

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“Does That Sound Familiar?”
Esther 9: 1-4, 20-22

A year or so ago, my wife and I were sitting in the Ryman Theater in Nashville (remember going to places?), listening to a concert by Drew Holcomb and the Neighbors, one of our favorite singers/song-writers, and they played a new song, not yet released on an album. He and his wife, Ellie Holcomb, were talking about this brand-new song, never recorded, brand new, not yet heard. And they start playing...and singing. This punchy little number was called “Family” and it was, as the Gen Z folks would say, a true, toe-tapping “bop”. For my wife and me it wasn’t just a song that we heard passively, it was the kind of song that we found to be true. The words poured out and the new story being told in this new song was a story that I already knew. “Family, singing in the kitchen. Family, running through the yard. Family, going on vacation. Family, on a credit card.” Yeah, that’s a new song, but man, that sounds familiar. That sounds like a story that I know, that my family knows...someone else was telling the story, but it was a story that I already knew to be true. It was familiar.

Art has a wonderful way of inviting you into the words and brush strokes and notes and every facet of the story being told. Sometimes, when we hear a story being told through art, through song, through film, through novel or whatever medium, when we hear a story that speaks to our own experience, we find that it isn’t someone else’s new story that is being told, but it’s a story that we ourselves have experienced, and in this we find some comfort knowing that we aren’t alone in our experiences... and we can say, “that sounds familiar” and we mean “someone else knows this to be true. When I look at art by my favorite local artist and maker, Paris Woodhull, whose art (particularly her maps of our communities) you have likely seen around or even in your own home...when I see the whimsy of her art, it looks familiar to me, the way she draws landmarks seems familiar, it’s how I used to look at the world with wonder and awe. When I eat strawberry ice cream from Cruze Farm, it is familiar, it’s what my mom’s homemade ice cream tastes like...it’s new but something I have experienced before.

“That sounds familiar”, others have felt these feelings before. “That sounds familiar”, others have navigated these uncertain plot twists before. “That sounds familiar”, others have lived this story and have moved on to the next chapter. It can be of great comfort to us, when the story that we seem to be living, the one that seems so uniquely scary and uncertain, is echoed in the stories of others, others who have come before us. We can know we aren’t alone; we can know that there’s hope and maybe where to look for and find it, we can know that there are chapters after the difficult ones. And, for us, we can know that God is present in all of our stories. We’re reminded of this when we hear our story echoed in the story of others...when we hear and know and say “that sounds familiar”.

For each of us, each of us in this room, each one of you wherever you are and whenever you are seeing this...there’s something disruptively similar about our collective story amid this

pandemic: whether your school year was abruptly canceled, you have had to shift to working from home (learning how to homeschool), whether your industry doesn't really "work from home" and your job and paycheck is put on hold, whether you are on the front lines as a health professional and you're bravely fighting this, whether you're a business owner and you're making tough decisions right now or you're a worker and you have or either fear losing your job, whether you're a child and it is kind of nice to be at home with your family, whether you are living alone and social isolation is a true challenge...each of us are living a collective story of anxiety and disruption, desperately seeking hope and a return to normalcy. Does that sound familiar?

We can find some comfort then, can't we, that as nuanced and strange and uniquely scary as this pandemic feels, as unprecedented and unpredictable as our journeys seem, our story of anxiety and disruption and our thirst for hope and normalcy is echoed in the stories of others. We aren't alone, others have felt these feelings, too, others in the great cloud of witnesses in our faith tradition and what can be more comforting than just knowing that others have felt the very same feelings that you are feeling in the midst of all this is that God met their needs and is and will continue to meet ours here and now.

Scripture is packed with stories that echo ours; stories of anxiety giving way to peace, longing for hope being met with deliverance...but there's one that I have been particularly drawn to in the last few weeks; maybe you're familiar with this story and maybe not, but I would suspect that it might meet each of us a little differently here and now.

Today I want to tell you a story about a different people living in a different time and place, but one that you might find sounds familiar. This is a story of anxiety and disruption, a story of the thirst for hope and normalcy, and ultimately the story of God's presence in the midst of all of it. This story is one that is told annually during the festival of Purim by our Jewish siblings in faith, it's a controversial and complicated story (so much so that some Rabbi's wouldn't even touch the scroll because they believed it would defile them to do so while others felt it was one of the most important books in Scripture); one feature that makes it so complicated and controversial is that we see no mention of God or God's action in the story, it's a story so dangerously hopeful that the reading of it was banned when the Nazi's invaded Poland to curb revolt and rebellion, this story is an exciting, terrifying, funny, desperate, and ultimately hopeful story that I think we might all agree sounds a bit familiar to us. This morning, we will be hearing the story of Esther.

Nestled within the ten chapters of this story we find the account of God's people at a time when they were living scattered, disrupted from their lives together in one place. Does that sound familiar? This is a period called the diaspora, when God's people were living dispersed. The normal that they once knew was not present any longer...does that sound familiar? The Jewish people were under Persian rule in this story and chapter one erupts with all of these incredibly weirdly specific setting details of the ruling empire. The story describes all the trappings of Susa, one of the capitals of the Persian empire and includes things like golden couches, unthinkably expensive curtains with dye harvested from snails (how do you think things were dyed blue and purple in the ancient world...I hope that isn't all you remember from this sermon), marble pillars, long and opulent parties and right from the get-go, we, as the hearer of this story might think...wow, what a wealthy and powerful threat this group could be...I would sure hate

for them to want to do me harm...and then the benign opulence turns sinister and places its crosshairs on the Jewish people when an edict goes forth, from the direction of an offended Haman (the villain of the story) that the Jewish people will be killed by the Persian military. God's people are faced with an unthinkable powerful and maybe insurmountable threat, a threat so large that hope doesn't seem plausible or maybe possible. Does that sound familiar?

