

Do Good Recklessly

For the past few weeks, we have been listening to the voices of prophets who cry out to God and speak for God as the people Israel face exile and the destruction of Jerusalem. This morning's text comes from one of the latest writings in our Hebrew Scriptures. The formal exile has now come to an end. Some Jews have returned to Jerusalem, while others have remained scattered, building lives and putting down roots in a larger, more diverse world.

This Sunday's reading comes from the fourth chapter, nearly halfway through the story of Esther. The Persians have conquered the Babylonians, again trading one conqueror for another, and today's story takes place in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. The King of Persia has conducted a nation-wide search to find a new Queen ... and he has selected the beautiful young Esther, who becomes Queen of Persia. The King doesn't know she is a Jew, and in the chapters before ours, he approves a request by one of his trusted advisors to slaughter all the Jews in his kingdom.

Upon hearing news of the impending massacre, Mordecai—Esther's uncle who raised her and who is still a "commoner" even though his niece is now the Queen—puts on sackcloth and ashes and publicly weeps and wails just outside the palace gates. He pleads with Esther to go to the King to get him to change this deadly decree. Yet Esther is not sure she can, for going before the King without being summoned is punishable by death—even for the Queen.¹ As I read from Esther chapter 4, let us listen for the word of God. [Esther 4: 1-17]

The book of Esther is one that has confounded and confused the faithful for generations. It barely made the cut when the early church was determining which books should be in the canon, the agreed upon holy bible. There is no overt mention of God. There are no prayers. The book made some ancient rabbis uncomfortable enough that they made a new version of Esther where they added prayers, explicit references to God, and more faithful practices and language so that it could be more easily identified as a holy book. But the text that made it into the canon, the one we have before us, this story is set during a tricky time, the time of diaspora when

¹ Helpful summary provided by Chris Duckworth.

faithful Jews are living in and amongst other nations, a time when it isn't always easy to see God or know God, a time when God often seems to be hidden.

And in this diaspora time, this time when it is easier for someone like Esther to play along and fly under the radar, the queen is presented with a choice: use her power and her privilege to help save her people or duck her head, stay safely tucked inside the palace bubble, and not rock the boat. And Esther chooses to risk her comfort and her safety for the sake of those whose lives hang in the balance. She appears so stoic and resolved, but at least in my mind's eye she is terrified.

I am a scaredy cat, a chicken, a wimp. I have never like horror movies or haunted houses or ghost stories. Even as a young adult living in my parents' house for a year between college and seminary, I was known to bound up the stairs after turning all of the lights off on the first floor. While I've learned how to manage conflict and work through disagreements, I would also prefer to keep everyone happy, especially with me, so I'm not a risk taker by nature. A few in my family even lovingly refer to me as the cautious child.

I remember hearing about a phenomenon where a person is in distress in a public place, like a sidewalk. The person was much more likely to be helped if there was only one other person around rather than a crowd. It's known as the bystander effect: "The greater the number of bystanders, the less likely it is that one of them will help."² Esther does not play the fear card or the bystander card. Though she is surrounded by a whole host of characters, Esther recognizes that she alone can do something; she alone is in a position to help.

A friend shared a beautiful story this week. Kelsey Zwick wrote:

To the man in 2D. Today you were traveling from Orlando to Philly. I don't know you, but I imagine you *saw* us somewhere. I was pushing a stroller, had a diaper bag on my arm and also lugging an oxygen machine for my daughter. We had smiles on our faces as we were headed to see her "friends" at CHOP (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia). We pre-boarded the plane, got cozy in our window seat and made jokes to those around us about having to sit by my yelling-but-happy baby. The flight attendant came over and told me you were waiting to switch seats. You were giving up your comfortable, first class seat to us.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bystander_effect

Not able to hold back tears, I cried my way up the aisle while my daughter Lucy laughed! She felt it in her bones too...real, pure, goodness. I smiled and thanked you as we switched but didn't get to thank you properly. Sooo... thank you. Not just for the seat itself but for noticing. For *seeing* us and realizing that maybe things are not always easy. For deciding you wanted to show a random act of kindness to US. It reminded me how much good there is in this world. I can't wait to tell Lucy someday. In the meantime...we will pay it forward. AA 588 passenger in seat 2D, we truly feel inspired by your generosity.³

The passenger in 2D was in a position to help, and he did. But as Kelsey pointed out, perhaps the most significant piece was that the man noticed her, *saw* her, *saw* them and used what he had to help make a difference. It wasn't risky really, but it was a sacrifice, a willingness to give up his comfort for the sake of another. And that is no small thing.

