

Sermon - 09/26/2021
Ps 124; Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22;
Ja 5:13-20; Mk 9:38-50
Inside Out

Our passage from the Book of Esther describes a time of history when God's people were swallowed up by the Babylonian-Persian culture. They are surrounded by a pagan society. They are aliens and outsiders – captives who have been conquered. Though the Book of Esther doesn't mention God or prayer, those who understand how God works will recognize that God is listening to His people and acting on their behalf. The outsiders are vindicated.

James gives us a little history lesson from the time of the kings of Judah. No ruler was as evil as King Ahab and his pagan queen Jezebel. It was the influence of one powerful godless person inside the society and culture of God's people that brought disaster on the whole nation. It is the prayer of faithful Elijah that restores godliness to the people of Judah by the signs and wonders God does. Ahab and Jezebel had to be removed to put things right. In this case those on the inside are being held hostage by an outsider – an invader.

The point of each of these stories is the power of prayer. God hears and acts so that His will is accomplished. Queen Esther asks the people to fast for her as she seeks the pagan king's favor. Elijah prays for a drought as the sign that God is present and working for the good of His people. Our take-away is pray at all times. Somehow, through the prayers of people, God removes evil and brings in goodness.

We forget to pray. Does this mean we are God – or that we think we are God? It may be that some of us are afraid to pray. This is the soul that doesn't want things to get even worse because (s)he prayed wrongly or foolishly. I'm inclined to believe that we simply start looking for worldly solutions to the problem, person or situation at hand. We forget that our God is sovereign over everything. If your intentions are good – seeking the will of God in the matter – the right outcome, you cannot pray wrongly. God will not misunderstand you. You do not have to use fancy language or to be eloquent.

Simply pray what is in your heart. I heard a story the other day about a gal who said, "Alexa, turn on the living room lights." Alexa replied, "There is no pudding room." Such a thing can happen with robots or with human beings, but not with God. He understands you perfectly. He understands your prayer even if you do not use words. Let what is inside you be expressed in prayer to God. God is interested and He always hears you correctly.

What about the intentions of our hearts? Do we have right motives in our thoughts and actions – and therefore in our prayers? "When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, He said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." (Jn 1:47) Jesus told the Pharisees,

²⁷ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you too, outwardly appear righteous to people, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Mt 23:27-28) Let each one here, including the preacher, consider these things.

Jesus takes the matter of the intention of the heart very seriously. We come to a somewhat difficult saying of Jesus in our Gospel portion for today. Recall that He is correcting the disciples who were arguing over which of them was the greatest. Jesus puts a little child in their midst and tells them that they must be childlike in their trust and belief in Him. The question John asks Jesus is, "Shouldn't we be the only ones healing in Your name?" Jesus tells him, "No." He says that if someone is not against us, they are for us. Jesus then lectures them and us on testing your own motives. Find out what is in your inner being. He is not telling us to injure ourselves by removing body parts. Rather, He says that wickedness is ***so dangerous***, you must remove it from your inner being at all costs – even if it costs dearly.

"Everyone will be salted with fire," says Jesus. He refers to the ancient Israelite practice of salting what is being offered to God. "Every grain offering of yours, moreover, you shall season with salt, so that the salt of the covenant of your God will not be lacking from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt." (Lev 2:13)

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When Jesus teaches that His followers are to be “salty,” He is saying that your whole life – all you say and do – is an offering to God. Let it be from pure motives, Kingdom motives. You need not criticize another’s offering, only be certain that yours is under the covenant of God in Christ. From the inside out. Amen.