

“Psalm from the Salter”

By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy

Esther 7.1-6, 9-10; 9.20-22

Mark 9.38-50

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I love to watch shows with a little bit of sarcastic humor and snark. I especially love British television because they balance drama with dry humor very well. I really enjoy stories where the world is looked at with some critical thinking – my liberal arts education probably helped a bit with that.

I am a bit behind, though, in watching popular television, so I usually watch things about two years after they become famous. So this week I began watching *Ted Lasso*, which recently won a bunch of awards. I put off watching this show even though I had heard so much about it because I had prepared myself to dislike it. It’s about a football coach who goes to England and coaches soccer – at least that is the basic storyline, but of course different personalities and side stories occur. I don’t dislike sports but would rather watch the sport than a show about the sport. I want to dislike the show because the main character, Coach Ted Lasso, is too wholesome. He’s too likeable. This character believes in everyone and smothers them with kindness and well-intentions and hilarious puns. He is supportive and kind, and being the critical thinker I am, I find myself thinking, “I love this – but no one is truly *this* nice.” He’s such a bland person.

Except, maybe not. Maybe we all have a different spice of life or flavoring that peppers our personalities and outlook on life. Perhaps his is just sugar, or sweetness – if not incredibly too sweet.

If everyone was salty we wouldn’t have that balance in the world. We need people who see the world as it is and use their saltiness to expose the broken world, while the sweet can see the world for what it could be – what it should be.

Today we read from the book of Esther, and this is the only time Esther’s story appears in the revised common lectionary. Her story is powerful and brilliant, exciting and hilarious, but it is only glimpsed here. We miss so much of what happens, so I will try to fill you in about the various characters. There are different people within this story – some with sweet personalities and some who come at the world with salt, and these combine to fight against the power and privilege in Persia.

King Ahasuerus is the leader of the Persians. The king lives in his own world and pays little attention to his people, relying on his courtier named Haman, who is vindictive and malicious, making decisions for the king.<sup>1</sup> The king was known for his drunken parties, and begins the story by showing his sexism and asking his wife, Queen Vashti to appear before the

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Esther 7.1-6, 9-10; 9.20-22” in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 4*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 99.

drunken party for their entertainment. In the first chapter we are told that “the rule for drinking was, ‘No restrictions!’” and that just about sums up the king and his parties. When Queen Vashti, a feminist in her own time, was summoned she was insulted, as she should have been, and refused to be a part of the king’s games. This infuriated the king and he immediately began looking for a new queen. While all this is happening, Haman, who served under the king, begins a plot to kill all the Jews in the land using the king’s authority, but without the king’s knowledge.

This is where Esther enters the scene. She is Jewish, but keeps her identity quiet as she seeks to become the next queen, passing as a Persian with privilege. She is encouraged by her cousin, Mordecai, who instructs her along the way. Esther’s parents died and Mordecai has taken care of her. They are both Jews that are living in the Persian Empire during the exile. We are not told if they are religiously practicing Jews, as God is not mentioned in this passage. Their Jewish identity is very important to them, though, as we will find out later in the story. Mordecai and Haman, the king’s courtier, are opposites. Esther, who is described as being beautiful, was immediately chosen to become the king’s wife, and she is taken in as royalty.

The king chooses to marry Esther, and then Mordecai begins to encourage her to speak out. He says that perhaps she has been chosen “for such a time as this,” telling her that she can save her people because she is in a position of power. It may seem like a simple solution, but Esther takes great risks for speaking out against the king. Look at Vashti – she stood up for what she believed was right and infuriated the king.

Esther was the sweet character, sweet and bold in this passage. She chooses her words carefully, thoughtfully, and knows how to reach into the hearts of her listeners. Just because she has a kind disposition does not mean she allows others to walk all over her. Mordecai is the character with salt. He sees the evil within the system and knows that he is the one with the plan, and she is the one with the words and actions.

So, one night the king invites Haman and the queen to a party. This is the part of the story that we read. The king tells Esther how pleased he is with her and offers her the world. Esther speaks boldly and tells about the injustice and cruelty happening to her people. The king is appalled and demands to know who is behind this atrocity. Esther doesn’t hold back and tells the king that Haman ordered this. Haman is frightened, as he should be, for he is then executed.

Esther’s people were saved because she spoke out. She was safe and comfortable as the queen, and could have sat back knowing she was protected, but she had a heart for her people. Both Mordecai’s encouragement and realism were necessary with Esther’s compassion and love.

Esther’s story tells the meaning behind the festival of Purim in the Jewish faith.<sup>2</sup> Each year Jews gather together and celebrate and have a boisterous time remembering the story of Esther. How true or accurate the story is may not be of consequence, but the importance is that Esther uses her gifts to speak out against injustice and her voice is heard in an unlikely situation.

God isn’t mentioned in this story at all. I love what Rev. Daniel Brereton, an Anglican priest, wrote about this passage: “Musing over Esther... a book famous for God being completely

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<sup>2</sup> Adele Berlin, “Esther: Introduction” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1623.

silent. Yet it is also a story about people finding their voice and not remaining silent – Vashti, Mordecai, Esther. Sometimes God is silent so those God calls will speak.”

Jesus talks to the disciples about salt in the gospel reading for today. I intentionally misspelled today’s sermon title – Psalm from the Salter – referencing God as the One who gives the salt. The disciples have come back to Jesus and are tattling on someone who is casting out demons in his name. Jesus tells them to let the people be as long as they are not against the good work they are doing. He tells them not to be a stumbling block, a distraction. Let good people do good work.

Jesus goes on to tell them everyone will be salted with fire, and salt is good because it has a purpose. Jesus says it’s ok to be salty – to be down to earth, honest, frustrated, so long as you season the rest of the world with what you know. We need the sweet and the salty to make change in our world. We need the flavors of the world, because when what we are doing is bland, when what we are doing has no purpose, we must ask ourselves why we are doing it.

I asked you to start this morning off by choosing either salt or sugar. Why did you choose what you choose? Maybe you thought I was going to pass out after worship snacks – but do you see yourself as more salty, down to earth, or sweet with heart felt words? Perhaps you’re both. We need both in a world that is hurting. We need all the gifts and talents of everyone.

Just like in the Esther passage, God works in silence, and in speech, behind the scenes, and with power. Find where your gifts lie, and know that we are in this together. Thanks be to God. Amen.