

We have just heard one of the scripture texts for this morning—the text from James that is finishing up your series on this epistle. The other scripture is less a passage than a whole book—the story of Esther. It’s an odd combination! But it is the combination that was put together in the lectionary cycle of scripture readings for today. In the three-year rotation of the lectionary, this week’s is the only one that has anything from the Book of Esther in it. And that’s probably because Esther is an odd book.

The Book of Esther doesn’t mention God. At all. Not once. There’s no apparent worship, no longing for Jerusalem or the temple even though the story is all about the Jews who are exiled in Persia. Instead of all that, there is a harem and a contest to see which young virgin from the harem would please the king most when they “went into him”... which implies a whole range of things. There is slaughter at the end of the book, and a lot of plotting and counter-plotting in the rest of it. Jewish and Christian interpreters over the centuries have tried to figure out what to do with it, and Martin Luther, the reformer, said he wished it did not even exist. (1)

Now you likely know that Martin Luther was also not a fan of the book of James. He called that an epistle of straw. He thought it had too much about works in it and not enough about grace. Maybe the thing he disliked about both James and Esther was that they were somehow not spiritual enough. At least, not overtly. **I** think, however, that they each have something to say to us about our availability to be used by God, anywhere and at any time.

Just to refresh your memory of Esther: The story begins with great King Ahasuerus, “ruler of 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia,” throwing a big bash to show off the wealth and splendor of his kingdom. At the end of it all (it lasted a very long time!), he threw one last

banquet, got drunk, and then demanded that his beautiful wife, Vashti, come and be paraded before everyone to show off her beauty—just like the rest of his property. But she refused. And Ahasuerus got mad, consulted his sages, and they sent out a decree that “every man should be master in his own house” and that Queen Vashti should be deposed and replaced with another.

In order to replace her, the king called for all the beautiful virgins from all the provinces of the kingdom to be gathered into the royal harem and brought before him until he found the one that pleased him most. It turned out that the one who ended up pleasing him most was the beautiful Esther, an orphan who had been raised by her cousin Mordecai, both of them among the exiled Jews. She became Queen Esther, loved and celebrated by the king, although she never told him about her Jewish heritage because Mordecai had instructed her not to.

One day, Mordecai overheard two men plotting to assassinate the king. He immediately got word to Esther, who told the king who hanged the conspirators. Not long after that, a man named Haman began rising in the ranks of the king’s officials. He loved his power, and he loved to receive all the deference that the king had commanded for him. But Mordecai didn’t bow down to him—or to anyone—because, he said, he was a Jew. So Haman began to plot against Mordecai and all Mordecai’s people. Haman convinced the king to issue an order to annihilate “all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day...and to plunder their goods,” because, he said, they kept “themselves separate...and [did] not obey the king’s laws.” The designated day was chosen by lot, and the orders went out to all the provinces.

When Mordecai heard about this decree, he wept and wailed and went to the king’s gate dressed in sackcloth and ashes. When Esther heard about his pitiful condition, she sent a messenger to find out what was going on. The messenger returned to her, telling her what

Mordecai had said, that there was an order to destroy their people and that she should go and talk to the king and beg for her people.

But Esther couldn't do that. There were rules. Everyone knows, she sent word to Mordecai, “that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone,” then that person may live. Mordecai's response to Esther contains probably the most well-known words from this particular book of the Bible. He said, “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, relief and deliverance will rise... 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.” (*repeat*) So Esther called for the Jews in the city of Susa to gather and hold a three-day fast on her behalf. And then she went into the king.

Now you may remember how this ends, although you may not remember all the ins and outs since there are lot of them. There is a multi-day banquet hosted by the Queen, there is a sleepless night during which the king remembers how Mordecai had saved him from assassination, and there is the mortification of Haman—the plummeting from the heights of power to hanging on the same gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. The Jews slaughtered their enemies, and the date that had been chosen by lot for the destruction of the Jews became a feast day called Purim. This turnabout came because Esther, even in her precarious situation, made herself available to be used for the purposes of saving the people of God. Perhaps she did indeed come to her royal dignity for just such a time as this.

This idea—that we are where we are for just the right purpose at whatever time we're in—rose up during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's, again during the gender rights

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*From Esther and James 5:13-20*  
*Anita Yoder Kehr*  
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movements of the last decades, and again with the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent protests of the unjust mistreatment of people of color last summer. Any of us, wherever we are, are available at the right place to do **something** that extends the just reign of God in the world. Now I’m not ready to say that God orchestrated Esther’s way into the king’s harem or demanded the slaughter of the enemies, but I do affirm that Esther’s availability—her openness to doing what she could within her sphere of influence—provided for the salvation of God’s people. In the same way, God can redeem what is hard in our lives and turn it around for divine purposes—  
if we make ourselves available.

