

Esther grew up orphaned in a remote part of the ancient Persian empire, raised by her uncle Mordecai. As she reaches adulthood, Persian King Xerxes gets rid of his Queen Vashti because she stood up for herself with dignity. He calls for a parade of candidates to be his new queen. Mordecai seizes this opportunity for Esther. After months of perfuming, make-up, spa treatments, fine clothes, she's stripped off any hint of Jewishness. Made over like Cinna with Katniss amid Capital excess in *the Hunger Games*. Long story short, Xerxes chooses Esther. Soon thereafter, Mordecai saves the king by overhearing a plot and telling Esther. He's rewarded, but refuses to bow down to Haman, Xerxes number one henchman. With ego-fueled rage, Haman schemes to destroy Mordecai and all his people (note the word destroy). Mordecai rekindles in Esther her Jewish identity, and remarks famously: maybe you were chosen for such a time as this. Hear what the Spirit may say.

{read Esther 7:1-10}

Esther overcomes evil. It's the dramatic turning point of the story. Haman gets destroyed (did we catch the same word?) hanging on the same gallows he built for Mordecai. It could be a Hollywood superhero movie. With touches of humor—King Xerxes portrayed as a buffoon. The gallows Haman builds about twice as tall as this sanctuary. It's an origin story by way of comedy for a most festive Jewish holiday: Purim. And after all the holocausts in their history I expect it's also about serious hope beyond surface humor.

Esther overcomes evil. Embodied in Haman and his minions. Except not quite in herself. Not in bloody violence she seeks from Xerxes to slaughter all enemies of the Jews. Not just once, twice ... first, hundreds then 75,000 people. “I would have held my peace,” she coyly weaves a web spinning the ego of the king. Except staying quiet doesn’t achieve peace. That’s what we talked about last week—need to be honest and speak truth. Except her speaking and scheming doesn’t overcome evil in the pursuit of peace as she does precisely to others as they would have done to her. Yes, she wins the game of thrones. She’s a heroine savior—a welcome woman of power in the pantheon of our faith. Maybe inspiring us with courage for such times as we may face. And yet more than a model to emulate, I find her a reminder to seek the true way to peace through many a deceptive pitfall along the way.

This month we’re centering worship on nurturing peace, as part of a season of peace in many activities. Next week we receive our Peacemaking offering—our commitment to *shalom*, the ancient Hebrew word and vision including healing from harm, ending violence and more. In full *shalom*, all of life flourishes healthy, whole, joyful. It sprouts internally, radiating inter-personally to universal scope. In the Bible, there’s no *shalom* without a loving order of resources and relationships in society that is fair for all people and creation. We began with hospitality—valuing, affirming, tending each person’s humanity. Last week we spoke truth in love. Not words that enflame. Honesty that builds up others and common life together.

There is so much more to explore about how we grow peace in our families, church, community, world. Strategies and practical courses with good folks like Mennonites, Quakers, and Presbyterians. About this time of year two decades ago, the church I served and this presbytery hosted Hilary Rantisi, a Christian Palestinian peacemaker. She shared human stories, history, details we don’t often hear. And I recall most profoundly her caution: don’t come to the Holy Land working for peace, if you’re not at peace in your own home, neighborhood, and nation.

That's tough truth. And friends, here's why it sticks. If we're honest we all struggle for peace, in a world where we do not find peace wherever we go. More than starkly simple dualistic good or evil characters, I'm drawn to books or movies with more nuance. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Harry Potter. Even most recent *Star Wars / Mandalorian*, *Marvel*. Louise Penny, Madeleine L'Engle, *Les Miserables*. Who might you add? When even moral paragons of our imagination like Mother Theresa courageously name internal dark nights of a struggling soul. When even favorite relatives prove less than perfect. When leaders of faith and culture with big moral bullhorns are often buffoons committing very offenses they decry. When we gaze in the mirror and lay awake at night, we know the truth: the line between good and evil runs through every human heart.

Friends, I believe evil powers exist that shadow our spirits and shape society. Not quite Sauron or Palpatine, Cruella Deville or Lord Voldemort. Though maybe akin as each began in ordinary humanity twisted horribly. You know, as liberals we emphasize corrupted evil in institutions, big social ills and injustice. As conservatives we prioritize individual choice and morality. Both are right. Unchecked, unredeemed selfishness in twisted individuals can metastasize into a spiritual force that transcends institutions and consumes communities. In a vicious cycle, it sucks in and feeds on more individuals.

We need to face together and discuss wider social concerns. And today James focuses our attention on personal holy integrity. Many have said over the ages variations on the theme: true wisdom combines knowledge of God and knowledge of self. James warns against the wisdom of the world—messages, assumptions, values that foster selfish pursuits, envy, and material cravings. Ultimately, they promise falsely what they can't deliver—deep settledness in joy, gratitude, peace. And such “wisdom” ultimately fuels arrogance and insensitivity, conflict and harm

as in the end, one benefits at another's expense. For better or worse, we know James is right. Whatever fills our minds and hearts flows into what we say and do.

Legend has it James is Jesus' brother in Jerusalem. Maybe. We know very little about him. Surely, he and his people face the existential struggle of seeking righteousness in a world that values the reverse. James spends little effort on esoteric speculation. He wants to get real, practical, in how we live faith every day. I imagine as they chat around the heavenly bonfire, James grooves best with Jesus' parables of ordinary life, and how with grace he challenges boundaries and bias. Or maybe with St. Paul when he urges Romans:

Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold on to what is good. Rejoice and weep together. Never avenge or repay evil for evil. Live peaceably with all, centering on what is noble and sacred, overcoming evil with good. (12:9-21)

Yes, James exclaims, that's how we sow a harvest of righteousness in peace!

