

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious and most loving God, you have sent us Jesus to mend that which is broken, to bridge that which is alienated, and to heal that which is sick. In his name our troubled hearts cry out and pray to you, O God.

We pray to you with our concerns for places where there is conflict, violence, and misery: war ravaged countries, particularly Afghanistan, domestic cruelty, bullying in school grounds, workplace intimidation, gang warfare on streets, or terrorist attacks.

We pray to you of our concern for all displaced people: in refugee camps, fugitives from oppression, those in our prisons and detention centres, and for all separated families and traumatised children.

We pray to you of our concern for neighbors, workmates, or members of our own families who are struggling with grief, mental health, financial struggles, and more; we pray the unemployed and underemployed, those facing terminal illness, others in despair from broken relationships, those grieving a death, those facing storms or the fallout of storms, and the many caught up in predicaments for which there seems no obvious answer.

We pray to you of our concern for the church: with its flourishing or weak congregations, those living in comfort and others surviving under persecution, those filled with self-doubts and others with over self-confidence, churches without priests and ministers or those where sadly there is conflict between clergy and laity.

We pray to you now loving God for ourselves: Help us, in our own small way, to be more like your compassionate Christ. Shape our thoughts, sift our feelings, supervise our efforts, bless our abilities, that we may get the best out of each day and give the best to those around us. Through the grace of Christ Jesus our Redeemer we pray the prayer that he taught...

SERMON

The last time I was here in worship with you all I shared that I was going tent camping in Martha's Vineyard for vacation. Someone who shall not be publicly named brought up rain. I tried to shake it off, but you might have heard

that “rain” turned into a little Tropical storm named Henri. I have been tent camping for a number of years but facing a hurricane downgraded to tropical storm was a new experience for me.

My BFF, also a pastor named Jess, is an avid camper and had us reinforce the ropes that tethered our rain flaps and tarps to the ground. I am incredibly grateful for her wisdom. Because our tents were strongly tethered to the stakes in the ground, our site remained in tack. Some of our neighbors did not fare quite as well as tarps ripped off and rainflies actually flew.

As I laid in the tent listening to what seemed like buckets of water pouring down on us, I couldn't not help but think about what I am tethered to in this life. When the storms of life hit, when it feels like the world is dumping buckets of rain on me, what is it that holds me in place and keeps me secure.

This morning we heard a Scripture about Esther. Esther was born to Jewish parents who actually named her Hadassah. As a girl growing up in a Jewish home, Hadassah would have learned to live within in her faith community. Women would have been expected to keep their heads covered for modesty, she would have learned to keep kosher and not mix dairy and meat and to avoid certain foods. Hadassah would have learned how to observe the Sabbath and keep the commandments of her faith.

These rituals, I believe, tethered Hadassah to her faith and to God. Lighting the Sabbath candles, praying the Shema, preparing her food a certain way, having these rituals, having these practices in her childhood formed and securely tethered the essence of who she was in relationship with God.

At some point in her life, Hadassah was chosen to become a part of the Persian Kings harem. I had to look up the word harem so let me put it bluntly- Hadassah, at some point in her life, had to hide her Jewish identity, change her name to Esther, dress like a Persian, and be one of many women who were to be available for the kings, cough, cough, pleasure.

Scripture is not clear how long Esther hid her true identity but in our Scripture this morning we hear that Esther is put in a precarious situation. The King, under the advice of his friend, has decreed that the Jewish community will be destroyed. On the one hand, Esther is asked by her cousin Mordechai to speak up on behalf of the Jewish people. If she chooses this option, she exposes who she is as a Jewish woman and has the potential to not only alienate her from the life she knows but it has the potential to put her very life at risk. On the other hand, Esther could go about her business and say nothing and do nothing. She could keep living the Persian life she has known for at least several years and maintain her position as a part of the king's inner circle. Esther has got to be

feeling a major storm of life. Her tent flaps have got to be blowing strongly in the winds of what to do.

