

FIVE SMOOTH STONES – The Book of Esther

Introduction: The book of Esther - *The pastoral work of Community-Building (becoming a celebrative community of faith in the environment of the world's hostility)*

*[The Biblical] memories recall the **essential reality of humanity as corporate**. In the Genesis story of creation Adam was not complete until there was Eve. The meaning is clear enough: no individual is complete in himself, in herself; humanity is person-in-relationship. **Persons are always part of community even when they deny it, even when they don't know it.** The congregation (qahal) is the basic working unit in God's relations with the Hebrew people. . . . There are no Robinson Crusoe traditions in the biblical narratives. You could be damned by yourself but you could not be saved by yourself. . . .*

The American tradition of individualism has interposed itself between pastoral work and the biblical heritage. The myth of the self-sufficient individual permeates the American self-consciousness. . . . [in the church] persons who had been turned by Roman census-takers into statistics were initiated into communities of faith in which each person received a new name. . . .

***The plain fact is that the community of faith, the church, is a highly specialized community.** It has a unique character. It is not a jack-of-all-trades organization, standing around on elm-shaded street corners with the off-chance of being useful to somebody or other. . . . There is nothing quite like it. No analogies or parallel experiences are adequate to explain its nature. (Peterson, pp. 194-197)*

The Text – SUSA – the people of God in the world

Read Esther 1 & 2

What is your impression of life in the palace of King Xerxes (Ahasuerus)?
What societal values seem to be in play? Any similarities to today?

The people of God had been taken from their homeland and settled in Babylon as prisoners of war and refugees; they fared better under the Persians. How do the people of God generally adjust to changes in secular government and its policies? How *might* they adjust?

The Text – HAMAN – the people of God under threat

Read Esther 3; 5:9-14; 6:12-14; chapter 7; 8:1-14; 9:1-16

How did Mordecai offend Haman?

Can you think of any instances (in history? in film? in the news?) of someone wanting to crush another person because of a personal insult?

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What was the origin of Haman’s genocidal hatred for the Jews?

1 Samuel 15:1 Samuel said to Saul, “I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the LORD. **2** This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. **3** Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy^[a] all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.’” . . .

7 Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, near the eastern border of Egypt. **8** He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. **9** But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.

10 Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel: **11** “I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.” Samuel was angry, and he cried out to the LORD all that night.

12 Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, “Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal.” . . .

30 Saul replied, “I have sinned. But please honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel; come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD your God.” **31** So Samuel went back with Saul, and Saul worshiped the LORD.

32 Then Samuel said, “Bring me Agag king of the Amalekites.”

Agag came to him in chains. And he thought, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.”

33 But Samuel said,

*“As your sword has made women childless,
so will your mother be childless among women.”*

And Samuel put Agag to death before the LORD at Gilgal.

Haman’s discovery that Mordecai was a Jew only opened the door for Haman to unleash this long-standing desire for revenge.

Can you think of any instances (in history? in film? in the news?) of someone wanting to completely destroy others because of a generations-long offense?

How does one determine whether God’s people are under threat because of someone’s **malicious intent**? How might God’s people respond to that type of threat?

How does one determine whether God’s people are under threat because of someone else’s **ignorance**? How might God’s people respond to that type of threat?

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The Text – MORDECAI – the people of God in steadfast faithfulness

Read Esther 2:5-7, 10-11, 10-23; chapter 4; 6:1-11; 8:15-17; chapter 10

Mordecai is never referred to by a professional or courtly title; he's always called "the Jew." Likewise Haman is always called "the Agagite."

How had Mordecai adjusted to life in Persia?

How did Mordecai respond to the personal threats made by Haman?

How did Mordecai respond to Haman's threats against all the Jews?

Why do you think Mordecai responded in these ways? To what degree might his response have anything to do with his trust in God?

The Text – HADASSAH – the people of God, beloved

Read Esther 2:7-10, 15-18; 4:9-17; 5:1-8; chapter 7; 8:3-8; 9:11-13, 29-32

How had Esther adjusted to life in Persia?

How did Esther initially respond to the threats made by Haman? To what degree might her response have anything to do with her trust in God?

What changed her mind?

What was Esther's vocation (=position in life, understood as given to her by God in His grace and practiced as an expression of her thanksgiving)? How did she practice her vocation?

The Text – GOD Who keeps His covenant

Note: Nowhere in the book of Esther is the God of Israel mentioned at all, either by name, by reference to the Covenant (and the people are not called "Israelites" but "Jews"), or in any other way.

In the apparent absence of God in Susa, how did Mordecai figure out what to do? On what did he base his advice to Esther?

Between the last OT prophet (Malachi) and the first NT evangelist (Matthew) were about 400 years without any obvious activity of God. How did His people figure out what to do in those days?

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Since the end of the New Testament era, how do God's people figure out what to do from day to day?

How do God's people figure out what to do in times of distress and in times of comfort?

How do God's people figure out how to exercise their various vocations?

The Text – PURIM – the people of God in celebration

Read Esther 3:7; 9:18-32

To what degree is the book of Esther a sort of Disney / Pixar story of a heroic girl called upon to do heroic deeds, a la [Merida \(Brave\)](#), [Pocahontas](#), or [Mulan](#)?

To what degree is the book of Esther an affirmation of the covenant relationship of God with His chosen people, in a place and time where He seems quite absent from them?

Is it ever appropriate for God's people to celebrate His covenant love for them? How might they do that?

2 Samuel 6:12 Now King David was told, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God." So David went to bring up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. ¹³ When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. ¹⁴ Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the LORD with all his might, ¹⁵ while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets.

Purim videos	Purim songs
What is Purim? The Purim Megillah The Purim Story	Hava Narisha Lakova Sheli Mischenichnas Adar
Purim shpiels (skits)	
Purim shpiel at Yeshiva Far Rockaway (YFR) 2020	
"Happy" – music by Pharrell Williams	
Purim shpiels that (sort of) tell the actual story of Esther: "The Adventures of Esther" at Park Avenue Synagogue	
"Hamilton" – tunes by, well . . .	
"Megillah Man" –tunes by Billy Joel	

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The Five Smooth Stones - 1 Samuel 17 – David goes to fight Goliath

³⁸ Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. ³⁹ David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them.

"I cannot go in these," he said to Saul, "because I am not used to them." So he took them off. ⁴⁰ Then he took his staff in his hand, **chose five smooth stones from the stream**, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.

Resources:

Luther, Martin. *Notes on Ecclesiastes*. Translated by Jaroslav Pelikan. Luther's Works, American Edition Vol. 15. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972.

Peterson, Eugene. *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.

Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character*. Simon and Schuster, 2010.

The Next Megillah - Song of Songs - The pastoral work of Prayer-Directing (learning how to love and pray in the context of salvation)

The scrolls were the applied wisdom of the pastoral office to a people who had come together to pay attention to their life together with God. Song of Songs was read at Passover, Ruth at Pentecost, Lamentations on the Ninth of Ab, Ecclesiastes at Tabernacles, and Esther at Purim. (Peterson, p. 14-15)

Peterson describes each of these as follows:

Song of Songs - The pastoral work of Prayer-Directing (learning how to love and pray in the context of salvation)

Ruth - The pastoral work of Story-Making (developing an identity as a person of faith in the context of God's covenant)

Lamentations - The pastoral work of Pain-Sharing (dealing with suffering in the context of redemptive judgment)

Ecclesiastes - The pastoral work of Nay-Saying (unmasking religious illusion and pious fraud in the context of providential blessing)

Esther - The pastoral work of Community-Building (becoming a celebrative community of faith in the environment of the world's hostility)