

Living Bold

14th Weekend after Pentecost – September 9/10, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Esther 4:9-16 (NRSV)

⁹Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, ¹¹“All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.” ¹²When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, ¹³Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. ¹⁴For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” ¹⁵Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶“Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.”

Esther’s faith and courageous spirit allowed her to stand with strength as she faced the king, not knowing what the outcome would be. We celebrate today the fact that 20 years ago, faithful and courageous people came together to begin and build this great church: St. Andrew.

C.M. Bechtel tells a story about Deborah Lipstadt. After winning a major court battle against a Holocaust denier, Deborah went to her synagogue for the feast of Purim, at which she heard the entire book of Esther read. When she heard the words of Esther 4:14, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this,” she reflected on her own recent experience. She later said, “I heard that and it made me think: Who knows if not for this very reason I got the education I got, I got the upbringing I got, my job – maybe we’re all meant to do one something significant. And some of us do it on the public stage. And some do it by helping a child. Nobody knows of it, nobody sees it, but we’re all meant to do something. And maybe this is the something I was meant to do.”¹

Today, we gather to celebrate a most significant “something,” the twentieth anniversary of the Christian community we call St. Andrew. For some of us, the most significant thing we might ever do is wrapped up in our contribution to the creation and growth of this church. Perhaps God surprised you in this, as he surprised me. God certainly surprised Esther.

God at work?

Surely God is at work in the story of Esther. But how? when? Where? Is there luck in the story? Coincidence? The story of

Feasting and Fasting

The story of Esther is set in Persia more than 400 years before Jesus. These Jews elected to remain in Persia after Cyrus let the exiles return to Jerusalem and Judea. When the Jewish community is threatened by Haman, Esther and her father, Mordecai, manage to save them from a massacre.

At the end of the story, the Jews are instructed to celebrate a festival to be called Purim, which means “lot,” for the lots Haman throws to pick the date of the massacre.

Jews celebrate Purim each year in late February or early March and quite a festival it is. Purim is the most fun and festive of all the Jewish holidays. I imagine that our own 20th anniversary celebration would fit right in.

The centerpiece of the Purim festival is a public reading of Esther in its entirety. The people are to join in this reading by hooting and hollering as the reading proceeds. They are to boo, hiss, and stomp loudly each time Haman’s name is mentioned. They use noisemakers, masks, costumes, and more in this communal celebration of the saving of the Jews.

But before the carnival-like festival, Jews observe a fast, in keeping with the three-day fast undertaken by Esther and all the Jews before she went to the king (4:16).

The Purim feast celebrates the saving of Persian Jews from Haman’s planned massacre. One can’t read this story without contemplating all the Purims without the miracle of Purim – when Jewish massacres, pogroms, and holocausts were not averted. “Purim is not a denial of those haunting realities,” writes Timothy Beal. “Nor is it a denial of the profoundly real and pressing question, ‘Where is God in all this?’” Rather, in the face of these hard questions, the Jews “persist in celebrating, playing, and having laugh-out loud fun with Esther.”

¹from C.M. Bechtel’s commentary on Esther in the *Interpretation Bible commentary series*. 2002.

Esther is a bit of a cautionary tale. The nature of God's work in the story is never stated. Indeed, this is the only book in the Bible in which God is never named! For this and a few other reasons, some Christians have never been sure what to make of Esther. Martin Luther wished that the book didn't exist at all! But like all the biblical books, it is there for a reason. One of them is to help us understand better how God works in this world.

Surely, God has been at work at St. Andrew over the last twenty years. But how? when? where? The ambiguity of God's work in the story of Esther reminds us that part of faith is trusting in God's work and God's purposes even when we can't be sure how or where or when God is working.

Have you ever *questioned* your faith?

Is your life *perfectly* balanced or do you wonder if something is missing?

Do you *think* you believe in the Bible, but you're just not sure?

Are you a Christian who has spiritual *questions* or perhaps exploring Christianity for the first time?

WELCOME TO ALPHA:

an opportunity to explore the meaning of life!

Come join us for The ALPHA Course ... a fast paced, interactive journey to explore the Christian faith in a relaxed, non-threatening manner. Over ten, thought-provoking weekly sessions, we'll have dinner together, discuss our questions together, laugh together (the course really is a lot of fun!) and grow together! ALPHA is a low key, friendly and fun class ... it's not a Methodist program or a Baptist, Lutheran, or Catholic program ... it's a course for all of us who have questions that can be discussed in a place where *no* question is too simple or too hostile.

Come for dinner and find out more ...

This Wednesday

September 13 6:00 PM

The first night is not a commitment - it's just a chance to come have dinner and see if ALPHA might be right for you! Bring a friend! Then come back if you want to continue!

HOW DO I GET MORE INFORMATION?

Learn more about the Alpha Course at AlphaCourse.org or contact Debbie Lyons at 214-291-8007 or dlyons@standrewumc.org

I've been blessed to have been on staff at St. Andrew for a few years and I'm confident that God is at work in and through this amazing community. Yet, in our day-to-day decision-making, God's will and work is often difficult to discern. We, clergy and lay alike, are not always sure what God would have us do. It is sometimes nearly impossible to be confident that we are listening to God's voice and not just hearing an echo of our own. Yet, choices must be made, plans set, and risks taken.

