

A CIRCLE WITH NO END AND NO GOD
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Text: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king." Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimeters
and the diameter of its effective range about seven meters,
with four dead and eleven wounded.
And around these, in a larger circle
of pain and time, two hospitals are scattered
and one graveyard. But the young woman
who was buried in the city she came from,
at a distance of more than a hundred kilometers,
enlarges the circle considerably,
and the solitary man mourning her death
at the distant shores of a country far across the sea
includes the entire world in the circle.
And I won't even mention the crying of orphans
that reaches up to the throne of God and
beyond, making a circle with no end and no God.

That poem was written by Yehuda Amichai, one of Israel's most famous writers. He was born in Germany in 1924, and he fled with his family during Hitler's rise to power. They settled in Palestine, and Amichai went on to fight in both World War II and a few years later the first Arab-Israeli war. So, he knew something about violence, and here in this poem he explores the far-reaching consequences of a single act of violence through the lens of a bombing.

The poem shows how the effects of the bombing spread out like ripples across space and time, encircling the lives of more and more people. And then, in the last three lines, it makes an imaginative leap. The crying of orphans, whose parents presumably were killed in the blast, expands the circle all the way up to the throne of God, which, in a final twist, turns out to be empty.

I was in my mid-twenties when I first read that poem, and back then I didn't know what to make of that ending. I'm in my mid-fifties now, and I'm still not completely sure. But I think we're supposed to ask ourselves what it means that God's throne is empty. Does it mean God has abandoned us? Does it mean there is no God? Or does it mean that sometimes we can't see God from the place where we are, and all we can feel is God's absence? Because how do we feel God's presence? Isn't it

mainly through our relationships? Isn't it mainly when we give and receive kindness and care? When we help one another? When we support one another? When we forgive one another? Aren't those the moments when God's love becomes something tangible and real?

But violence destroys all that. It tears relationships apart. It separates people from their loved ones. It turns people into enemies. It fills them with sorrow and sadness and hate. And that makes it difficult, maybe even impossible, to know that God is there. We look, and all we see is an empty space where God is supposed to be.

Now let's turn from a poem with no God to a book of the Bible with no God. The book of Esther never mentions God, not even once. It reads like a political thriller, full of intrigue and suspense—and plenty of violence. If you don't remember the story, here's a little synopsis.

The Jewish people have been enslaved by the Persians, led by King Ahasuerus. But their fortunes are about to change, all because of one woman. It all starts one night when the king has had a little too much wine, and he tries to make his wife, Vashti, parade herself in front of his friends so they can all "appreciate her beauty." But Vashti refuses to be ogled. So, the king kicks her out of the palace, and word travels quickly that there's an opening at the palace.

A man named Mordecai hears about it and gets an idea. He has a cousin named Esther, whom he raised after her parents died. She's poor, and she's Jewish, not Persian, but she's beautiful, and Mordecai thinks the king will really go for her. And it turns out he's right. When he sees her, Ahasuerus is immediately smitten by Esther, and he takes her as his new bride.

So Esther is now the queen of Persia. But in her heart, she's still Jewish, and when she finds out from Mordecai that the king's right-hand-man, a guy named Haman, is plotting to kill her people, she knows she has to do something.

The opportunity comes during a feast, when the king, who's been drinking again, turns to Esther and says, "What would you like, my darling? Name it, and it's yours—as much as half of my kingdom."

"If it pleases you," Esther says, "give me my life and the lives of my people because there's someone who's out to destroy us."

"Who would dare do such a thing?" the king asks, and Esther replies, "That wicked Haman!"

Just then a eunuch steps forward and says, "Look, Haman was making a gallows to hang Mordecai, and it's still at his house." Furious, the king has Haman hanged from his own gallows, and at this point in our reading, we jump forward to the celebration of the Jewish people. They've been saved from their enemy, and they mark the

occasion by declaring a new festival. From now on, every year they'll have a feast, and they'll give presents to the poor as a way of remembering how the powerless were given a voice, and how the powerful were defeated.

But that's not the end of the story.

When the celebration is over, Esther, for all her beauty and bravery and loyalty to her people, turns out to be a lot like Haman. Just as he called for the killing of her people, she calls for the killing of his people—75,000 of them. And as if that's not enough, she has each of his ten sons hanged. Maybe that's why there's no mention of God in this book. It's hard to see God from a place of violence and vengeance, and it's hard to feel God's presence as that circle is expanding.

So what can we take away from this poem and this story? For me, it's the understanding that violence separates us from each other in all kinds of ways, and in so doing, it separates us from God. Not that God abandons us. Not that the throne of God really is empty. But when we're filled with sorrow and sadness and hate, it's difficult, maybe even impossible, to know that God is there and to feel God's presence. And that makes peacemaking a spiritual discipline, alongside prayer and worship and Bible study and anything else we do to get closer to God. When we make peace with our neighbor, it

opens a pathway for God's love to reach us and become something tangible and real.

That's how I see, for instance, the anti-racism work we're doing here at Valley—first with the history of racism class we held last spring, and now with the book club we're starting this fall. Racism is a kind of violence. It creates separation. It turns people into enemies. And the consequences are far-reaching—for all of us. So we need to understand it, and wrestle with it, and do what we can to dismantle it, beginning with our own communities. Which isn't easy. It's a hard conversation to have. But the reward is healing for our souls.

So that's my plug for the book club. But mainly what I hope you take away from this today is the knowledge that no matter where you are at any given moment in life, no matter what kind of pain you're in, and no matter how alone feel, God is still there, and God still loves you. Amen.