The Jewish people, when they hear of this news begin to weep, be fearful, mourn. Does that sound familiar?

As the story progresses, we see Esther, a Jewish woman who (and I don't have time to go into the complexity of this) becomes the Queen of Persia and is living in the court, far removed and insulated from the dreadful news of the impending doom of her people. Her Uncle Mordecai sends word to her of this terrible news and asks her to advocate for her, use her agency (what she can do) to save her people. Her response is that it's a bit more complicated than that...if a person sees the King unsummoned, they could be killed. Mordecai reminds her that if the lives of the Jews are at stake...she is a Jew...she's bound to her people; their fate is her fate...the action of an individual has collective repercussions. This threat is not a threat to some, it's a threat to all. Does that sound familiar?

Throughout the story, things that seem awfully coincidental occur, people just so happen to be at that place at that time...people just happen to be willing to hear certain ideas...little reversals happen here and there and the fate of the Jewish people begins to turn. As the story concludes, God's people (who were fearful and powerless) are now feared and powerful. The threat that seemed so insurmountable has been overcome, and a new chapter is emerging. Now, that part of the story may seem far away, but it is part of their story and I would wager to guess it will be part of ours as well.

Hear this reading from Esther, chapter 9, verses 1-4 and then 20-22. Hear the story of God's people, hear your story.

¹ On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. ² The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those determined to destroy them. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them. ³ And all the nobles of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and the king's administrators helped the Jews, because fear of Mordecai had seized them. ⁴ Mordecai was prominent in the palace; his reputation spread throughout the provinces, and he became more and more powerful.

And now verses 20 through 22

²⁰ Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, ²¹ to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar ²² as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into

a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Friends, does this story sound familiar? A story of unthinkable anxiety in the shadow of a seemingly insurmountable threat? Does that sound familiar? Is that the way you hear and receive the news as the infection rate grows and the fear of the Covid-19 virus overrunning our local, national, and world healthcare system? Does the threat of all this make you feel small and insignificant in the shadow of its threat? Does that sound familiar?

Does this story, of a people who are anxious and mourn and weep in light of their context sound familiar? What has your week been like? Have you recognized your grief in this? Underneath the fear and anxiety? When your school year was canceled, sports seasons put on hold, life as usual was put on pause, the world began to orbit a single anxious subject, you were not able to gather in your holy space to worship, you weren't able to visit your parents in their assisted care facility? Have you felt grief for those who have died, those in critical condition, those health care professionals who are on the front lines of all this...realizing we're all connected? In all this, does the story of a people who mourn and weep and grieve in light of their context sound like your story? Does that sound familiar?

Does this story, of the recognition in our collective identity sound familiar? This story in which Esther learns that her fate is bound with her people...where statements like "only the vulnerable will be impacted" simply don't or shouldn't ring true. We are all and should be in this together through our collective action, our social distancing, our calling of our neighbor, our sharing of resources...we are all in this together. Does that sound familiar?

This is our story, friends. It sounds familiar because it is. We are anxious and in need of hope, we are grieving, we are connected...and all of these truths point us to a greater truth, a hopeful truth, a truth that has been part of this shared, disruptive pandemic story all along...and perhaps this story of Esther and her people living their own anxious story can help illumine our own. In the story of Esther, even though God is not a named character, God's presence is unmistakable. Little reversals of fate are authored. Illogical and improbable hope shines through. The doom that is expected is replaced with hope through the actions of God's people. God is present and evident in these acts of reversal.

In our own story we see these reversals (not in the far-off future but in the here and now), when we expect people to turn inwardly and be hostile toward one another and we see businesses giving food and resources to the most vulnerable in our society. When we close a church building but the church and her capacity to bind us together through word and spirit is still alive and thriving. When our investment portfolios look bleak but our willingness to support local businesses leads our actions. Even when people are afraid, they want to help (calling people, leaving stuff outside of their house, sharing precious toilet paper, sewing masks in their home). When we expect fear, the most abundant emotion of the day, to lead people, but it's compassion and grace that win. Friends, these are reversals of fate that point us directly to their author...God. Does that sound familiar? God was with God's people in their own story of anxiety and

uncertainty and is very present in our own...we need only look for his presence in the glimmer of these incredible reversals that flicker with radiant light in the swell of darkness. Where do you see God working? Where do you find the story of his presence familiar in your own?

Like all stories of God's people who are in desperate times, there are chapters that follow, where we emerge as stronger, more connected, more faithful, more loving and gracious. Friends, in all the ways that our story has sounded familiar thus far, we can trust that our emergence to the next chapter will sound familiar, too. As difficult as it can be to imagine this scenario when we are self-quarantined, running on our last few rolls of toilet paper, exhausted with what might only generously be considered home schooling, fearful of our economic future, tapped out on streaming services, it can be difficult to imagine being in that next chapter...but perhaps for you, you can find some solace in that we are not navigating a story that hasn't been navigated by God's people before. These moments "that sound familiar" can be touchstones for you, reminding you of God's abiding presence, leading us, inch by inch, to the next chapter of this collective story, not in a dismissive way, but as a means of hope in the midst of uncertainty.

As sure as a story of anxiety and desperate hope, of realizing our connectedness, of feeling grieved, and of seeing God's hand through surprising acts of reversal might sound familiar, we can be assured that emerging from this, we will be a new, stronger, more faithful, and more connected people. That chapter will sound familiar. May you hear this, friends. May you know that as isolating and scary as our collective story seems, it has been told before. We're not alone in it. May you see God's hand in the surprising reversals all around you (may you be open to being such a reversal in the life of your neighbor), and may we anticipate the next chapter of our collective story with hope.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. May this be so. **Amen and amen.**