me. I want that, Lord Almighty. I want solid fellowship. I want inner calm , and I want it for my neighbor, here, in communion and community. We wait for it ... and now you say accept it, be it, do it, lo, I am with you, always, among my people, my friends.

May it be so.

Amen.