

Did you hear the call to worship this morning? (from Ps 130, 2 Chr 16, Is 41) Listen to the words and think of Esther in these terms:

Leader: O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is unfailing love. His redemption overflows.

All: *The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.*

Leader: You will look in vain for those who tried to conquer you. Those who attack you will come to nothing. For I hold you by your right hand-- I, the LORD your God. And I say to you, 'Don't be afraid. I am here to help you.'

All: *We will toss them into the air, and the wind will blow them all away. Then we will rejoice in the LORD. We will glory in the Holy One of Israel.*

Esther and Mordecai could have written that call to worship. That would be their testimony – that was their life story. God had searched them out, placed them in the courts of Susa, given them a job to do, and then said, “Go for it, and when you are victorious, celebrate the Lord!” And these two everyday people, a young woman and her adoptive father, did it. Today is about a great celebration.

Last week’s defeat of Haman gave reason to celebrate. But we left the story with the decree to destroy the Jews still in effect.

Have you been holding your breath all week? Wondering what’s going to happen? Can’t wait to hear the rest of the story? After all, we left Esther in the middle of a conversation with the king; Haman had been carried out for execution. What did she do? What did she say next?

Well, we just heard Jim Stahl tell the rest of the story.<sup>1</sup> Do you find yourself appalled by the destruction of lives? You might think, here it is – that vengeful Old Testament God who wipes people out. What about that? Why was it okay for the Jews to kill the people who attacked them? What about Jesus who says “love your enemies?”

This story is about genocide; a Holocaust. Even with Haman gone, life in Persia was not safe for the Jews; the edict was still out; their very existence was still threatened. And threats happen like that today against people groups, and even against Christians. Jesus himself told us to anticipate that (John 15:18-25).

If someone came against you to attack your family, would you defend yourself? Do you think it would be right – or at least reasonable? Through Esther and Mordecai, the Jews were given permission to take defensive measures to fight for their lives if attacked. This was self-defense; they were not on the offensive.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s see how Esther handled it.

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<sup>1</sup>For those reading the sermon, please stop now and read Esther 8, 9, and 10.

After Haman was taken out, she didn't waste any time. She immediately used her political savvy and winsome ways to gain reversal of the edict. It was going well! The king gave her Haman's property. And he made that decision on his own, without an advisor – a first! He really did care for Esther. He took her concerns to heart. He also put Mordecai in Haman's position because of her. But she knew she needed more. She wanted the impossible – the reversal of an irreversible edict. What does a woman do when she wants the impossible?

She throws herself on the floor and cries. Then she looks up at her husband and says, "If you really love me you will do one more thing." ("If I am pleasing in your eyes," i.e. "if you really care for me a little.") I think it was a brilliant strategy. ☺

Well, she got mixed results. The king got a little short with her. He told her to dry her tears, get up off the floor and handle it herself.

The truth is, he had done a lot, and so he refused to take responsibility. He said, "You write; you – Esther and Mordecai, write whatever you please concerning the Jews– if you can think of a way to reverse the irreversible." And of course, with the seal, that is, the authority of the king, they could do it.

Sometimes we want the government to take care of things. Or at least we think there's someone "out there" who will do it. But God wants us to step up; to take some responsibility to do something about the atrocities in the world. Government is not always the best agent for the job. Governments are not always just, don't always care. But when believers connect with God through prayer and put into action God's passion for the oppressed, then God's power is unleashed, because God makes our efforts fruitful.

A man named Gary Haugen has done just that. Mr. Haugen founded International Justice Mission (IJM),<sup>2</sup> a Christian human rights organization which offers legal services to the poor. Mr. Haugen resolved that Christians have a responsibility to victims of cruelty; he wanted to use the law to help rescue them. "This is not a God who offers sympathy and best wishes," he writes. "This is a God who wants evildoers brought to account and vulnerable people protected—here and now!"

So, 300 Christians made up of lawyers, criminal investigators, social workers, and advocates, work with local authorities mostly in SE Asia to rescue victims of human rights abuse. In Cambodia they've been very successful at rescuing girls, some as young as eight years old, out of the rampant sex trafficking trade, giving these girls hope for a future.