Because we live in a diaspora world, too. We live in a time when God is hidden. Much of the world around us gets caught up in how we demonstrate who we are and whose we are by whether or not we say "Merry Christmas" versus "Happy Holidays" or whether there is a nativity display in the public square. But I wonder if those debates do anything to reveal or celebrate the tiny child who comes to save the world. How do we best acknowledge and point to the God who seems so hidden so much of the time?

Another friend shared some anecdotes from different people who found themselves in line at the grocery store when the person checking out in front of them did not have enough money to cover the bill. In each case the person sharing the incident said that he or she covered the difference. And in each case, a friend or a stranger tsk tsk-ed and said, "You know you likely just got scammed, right?" And in each case, the response was virtually the same, "If you're scamming me for chicken or cauliflower or diapers, then just take my money."⁴ Somewhere in the course of sharing the stories, one person celebrated these everyday moments of "doing good recklessly." The 13 truckers who lined up their rigs below an overpass in Detroit to break the fall of a man who wanted to jump did good recklessly.⁵ They risked their comfort, their schedule, and perhaps even

³ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10113814031412134&set=p.10113814031412134&type=3&theater>, emphasis added

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/michael.fagans/posts/10212884579655268>

⁵ <http://www.thedrive.com/news/20378/heroic-truckers-use-their-rigs-to-stop-suicidal-man-from-jumping-off-bridge>

their jobs to save another. As did Ricky John Best, Taliesin Myrddin Namkai-Meche, and Micah Fletcher. In May of last year, these three men intervened when a fellow light rail traveler in Portland, Oregon verbally attacked two teenagers, one of whom was wearing a hijab, the traditional head covering worn by many Muslim women. The young women fled to safety, and the attacker turned on the men and stabbed them, taking the lives of Best and Namkai-Meche.⁶ Yes, some would say they were reckless. But they did good. Maybe the best good.

And so does Esther. Some would say this is an odd text for Advent. There is no mention of the promised baby, no words about the savior coming into the world. But I think it speaks to our waiting. Yes, we can count the days on the calendar until we can place the baby in the manger, but we are still waiting, waiting for the full and final redemption of the world. The ways of God are still very much a mystery, hidden so often from my very human eyes. Esther's story goes on to have a happy ending, a fairytale ending some would say. But the power of Esther's story for me today lies in the waiting. She is waiting, too, sorting and sifting through what it means to be a faithful Jew amidst a people who are not. And yet she does not simply wait with folded arms with her back turned on her faith or her people and bide her time and save her own skin. No, in the waiting she is given a chance to do good, and she does. Recklessly. And this is what she is known for. This is how she is remembered.

And what about us? How do we wait? How do we spend our energy, our time, our influence, our privilege, and our voice? What are we known for? How will we be remembered? Do we play it safe and fly under the radar? Do we spend our breath lamenting that not everyone thinks or prays or celebrates like we do? Is that what we want to be known for? Or do we open our eyes to the moment before us, to see those who could use our help? My hope is that when those moments come our way, we will find a way to do good recklessly in the name of the hidden God. After all this God, Esther's God, our God is the one who comes among us as a tiny child, the one who loves, gives, and redeems with no thought to saving himself, the one who reveals the hidden God by doing good recklessly in moments with outcasts, lepers, women, and children, in moments confronting those who would dismiss and exclude, in moments of healing and weeping and praising, and in that moment when he gives up his own life to save ours. The very best good, done recklessly. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/29/us/portland-train-teenager-stabbing/index.html>