Transformed every day to embody sacred presence and purpose we know in Jesus Christ.

Like Aaron helps us see through a shattered window on our bulletin cover. Can't recall ... was it accidental or intentional? Maybe we just found it and never knew. I love how Aaron finds a way to view our broken world through a lens of faith. Friends, hurtful words, physical wounds, conflicts, abuse, wars, shooting after shooting, fires / hurricanes / natural disasters, poverty, fear, anxiety – so many ways abundant life God intends for us gets shattered internally, interpersonally, communally. Emotional violence in families, children and adolescents in school, among colleagues at work, from people of faith condemning or prejudice demeaning based on constructs of race or wealth or education ... all so in a twisted way I can be helped by another's hurt. And spiritually when we lose identity, trust, Holy Love as the heart who we are and how we relate.

At the center of all that brokenness stands the cross. As if radiating Divine Grace through all the faults and fractures and failings to bring a growing experience of peace. It's the turning point in overcoming evil, because that's how Jesus stood—how he taught and healed and ate with outcasts and forgave and did miracles of generous abundance—how Jesus stood for God's way of peace. Faith, here's the paradoxical promise of our faith. Jesus did not seek to destroy. He accepted being destroyed. Because he trusted above all the Divine Power of grace and redemption beyond human control. Power of resurrection nurturing new life through love greater than the worst violence even death. Power made real through individual witness. Friends, trust that more powerful than evil metastasizing, a sacred metamorphosis of humanity and all creation can begin with me and you. Hope, courage, we feel for such a time as we face, whatever it is. We live this promise deeply without knowing where exactly it will lead. We live this power intimately with integrity to the best of our ability, often at the cost of dissonance in our closest relations of family and friends, just trying to make the smallest difference.

In that spirit, Parker Palmer urges nonviolence as our path to fullness of peace, flowing from four resources. First, sound rationale, inspiration, motivation. Quite simply, we act in ways that honor the soul, practicing reverent respect, because all people are inherently worthy of it. Second, we ask honest, open questions working together rather than in isolation. We foster collaboration around new possibilities by forging a climate of personal story-telling, blame-free truth-telling. Third, we forge a community of support. Circles of trust within which we share failures and successes, hopes and fears, and courage to take the next step living “undivided lives”, that is with integrity. Finally, we need solid inner ground. A center of inner peace that is the source, the well-spring of all attempts to serve with facing and transforming the violence of our world. “We can be peacemakers in our small part of the world,” Palmer concludes, “only when we are at peace within ourselves.”<sup>i</sup>

He tells the story of John Woolman, a Quaker from colonial New Jersey around the birth of our nation. Woolman was a tailor, among farmers and businessmen who banked sizable wealth on the backs of slaves. Woolman received a vision that slavery was an abomination and should end. For twenty years, he “walked this talk” among fellow Quakers—fasting rather than eat meals made or served by slaves, and if he inadvertently benefited from labor of a person in slavery, insisting on paying that person fairly. Traveling from town to town, farm to farm, meeting to meeting Woolman faced the hard and costly tension between the Quaker vision of God in every person and financial sacrifice ending slavery would cost. Still, he stood amid the tension for two decades until by consensus Quakers freed all their persons in slavery. In 1783, the Quaker community petitioned Congress, and from 1827 Quakers were instrumental in the underground railroad.

Howard Thurman was born in segregated Daytona, Florida, the grandson of a slave. He became a leading voice to inspire Civil Rights. After meeting with Gandhi and collaborating with Quakers, he co-founded the first interracial church in the mid-1940s, and through other leadership positions he urged nonviolent pursuit of peace through justice. Martin Luther King, Jr studied with him, got to know him well, and carried a book by him during the Montgomery bus boycott. Overcoming evil, Howard Thurman stresses, begins within each human being. In a weekly reflection from ordinary life among people in a local church, he writes:

I seek the strength to overcome the tendency to evil in my own heart. [... unkind things to retaliate, to make others a means to my own ends, yielding to fear.] I seek the strength to overcome evil that is present about me in much of the organized life ... found in groups, institutions, and individuals ... The terrible havoc of hate and bitterness ... [As] I seek the strength to overcome evil; I must not be overcome by evil. ... What I seek for myself I desire with all my heart for friend and foe alike.<sup>ii</sup>

Dear friends, James interlaces through all he writes, which we read today, a humble plea. Draw near to God, as God seeks to draw near to us. In that spirit we close with Howard Thurman in prayer.

“O God, we gather ourselves together in all of our available parts to see if somehow there may be made clear for us the meaning of our own lives and the meaning of the journey to which we are committed. ... We want to be better than we are. ... Again and again, we are moved by the impulse ... but we do not quite know how to give way to it, that it might sweep through us with its renewal and its inspiration. We are such divided, tempest-tossed, driven children. If we knew the right words to say, oh God, we would say them, if somehow we could bring our minds and our hearts into focus so that what we mean we say, and what we say we do if we could do this, it would help us to be whole [in peace]. ... O, that we might be unanimous within ourselves, that our total being and our lives might be a tuned instrument in Thy hands, making the kind of music that would calm the distressed, that would heal the broken body and mind, that would bring tenderness to those who feel rejected and outcast. As we wait in Thy presence, O God, gather us in, that we might be a lung through which thy Spirit may breathe. Is this asking too much? We wait, O God, we wait.”<sup>iii</sup>

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: the Journey toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 171-174.

<sup>ii</sup> Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1981), 164-165.

<sup>iii</sup> Howard Thurman, *Essential Writings*, selected by Luther E. Smith, Jr. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 145-146.