IJM takes the gospel into hard and scary places; into the violence of the world. They claim that their most important tactic is prayer. Mr. Haugen says history proves that the prayers of the church community make a difference. So twice a day employees stop their work and pray together for thirty minutes. With God, powerful progress has been made by International Justice Mission. They believe in living into our authority to fight for the lives of God's children.

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<sup>2</sup>Info about IJM from [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/01/19/090119fa\\_fact\\_power](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/01/19/090119fa_fact_power), accessed 8/25/09 To read more about this wonderful organization go to <http://www.ijm.org>.

Esther and Mordecai found themselves in the position to do something about the aggression against the Jews. Each step of the way, that question continued to be asked of Esther, and now, Mordecai too. You have been placed here for such a time as this. Will you do it? If you were in their place, what would you do?

They acted. They took the edict and simply reversed it. If attacked, the Jews were given the right to defend themselves, and also to confiscate the goods of those who attacked them. This served to lessen the attacks on the Jews. In fact, what happened is that many people aligned themselves with the Jews. The tide had turned in support of the Jews, and amazingly, the whole city of Susa celebrated when the edict came out.

God has a way of protecting God's people. And notice, the Jews took no one's goods. This was not a matter of material gain but of overcoming God's enemies.

How does this Old Testament story parallel Jesus' words in the New Testament? We are to love our enemies but not be overcome by them. We are to stand up and fight for the rights of the abused and oppressed. We live in the midst of spiritual warfare against Satan. When we push into enemy territory, we will be attacked. We must not shrink back. God is faithful, and God is here to help us overcome the enemy.

This is God's passion – to defend the powerless, and to stand against injustice. But how do we apply this today here, in our own community?

Everyday people can do amazing things when they connect with God and assume God's passion for their neighborhoods.

There's a neighborhood in LA called MacArthur Park. (Once someone even wrote a song about it: "Someone left the cake out in the rain, I don't think that I can take it cause it took so long to bake it and I'll never have that recipe again . . .") MacArthur Park was a safe, middle class neighborhood that became overrun with drugs, prostitution, and production of illegal documents. Because there were no parking meters, pimps parked limos and ran mobile brothels out of them right there on the street! The beautiful park was filled with drug dealers, drug addicts passed out on the benches, and violence. It became so dangerous that no one ventured out anymore.

A man named Joe Coletti, and a woman who ran a little restaurant called Mamas Tamales started praying for a solution to recapture the neighborhood. Step by step God began to show them the way. Working with city officials and police, they asked that parking meters be installed to limit parking. Then officials reinstalled lighting in the park. Almost immediately, those new lights were shot out. But then surveillance cameras were installed and the police brought in park rangers who began pushing the drug dealers/addicts out. As they did so, citizens organized positive community activities – picnics in the park, inviting families.

At first progress was slow. People only ventured about 10 yards into the park. But each week got better and better as police and this group of citizens cooperated to regain the area. Soon paddle

boats were purchased and the lake cleaned up.<sup>3</sup> Today it's again a safe place with a lower crime rate than greater Los Angeles.

There's more to the healing and revitalization of that neighborhood. Mamas began helping street vendors thrive in their businesses by offering training for how to run a small business. The full story is absolutely fascinating, all because two Christians stepped up. I've been to the restaurant and seen it for myself.

Like Mordecai and Esther, God calls us to live into the authority of God's power. Scripture says, "*The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.*" Those who attack us and our neighborhoods will come to nothing. For God holds you by your right hand, saying, 'Don't be afraid. I am here to help you.'

Will you be about God's passion for the world? Like Esther and Mordecai, we can make a difference, and as we overcome the evil one, let us celebrate!

AMEN

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<sup>3</sup>To read more go to: [http://www.urban-initiatives.org/joeColletti/PDFs/091\\_FullerFocusArticle.pdf](http://www.urban-initiatives.org/joeColletti/PDFs/091_FullerFocusArticle.pdf)