Called to boldness

The people of God are called to be bold, to be risk takers, to go forward doing our best to live out God's purposes and hopes, even when it is difficult to know how God is working in our lives. Esther had to be bold. She needed to go to the king but knew that anyone who approached him without being summoned was executed. Mordecai, Esther's father, had to push her a bit on this (4:12-14), but, in the end, Esther went to the king - and the people were saved. Was it God's will that the Jews be saved? Surely. But no angel and no prophet showed up to encourage Esther and Mordecai, they just had to trust and proceed.

Founding St. Andrew twenty years ago took boldness. There are always reasons to be cautious, to hold back. But that is not what God asks of us. Had Esther held back, the Jews would have died. Had the first leadership teams and charter members held back twenty years ago, there would be no St. Andrew. Had the St. Andrew community held back from the several subsequent building campaigns, St. Andrew would have languished. God expects boldness and strengthens us despite uncertainties.

Living bold

Because the St. Andrew community has always taken risks, proceeding on the basis that God will work through us and guide us, we continue to carry out the mission of the UMC, indeed of all Christians, to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We do this by inviting people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another through worshiping, learning, loving and serving.

It is in community that we grow our trust of God and one another so that, like Esther, we'll take the bold step forward. We worship *together*. We read and study Scripture *together*. We pray *together*. We sing *together*. We hurt *together*. And we celebrate *together*, as we are today. It is in this fellowship, to which God has called each of us, that we grow in our relationship with God. There simply is no healthy relationship with Jesus Christ without a relationship with his church.

As we look back, we pray that the same faith, vision, and bold spirit that has characterized this congregation for twenty years will, by the grace of God, shape us for the next twenty.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

September 10 ~ 16

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Job 7-9; Psalm 120 Job's friends look for the explanation for Job's suffering. So far as they are concerned, Job or a member of his family must have done something to bring this punishment.</p>	<p>Monday Job 10-12; Psalm 121 Job's misery and suffering have no bounds. He is a laughingstock.</p>
<p>Tuesday Job 13-15; Psalm 122 Job's despondent prayer; Eliphaz accuses Job of undermining religion</p>	<p>Wednesday Job 16-18; Isaiah 1 Job again asserts his innocence. This is key – Job is right. He has done nothing! The opening chapters have revealed to us what is going on.</p>
<p>Thursday A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Friday Job 19-21; Isaiah 2 Zophar picks up the theme that wickedness receives just retribution. Job replies that the wicked often go unpunished.</p>
<p>Saturday Job 22-24; Isaiah 4 The back & forth between Job and his friends continues; Isaiah brings God's message of judgment for Judah (chapter 1) but also paints dramatic word-picture of hope (chapter 2).</p>	

Sermon Notes

The St. Andrew Academy classes begin this week!!

Registration is on-line at www.standrewacademy.org

We've completely revamped the Bible Academy. It is now the St. Andrew Academy. We've added lots of new classes and teachers: marriage, parenting, spiritual gifts, missions, and more have been added to our classes on the Bible and spiritual formation. You can see the class schedule and register on-line at our new website: www.standrewacademy.org.

Talking the Walk: Letting Christian Language Live Again

by Marva Dawn

Words matter – especially to the people of God. God spoke creation into existence. God has revealed himself to us both in what he has done and in what he has said. In this volume of seventy-two brief essays, Marva Dawn reflects on the meaning of and our use of key theological words. Many of these words are ignored, some have gotten a bad reputation, and some are simply trivialized. As Ms. Dawn puts it, her goal “is simply to ask what might be good about the original words.” The book is very suitable for daily or weekly devotional reading or for small group discussions, as each brief essay is on a particular word. I'm sure you'll be both informed and moved by her reflections. Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore.

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have more than ten small groups meeting now and a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewcccl.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

When Mordecai learns of Haman's plot, he wails loudly and bitterly – and then he seeks his daughter's intervention with the king. Esther's first reaction is a loud “No!” I guess most of us would respond in the same way. People who approach the king on their own are soon dead. But Mordecai pushes Esther. He is confident of two things: help will come and Esther must act. Here is the question for Esther and Mordecai, and for us: How do we find the courage to do what needs to be done in the face of inevitable ambiguities?

Founding and growing St. Andrew took boldness. There were risks in the beginning and all along the way. The most recent building campaign was an enormously bold step, when you compare the financial commitment to the size of the congregation. What are some ways that you've experienced St. Andrew's boldness? Do you think we need to be more bold? Less? What are some things that you would like to see St. Andrew undertake? What are some of the keys to making such undertakings successful? What is God's part in all this? Does God accomplish his purposes through us? Despite us? How can we, as a community, become better at discerning God's will for our congregation? How can we make better decisions, remembering that better means more in line with God's will? What is the place of Scripture in this?

Finally, you might share some stories of particularly joyful and meaningful St. Andrew moments that you have experienced. Perhaps it was during a significant life event, such as a birth, a death, or illness. Perhaps it was time that this community helped you grow in relationship with Jesus Christ. What would you say to someone who was considering joining St. Andrew?