

Decisions... decisions.

Our theme for advent this year is having a party. And I get to kick off Advent talking about deciding to have a party Today's scripture wasn't a decision to have a party but the decisions made within the story resulted in an annual party or celebration for the Jewish nation called Purim.

It is a two day festival which starts March 9th this next year. They have a festive meal, send gifts of food to friends and make it a point to give to the poor. There is also a public reading of Megillat Esther. This is the Hebrew title of the book meaning "revelation [of that which is] hidden." What is hidden most overtly in the story is Esther hiding knowledge of her Hebrew roots. Many say because God is not named in the book there is no divine presence. I believe, as others do, God, though not overtly named, is hidden.

I know there have been times in my life that God doesn't seem present, it's usually during tough times... times when having a party is the last thing on my mind because my focus is on my fear. And yet I have gotten through those times. I can look back on those times and see God's presence. I look at the Book of Esther the same way.

There are three key characters of the story besides Esther herself. There is Mordecai, a Jewish man who is portrayed as being a very good man doing what is right, including taking steps to thwart an assassination attempt on the king's life. Mordecai is also noted for having adopted his orphaned cousin, Esther the heroine of the story.

There is King Ahasuerus who after banishing Queen Vashti for not coming upon his request, seeks a new queen, he summons young women to appear before him. When Mordecai learns that the Esther was a viable candidate as the next queen, he instructed her to keep her national origin a secret. When Esther succeeds in attaining her position as queen she complies with Mordecai's wishes.

Then there is the grand vizier Haman, the villain of the story. When the story is read at Purim, people use a noisemaker called a gragger, to blot out his name, symbolic of blotting out evil. In the story he is angered by Mordecai's failure to bow down to him. When Haman discovers Mordecai is Jewish, he decides to issue a decree to annihilate all Jews. When Mordecai learns of Haman's intentions he wastes no time in bringing it to his cousin the queen's attention, so she might convince the king to avert their people's death.

His expectations of Esther left her in a quandary. No one not even the queen could show herself before the king unless summoned, as the penalty could be death. She is apprehensive as we all might be in her circumstances, when Mordecai says those haunting words that I believe imply God's presence "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Ultimately she recognizes her higher duty to the community and I believe possibly for God.

But Esther is not the only biblical character to struggle with making life and death decisions. Some correlate the book of Esther with the story from Exodus. Moses' identity as a Hebrew was hidden as a child in order to save his life, presumably for a greater purpose, yet ultimately he lived among royalty until he fled Egypt. Eventually God calls him back to Egypt to set the Hebrew people free. Now Moses comes up with a lot of excuses... none of those he voiced sounds life threatening, but I believe there was an unspoken excuse... a hidden excuse.

When Moses was last in Egypt he had killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. Now it says in Exodus 2:17 When the Pharaoh heard of the killing he sought to kill Moses. So it seems plausible that there may have been an unspoken excuse that he feared for his life. He, like Esther, begrudgingly said yes to his call. His decision too, resulted in an annual celebration—Passover.

Such tough decisions were not limited to the Hebrew Scriptures as the Luke's gospel introduces us to a teenage girl who was told that she would conceive the child whose birth we are preparing to celebrate. She too provides excuses but neglects one vital one... agreeing to be pregnant out of wedlock could have meant death by stoning. And yet we hear her famous words each year "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Decisions... decisions... Often life finds us in situations where we're capable of taking action on behalf of others who are oppressed, but fear some negative consequences. For some of us a decision can mean life or death. Now I have made a lifetime of decisions, I don't know that any of them were life and death all I know is I have a hard time deciding what to wear each morning.

As many of you know I am attending Garrett Evangelical Seminary in Evanston. December 10th is my last day of seminary this semester and that is also the day when I will hand in one of four final papers. This particular one is for my Doctrine of God class with Dr. Vaux. I need to write a ten page paper explaining the theology of "A God to Die For." I had a problem with that title because, for me, it implies that to truly believe one must die for the cause. But I believe our God is a God to live for, and I believe these biblical stories reflect that. Their decisions honored a God to live for but also one they were willing to die for.

At Garrett there is often mentioned that back in 1958, when Dwight Loder was the president of the seminary the school had invited a man to join the faculty. This man could have gone to Garrett living a comfortable life and making an impact on people who were going into the trenches of ministry.

Although the invitation was appealing to him he responded by letter "I have a deep sense of responsibility at this point and feel, for the next few years at least, that my place is here in the deep South doing all in my power to alleviate the tensions that exist between Negro and white citizens. I have started on this challenging venture

of love and non-violence, and I am all too aware of the fact that this philosophy has not been spread enough throughout the deep South. I am hoping by the Grace of God to be able to carry this approach far beyond the bounds of Montgomery, and this will take both time and hard work.”

That man made a decision and because of that decision, I won't be able to get my mail on January 19th this year. Regardless of where you stand politically, it seems ironic to me at least that, perhaps it is because of the decision Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made back in 1958, that this coming January 20th, we will be inaugurating the first black president.

Day in and day out we make decisions albeit the majority may seem frivolous but in those decisions we can decide to live on the edge or to flinch away from the challenge. I must ask if we are always taking the more comfortable route are we really living for God? Or is part of us dying to all we could be?

You see I am not one to believe in predestiny. I believe that God's Spirit is with us inclining us to step out of our comfort zone but ultimately we are given free will and consequently it is not God who decides, but the choices we make that determine the direction the story will go. I admit I metaphorically used noisemakers when I felt God calling me into the ministry. When I felt God's call it seemed too big, it scared me, I would have liked to have whipped a gragger around saying, I can't hear you. But I believe that the gragger is not to be used to drown out God but to remove the excuses. This is the season that it is all too easy to let the noise get in the way of hearing God's call... not the noise of the gragger but the Christmas music, the parties to be at, the Christmas shows, cards to write, cookies to bake and on and on and on. Valid excuses but excuses just the same.

The reason we know the names of Esther, Moses, Mary, and Martin Luther King Jr. is because they stepped up to the plate they overcame the excuses. None of them foresaw a party, each one of

them now represents a holiday that came from making a decision... a tough decision. This advent season I hope you will take some time to quiet the busy-ness in your life and listen for God's call to what really is necessary. When you do I dare each and every one of you to say "Here am I," and watch how God transforms the world through our hands and feet.