

On the church calendar, because it is the first Sunday after Epiphany, today is the “Baptism of the Lord” Sunday. Last Sunday, Rob finished up the message series “The Will to Dream” by focusing on “Courageous Defiance”. The Magi defied Herod by heeding the warning in the dream and going home a different way; Joseph showed the courage to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt which spared them from the anguish that Herod unleashed on Bethlehem. But as scriptures proclaimed, the one who would save Israel would come out of Egypt again.

And that is the ongoing story of Israel. In Genesis, God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, as numerous as the stars, and it was called to be set apart as holy. For a lot of it's history, Israel would forget the promise, remember the promise, forget the promise – you get the picture. Fast forward to John the Baptist, and most of Israel seemed to have forgotten that promise. While people went about their daily lives saying the prayers and showing up to synagogue on the Sabbath, very few were like Simeon and Anna who showed true holiness. Most Jews just kept the rituals because they knew the temple leadership was just appointed by Rome because they would cooperate to keep people under control. The leadership was giving outward appearances of holiness but it was all for show and not out of gratitude for what God had done for them. When they showed up, John called them out as a brood of vipers and repeated the call nonstop to repent and be baptized. And many ordinary people did. In the gospel lesson today, John was not just surprised when Jesus came to be baptized, but was outright reluctant to baptize him. John knew that Jesus was sinless and there was no reason to be baptized for repentance of sin, but Jesus was insistent. To the ordinary people there, I am sure that they took it at face value, much like the commercials running on TV for “Jesus – He Gets Us.” I am sure they thought, “Jesus is just like us – look, he is getting baptized, and if he can do it, we can do it.” But this was different. When Jesus came up from the water, it was the Holy Spirit that was upon him and the voice from heaven proclaimed that he was the Son with whom God was well pleased. This was about confirming Jesus' identity and the starting point of his ministry to proclaim that the kingdom of God was near.

For us who take the baptismal vows and the name Christian – faithful follower of Jesus – it is about our identity. Baptism is not just about whose we are, but who we are. Do we fulfill our “who we are” on a daily basis by following the example of Jesus? Or are we afraid to really follow Jesus and be uncomfortable and feel out of place? Are we afraid of offending people by living out the gospel? Are we afraid of getting the same reaction Jesus got when he read from Isaiah about the one who would bring release to the captive and good news to the poor, then said “today this is fulfilled in your hearing.” What was the reaction? There was a near riot and they were literally going to take him to the edge of town and throw him off the cliff.

This is nothing new; nobody wants someone to make waves and upset the status quo. There is a long history of people just wanting to fit it, to fly under the radar. Live and let live. And what does that lead to? Many times it is a feeling that that whole world is going down the tubes and what can I do about it? This has seemed to be especially true since COVID. How many times in the past week even have you said to yourself or even to others, "What is wrong with people?" The world has just gone crazy. Does anybody remember the words of the prophet Micah? "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

As we were finishing up the current Bible study, we were talking about what study should we do next. Cindy Larger and I both thought we ought to find something by Max Lucado because he always has something good to offer and it is plain language that you can always understand, not a lot of theological mumbo-jumbo. We also thought if there was something that focused on women that would be a real bonus. That is when I came across the study we are starting this week, and when I ran it past Rob, he ditched the sermon series he was looking at to focus on the study as the sermon series to take us through to Lent. Max had written a book during COVID entitled "You Were Made for this Moment" and it is about the book of Esther. And there was a 5 week Bible study series that went with it. A sample read, and it was like the proverbial writing on the wall – this was the study we were meant to do next. In fact, Max prefaces the introduction by saying "this is a study meant to be done during the winter, when everything seems gloomy and not a lot of hope out there."

How much do you really know about the book of Esther? Why is it even in the Bible? It is one of only two books in the Bible that doesn't have God's name even in it or any quotes that "God said... God spoke to..." or "God commanded...." but God is certainly at work in it. It is another part of the story of the Israelites and how Israel is called to be God's people and set aside to be holy, but they were not living up to that. When the story begins, the narrative lays out the main cast of characters: King Xerxes of Persia, Mordecai one of his trusted civil servants, and Mordecai's neice, Esther, who he had raised since she was orphaned. And as a "by the way," Mordecai and Esther were not really Persian, but Jewish. They were third generation Jews whose ancestors had been carried off into exile in Persia by Nebuchanezzar. Their family had lived in Persia for so long that for all practical purposes, they lived as Persians. They went by their Persian names instead of their Jewish names, and their Persian names were both derived from the names of two of the Persian gods. They didn't live in the Jewish part of town, Mordecai purposely kept his Jewish heritage a secret, and instructed Esther to do the same. They were very cozy in the culture. They led a very good life and were pretty well off.

