

**September 5, 2021 | Summer Worship Service**

**TEXT: Esther 8:9, 11–12, 17; 9:16–17, 30–32**

**TITLE: The Paradox of Purim**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Esther is a bible story that is more story than bible. And the end of Esther is the part of the story we hear the least about, for good reason. The evil advisor, Haman, set in motion a genocide against the entire Jewish population in that nation. His edicts, ratified by the king, could not be revoked or changed, so the king decided to let all Jews fight back if attacked and to take their revenge on their enemies for two days in a month chosen by “pur”, by chance. The annual Jewish festival of Purim is a time to remember when the tables were turned and the oppressed could fight back against their oppressors. How Purim is celebrated tells us a lot about how this part of the Esther story should be interpreted. Purim is a crazy carnival of costumes, noisemakers, play-acting, food-eating, and gift-giving. It’s a fanciful, farcical festival—and so people typically read this last part of the book of Esther just as fancifully and farcically. A king’s edicts can’t be revoked, so he writes a new edict giving the victims free range to retaliate? That’s a joke. And as it all unfolds, the king excitedly listens to reports of slaughter in his own land, including 75,000 dead? Don’t make me laugh!

Yet this story of reversals and slaughter is in the bible. We can’t just walk away from it. Maybe the entire book is just a whimsical way to describe how an ancient festival came to be. But in the end it is a story that says something about us, especially the way we talk about war and violence here on earth.

How do Jewish scholars deal with these last chapters in the book of Esther? Some scholars I read point back in the Old Testament to when Moses was leading the Jewish people out of Egypt and the Amalekites in an unprovoked raid attacked the people of the Exodus. With God’s help, the Hebrews defeated them but the Amalekites have come to represent archetypal enemies—they stand in for everyone throughout history who has sought to destroy all Jews. The scholars note that Haman is a descendant of the Amalekites. So the whole story is a reminder that there have always been those plotting to kill the Jews and Purim is one case in which the evildoers were defeated. The Jewish scholars I read did not condone the violence of Purim; they simply saw it as a fictional part of this ancient story of reversals. And the Christian scholars I read warned that in light of our faith tradition’s long history of anti-Semitism and genocide against the Jews, we should be very cautious before using the Purim story to ascribe blanket violent tendencies to Esther and Mordecai’s people.

Having said all that, there is still a lot of uncomfortable language in the end of the book of Esther—language about war, about slaughter and loss of life that is hard to take. We’ve seen too much of this in our world over the last century. Must we hear about it on Sunday? Must we keep reading about it from the bible? Here’s the challenge I face: If I stood up here and said, “As people of faith, we worship Christ, the Prince of Peace. We profess ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ and we long for the day when the lion lies down with the lamb and swords are hammered into plows.” I could say all that and you would

likely nod in agreement. But if I stood up here and said, “As people of faith, we need to denounce all wars, especially America’s militarism, our exorbitant defense budget expenditures, and our idolatrous worship of all soldiers,” I’d likely get some eye-rolls or angry emails as a result.

For approximately the first 300 years of the church, Christians were unanimously pacifists. A Roman church leader named Hippolytus wrote that no man could be baptized a Christian if he were in the army, and displaying military ambitions was a reason to reject a request for baptism. The church father Origen argued that no Christian should pick up a sword. When a non-Christian named Celsus argued against him, worried that the spread of Christian pacifists might put the empire at risk, Origen replied, ‘Well, if the world became Christian, you wouldn’t need an army in the first place.’ All this changed around the year 312 with the victory of Constantine and the naming of Christianity as the official Roman religion. Christian pacifism crumbled after drinking the heady wine of imperial power. By the year 416 you had to be a Christian to serve in the Roman army. We moved from following the Prince of Peace to Jesus being the Lord of war.<sup>1</sup> We moved from the catacombs to the Crusades—and sadly the language of war, violence, revenge, and destruction has been on pious lips for centuries now.

Someone once said, *Give a small boy a hammer and he will find that everything needs pounding.* That’s similar to the old saying, *To a person with a hammer everything looks like a nail.* Well, to a person with a gun, everything looks like a target. Basically, one of the causes of war is war itself. Wars produce warlike societies, which in turn make the world more dangerous for other societies and force them to become warlike themselves. War begets war and corrupts human society as it does so.<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, the greatest writer on the nature of war, said that war is essentially irrational—not accidentally, not on the edges, but at its very core.<sup>3</sup> To train young men and women to kill is essentially irrational, just as it is irrational to believe you can win the hearts and minds of your enemy while aiming a gun at them, their families, or their children.

Usually at this point someone will say, “What do you want us to do? Put down our weapons and let others run over us? They have guns, so we have to have guns.” That argument is the epitome of the “war begets war” school of thought. Instead of that approach, take a deep breath and ask yourself: Who profits from the sale of guns and weapons equipment around the world? Must we make money that way or is there a better way? Why do we assume the military budget must increase every year while education, health services, and anti-poverty programs face annual cuts? Isn’t there a better way?

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, *“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?”* (Mt 7:9-10) Paraphrase those verses to read, *If your child asks for bread, why do you hand over a gun; if they need fish, why insist on a weapon?* Must we be people of war? Wouldn’t a better way involve being people of peace, of medicine, food, compassion and grace?

A newspaper writer recently attended a ceremony in a small chapel at the V.A. medical center in Philadelphia, where a group of veterans gathered to talk about the moral injuries they had sustained while serving overseas. One veteran sobbed while recounting an airstrike he'd called in that ended up killing dozens of civilians. After the veterans spoke, the congregation formed a circle around the veterans, linking their arms and saying as one: *We put you into situations where atrocities were possible. We share responsibility with you for all that you have seen, for all that you have done, and for all that you have failed to do.*<sup>4</sup>

More than other nations, we Americans live disconnected from the brutality of war. War's violence is something that happens over there to someone else. Even our returning vets with their scars and PTSD are mostly kept out of sight and out of mind. There must be a better way—a more faithful way. John F. Kennedy wrote in a letter to a Navy friend that “war will exist until that day when the conscientious objector enjoys the same reputation and prestige as the warrior does today.”

That's the paradox of Purim. It's a story of reversals, a fable that's become an annual festival for a people long persecuted, allowing them to dance, dress up, and role play a time when the oppressors didn't win. But it's also a story that contains the painful language of organized violence—of war and death and retribution. We can't remove those last chapters from the bible, but we can insist there truly is a better way.

We must stop allowing the language of war and violence to define how we will live as one human family under God in this world. We will not accept stories of warfare, even in the bible, as inevitable or God-sanctioned. We have seen that war invariably escalates—from Blitzkrieg in London to the firebombing of Dresden to nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. War not only harms our brothers and sisters today, but makes it almost impossible to live peaceably with them tomorrow. As Christians, we must persistently show a bias for peace. It is not the conscientious objectors who must justify themselves but the war room generals. War is never inevitable – it mostly reflects a failure of imagination and a weakness of spirit. And it is an affront to who we are as followers of Christ.

Soon we will share in the communion meal, which speaks of Jesus' tragic death – his body broken for us, his blood poured out for us. We share that bread that all may live in peace. The communion table was never meant to feed just us. May we be biased for peace and do all we can so all may live—literally live—for such is the will of the one who died and rose again for us, Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Maguire, *The Moral Revolution: A Christian Humanist Vision*, 1986, pp. 46-47.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Christian Century*, May 3, 2003, p. 7; quoting Dutch social scientist Henk Houweling.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Garry Wills, *Certain Trumpets*, p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> Eyal Press, “America's Ethically Troubling Jobs,” *New York Times*, August 15, 2021, p. 4-5.