

Out of Darkness, Light

Sunday School Lesson

Esther 8; Psalm 30:1-3,5,11-12

September 29, 2024

After September 11, 2001, the United States declared a war on terror. This new war began with special forces in Afghanistan, a nation long destroyed by political corruption and religious extremism. In 2003, we launched an attack on Iraq, convinced that Saddam Hussein was somehow behind the terrorist attacks and that he was planning further attacks with a stockpile of WMD or Weapons of Mass Destruction. Later, we learn there were no WMDs. We had launched a war on bad information.

On the twentieth anniversary of the War in Iraq, March 20, 2023, NBC News released these statistics:

- \$728 billion: The Defense Department's estimate of how much the U.S. spent directly on the war in Iraq from the 2003 through 2012 fiscal years (the official withdrawal happened at the end of 2011, a few months into the 2012 fiscal year).
- \$1.6 trillion: The estimated amount spent — combined — on the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria from fiscal years 2001 through 2021.
- 4,492: The number of U.S. servicemembers killed in Iraq.
- 32,292: The number of U.S. servicemembers wounded in Iraq.
- Approximately 200,000: The number of Iraqi civilians killed in the war.

Among veterans who served during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the suicide rate for those who were undeployed is 48% higher than for veterans who experienced deployment. In 2021, more than 50% of veteran suicides occurred outside Veterans Health Administration care. This is not counting the Iraqi losses or the losses of our allies.

We present these statistics to remind us that we are all capable of evil when we forget the humanity of others and begin treating them as an object. It can happen to the bad guys. It can also happen to the good guys.

Let us pray

O Holy God and Creator of the Universe, thank you for being present with us this week. Open our hearts to hear your word so we may be faithful disciples who are known by our love for one another and for our love of our neighbors. Amen.

Our Purpose Statement: **To discover paths that lead to joy**

The ending to the Esther story takes a dark turn as the result of one ridiculous decree. If a decree is signed by the King and sealed with the royal ring, it cannot be rescinded or called back. The King, at the urging of Haman, had signed an order for the execution of all Jews. He signed this order, not realizing that the people Haman had objectified included his own wife and her uncle. This is how easy it is to demonize a group of people and sign their death warrant without fully understand what is at stake.

After the King impales Haman on the pole intended for Mordecai, the King now offer to do whatever needs to be done in order to save Esther's people. So the King sign another decree but this one empowers the Jews to defend themselves. The Jews were empowered to wipe out, kill, and destroy every army of any people and province that should attack them, including women and children. They could all keep any booty left by those who were killed. This is more than simply defending yourself against harm. This is forgetting who you are in retaliating against someone who means you harm. We often quote "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" in rationalizing revenge against those who do us harm but in fact, this saying was not intended for revenge. It was to place a limit on the damage we could do. If someone took your eye, you could not take their life – only their eye.

In Mathew 5:38-42, Jesus says this:

"You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don't refuse those who wish to borrow from you.

Many Christians have taken this to heart and become pacifists, especially in the early days of Christianity. This was the general understanding until the fourth century when Augustine wrote a "Just War" theory to help Christians define how to defend themselves and no more. At the time, Augustine was dealing with a violent group of theological antagonists and he felt that the church needed a strategy that defined war in Christian terms. Twentieth century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was scholar of Just War Theory. He laid it out this way:

When is it right to go to war?

- Proportionality – benefits must outweigh expected harms
- Just reason – Like decreasing suffering, not to punish or conquer
- Competent authorities – only competent authorities can declare war
- Probability of Success – must be likely to win
- Last Resort – all other options must be exhausted

An example of how this was used is the first Gulf War where George HW Bush ordered our forces in when Iraq invaded Kuwait. He withdrew troops without invading Bagdad when Iraq left Kuwait.

Esther holds up a mirror to all of us who are working through conflict. It is not a sign of strength to destroy your opponent. There is cause for celebration as soon as arms are laid down. Israel celebrated being freed from the Egyptians and now, they celebrate being afar from the Persians. Sometime we forget what the celebration actually honors so I am grateful for this lesson.

Let us pray.

O Holy God, work a miracle within us that we might grow beyond our prejudices and limitation to become more loving, more accepting, more compassionate, kind, and generous. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.