And as good citizens, they pretty much looked the other way at what was really going on around them. Chapters 1 and 2 of Esther lays out a pretty vivid picture of life in the Persian court. To put it mildly, King Xerxes was a real piece of work. He had a kingdom that covered the whole modern Middle East all the way to India. His palace

was lavish with gold and silver everywhere, including the couches, marble floors, golden drinking goblets – it was meant to impress. And he loved to impress. He threw a party for all the military leaders and princes of the kingdom that went on for 180 days so he could impress them with his wealth and power. He expected his guests to drink as much as they wanted and had instructions to his staff to not cut anyone off. He had a harem complete with a master of the harem and he surrounded himself with a close circle of “yes-men” advisors. At the end of the 180 day party, he threw another 7-day banquet for the whole town. And Queen Vashti threw a party for all the women. At the end of the 7 day banquet, he sent seven of his lackeys with instructions to the harem master to send Queen Vashti in to entertain him and his drinking buddies. And because she was so beautiful, she was to show up wearing nothing but her crown. Can you imagine?!

Queen Vashti showed courageous defiance and refused to show up. Of course this sent Xerxes into a rage and when he asked his cronies what he should do, they advised him to send out a decree to every province in the kingdom that Queen Vashti was no longer queen and was banished from the palace. And the reasoning was so that all the rest of the wives in the kingdom would not follow the queen's example disobey their husbands. Think he is a little insecure?

Some time later when Xerxes sobered up and realized he had no queen, he consulted the cronies again. Did they advise him to apologize and take back the queen? No. Did they advise him have the harem master to select one of those already in the harem to be the new queen? Not that either. Time for a new decree. Appoint a commissioner in each province of the kingdom to find a new beautiful virgin to be sent to the harem master for beauty treatments, the best food, and then let the king decide after trying each one out which one pleased him the most. That just shocks our sensibilities!

That sets the stage for meeting Esther. Here in chapter 2:5-10 is where we first hear about her and her uncle, Mordecai. (**Read**).

So, here we have the beginning of Esther's story. Young, beautiful, and moved into the palace harem, finding favor with the harem master, and keeping her true heritage a secret. So cozy in the culture now that this is sure to have the ending that everyone is expecting – she will become queen and they all live happily ever after. Except that is not how it goes. Soon--when it matters most in God's plan for Israel and holiness counts--fitting in, staying safe and cozy, will no longer matter when the stakes are high. True identities will surface and God's story, not the world's story, will play out.

What we will be able to learn from studying Esther? First, it may seem like God is not a character in the play or even a stagehand at the play, but God is always at work as the playwright, even when times seem the darkest. Even when we are like Simba hanging out with Timon and Pumba having the “Hakuna-Matata” – No worries-- lifestyle, times

will get tough, and when they do, we need to reclaim our identity to remember whose we are and who we are in God's plan. We need to look at the reflection in the water and see Christ in that reflection because his spirit is in us.

Even when the world is in chaos and the rich and powerful seem to have total control, we can find words of encouragement from Peter. When he was sitting in Nero's jail and knew that execution was just ahead of him, he wrote another letter to believers to encourage them to keep following Jesus and not listen to false teachers in the world. He writes in 1 Peter 2:9-10, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." How did we receive that mercy? Through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and accepting the life of a Christian through baptism.

We are set apart. Christians are not supposed to "fit in" and I am not sure why we think that fitting in is the goal. But we place a lot of value on fitting in. I remember as a young teenager when Nehru jackets were the "in" thing in fashion, mostly because the Beatles were wearing Nehru jackets. I wanted one in the worst way, but they were expensive. I was still carrying the sting of disappointment that I was the only one in my class who did not see the Beatles on Ed Sullivan because my mother thought watching Flipper was a better choice. Evidently in the couple years that passed she mellowed a little, because she was a good seamstress and for my birthday she made me a Nehru jacket. I didn't tell anyone it was homemade for fear that would lessen the approval of having a Nehru jacket. Looking back, I realize that was a sacrifice for her to spend the money and time to make that jacket. I wore it as long as it was "in", but it really didn't make me any new friends, I was still considered the history nerd, and it didn't change my life in any significant way. What did change my life was Pastor Harry Sherry spending the time teaching our confirmation class and making sure we understood and felt the Apostle's Creed in our hearts; he led us through the affirmation of our baptismal vows when we took our membership vows. Sometimes we need the reminder that Paul gave the Romans. In Romans 12:2, he writes "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will." In other words, don't get cozy in the culture, but be transformed by remembering and reading scriptures. Remembering your baptismal vows and claiming your identity as a Christian will show you what God's will is. Today, as we celebrate Jesus' baptism, remember your baptism and be thankful. If you have not been baptized, and want to be, make sure you have that conversation with Pastor Rob.

Let's pray.