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord...” Those are the beginning words of our text from James and also the beginning of the end of this book of wisdom. Since you’ve been studying James in recent weeks, you know about his very honest teaching in regard to what faithful living looks like, both as individuals and in the community of faith. He is clear that you can’t say you’re a follower of Jesus if you don’t show it in what you do and how you act. You can’t say you’re a follower of Jesus if you don’t make yourself available to God to extend the reign of God in this world. James is also clear that *any* of the doing emerges out of faith—out of a relationship with the God who is generous in giving every good and perfect gift that we need in order to be faithful.

In our text for today, in these concluding words of James’ epistle, we find one last set of instructions for living faithfully in Christian community: In every situation, James says, in all kinds of suffering, in joy and goodness, in physical sickness, don’t go it alone. Come together with others and pray—or praise, as the case may be. Pastor Christopher Michael Jones says that

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James’ ending message is this: Prayer is the “best medium” by which the Christian community “can engage in a dedicated struggle against sin” and oppression. “Through the power of prayer total personal and communal healing can occur.” (2) Praying and praising are ways in which we make ourselves available to God and to each other to extend the reign of God in the world.

Before I go further, I just want to say a word about verses 15 and 16: “The prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed....” These verses have been misused over the course of Christianity, over and over again. They have been used to heap up guilt: “Surely,” folks have said, “if you would pray in the right way and with real faith, you would already be healed. What is wrong with you?” Or “what is wrong with your family or pastor or friends who are praying for you?” These verses have also been used to tie physical illness directly to sin—and while we know that body, soul, and mind are surely connected, we also know that sin is not the sole predictor of sickness. So, I just want to say this: We can pray in faith, in earnest, deep faith, surrounded by other believers and anointed with oil and still not be made well. We can pray in faith and experience miraculous physical healing. We can confess every sin, confident in the gracious love of God through Christ, and still suffer illness.

I don’t know why physical healing doesn’t always happen when we pray for it, but I do know that it’s not because of lack of faith. Until the time of the new heaven and the new earth, death is with us. That is as scriptural as what is written in the book of James. What I also know is that the healing that can happen as the community of faith prays together can be much broader than restored bodies. It can mean healed relationships, healed hearts and minds, the gift of peace

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that goes deep and surpasses understanding. I think you know all this. But I need to say it anyway.

What is also true is this: Praying—in solitude and in community—really is a way of making ourselves available to God. It really is a way of extending the reign of God in this world within the sphere of our influence, among those people whose lives meet ours. And each of us, wherever we are, can be at the right place at the right time to pray in faith for the wholeness and health of individuals and of our broken world. Bearing each other’s suffering, praising and celebrating with others, reaching out and drawing in those who have drifted away—these are also real ways of extending the reign of God in this world. Anytime and anywhere, in big and small ways, at every age and stage of our lives, with a well-spoken word, with careful listening, with an open heart, we can be at the right place at the right time to touch the lives of others and recall to them the love of God.

Making ourselves available to God and to others makes every moment of our lives “such a time as this,” as Mordecai told Esther. Making ourselves available to God and to others has eternal implications, as James wrote to that struggling little Christian community. Not many of us will save a whole people or overturn a completely unjust system like Esther did. But all of us can participate in advancing the Reign of God in the here and now. For such a time as this you are who you are, particularly suited to do what only you can do and to be who only you can be, in your time and in your place.

As I end, I offer you a poem by the late John O’Donohue, Irish teacher, poet, and former priest, who reminds us of the gift and potential of each day.

### The Inner History of a Day (3)

No one knew the name of this day;  
Born quietly from deepest night,  
It hid its face in light,  
Demanded nothing for itself,  
Opened out to offer each of us  
A field of brightness that traveled ahead,  
Providing in time, ground to hold our footsteps  
And the light of thought to show the way.

The mind of the day draws no attention;  
It dwells within the silence with elegance  
To create a space for all our words,  
Drawing us to listen inward and outward.

We seldom notice how each day is a holy place  
Where the eucharist of the ordinary happens,  
Transforming our broken fragments  
Into an eternal continuity that keeps us.

Somewhere in us a dignity presides  
That is more gracious than the smallness  
That fuels us with fear and force,  
A dignity that trusts the form a day takes.

So at the end of [the] day, we give thanks  
For being betrothed to the unknown  
And for the secret work  
Through which the mind of the day  
And wisdom of the soul become one.

(1) Dan Clendenin, “Queen Ester: Unedited,” *Journey with Jesus*, September 20, 2015, [Journey with Jesus - Queen Esther: Unedited](#).

(2) Christopher Michael Jones, “A Day of Healing Lectionary Commentary,” *The African American Lectionary*, November 9, 2008, [The African American Lectionary](#).

(3) John O’Donohue, “The Inner History of a Day,” *To Bless the Space Between Us*, New York: Doubleday, 2008, p. 161.

Thanks also to James Boyce, “Commentary on James 5:13-20,” *Working Preacher*, September 27, 2015, [Commentary on James 5:13-20 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#).