Friends, as I think about what this sister of faith faced, I have been deeply challenged by Esther. I don't know about you, but I like to THINK that I am the type that would boldly do the right thing, that I would dare greatly, and that I would speak up for the Jewish community. I like to think that I would do that, but my reality proves that is not always the case. There have been times when I have felt deeply called to speak up on behalf of one group of oppressed people or another. I have felt called to speak for police and prison reform, for full inclusion of rights for LGBTQ persons, to speak up for immigrants and greater climate care, the list goes on and on. But there are so many times when I went with the "nice" sermon because I didn't want to ruffle feathers or have people upset with me. I like to be liked. Having people angry with me, let alone putting my life at risk, doesn't feel good, the risk doesn't always feel worthwhile, and so I have often times backed down, run away, smiled sweetly, and stayed silent.

But Esther is this courageous example of being so strongly tethered to God and to God's people, that when the storm of her life calls her to risk her life, approach the king, and advocates for her people, Esther poignantly says, "If I perish, I perish". In other words, this is so important, I am willing to risk my very

life for it. Esther knows, deep in her tethered soul, that God has placed her in a unique position to have access to the King while also being a part of the oppressed Jewish community. She knows that this is not a political issue that she can just ignore but that this is a faith issue because it is an issue that involves God's children. Not knowing how the king will react or where speaking up will leave her, I picture Esther secretly lighting sabbath candles, praying to the God she knew so well as a child, and trying to muster the courage to speak up on behalf of her people. I imagine her reverting back to those practices that tethered her soul to God and it giving her the strength to face the storm and to move toward the king when her knees were wobbling, and to speak the truth, in love, even when her voice was shaking.

Esther dares greatly and speaks to the king and advocates for the Jewish people. This is where Esther encourages me and challenges me to do the same in my faith journey. When I first started out in ministry, I had the opportunity to have dinner with a Bishop of the Church. His name is Bishop Marcus Matthews, and he is well known for being a courageous preacher. I told him that I was struggling and thinking about leaving ministry because I felt deeply called to preach sermons that spoke up for groups of people who were marginalized by society, but my sermons were being met with anger and people upset that I was

being too political. I will never forget his words of wisdom. He said “Jessica, you will do great things to further God’s kingdom through your preaching, but you have to remember that prophetic preachers must be like rhinos. They have to have the solid horn to keep prodding the church forward toward God’s kingdom, but they must also have the thick hide to take the criticism that comes with the prodding.” Ever since that time this rhino has always been a powerful reminder in my office.

I share this with you 8 weeks into my tenure because I can pretty much guarantee that I will preach a sermon that you don’t agree with. If you are liberal and progressive my evangelical side will at some point rub you the wrong way. If you are evangelical or conservative, my social justice side will probably do the same thing. I consider myself to be an “equal opportunity offender” because I don’t care about earthly political sides, I only care about being aligned with the priorities and values of God’s kingdom and those priorities and values are so vastly different from our earthly ones that they are bound to ruffle feathers and challenge us in different ways.

I lose a lot of sleep over this because I dearly love people and I want to bring more love and grace and forgiveness into the world, never more division. At the same time, women like Esther who dared greatly and spoke up even at the

risk of her life, empower me to remain deeply tethered to God, who I know and name Jesus Christ, and to speak as the Spirit leads me.

Friends I want to be very clear. I am called, you are called, we are called to speak courageously as well. I have shared at various meetings that I sought to be appointed here because I see that the Spirit also leads this congregation. You have experienced and weathered some significant storms. Any church that has the courage to discuss becoming a reconciling congregation, even when there is great loss and risk, must be deeply tethered to God. Any church that prioritizes talking about race when it is a hot button and controversial issue, shows a level of spiritual courage that I want to be a part of. Any congregation that says we will offer hybrid worship services and continue our missions even through a pandemic has such deeply rooted faith and practices that I have to sit up, take notice, and find out how to take part. Like Esther you and your witness as a congregation continues to challenge and encourage me and I hope it does the same for you.

As we go into this week ahead, continue to dare greatly like Esther. Find the spiritual practices that help you remain tethered to our faith in God so that you, so that we, can weather everything and anything we may face. And continue to courageously and boldly find ways to offer grace and love independent of the storms that may arise. May it be so, amen and amen.