

17 Pentecost - 27 September 2009 - Proper 21 B
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50
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"I don't believe in God, but I miss Him." It's the opening sentence of author Julian Barnes' latest book, *Nothing to be Afraid Of*. Barnes claims to be an atheist. Of course, if it were a settled issue for him it seems unlikely that would have written an entire book expressing his nostalgia for Church, religion, and faith in God. His voice made especially poignant because it speaks for one who believes that he once had that relationship, but seems to have lost it somewhere along the way.

I read a story about a family of mice who make their home inside a large grand piano. For as long as any of them can remember, they have blissfully enjoyed the music that regularly surrounds them. Sometimes it is sad, but not regretful, sometimes inspiring, and often soothing and peaceful. The mice take great comfort in the sense of some great Unseen Someone above them but also close to them from whom comes the beautiful music that they all love.

One day, though, one of the mice wanders away for awhile. He returns to the others, and, tentatively, thoughtfully, he tells the others a story of wires drawn incredibly taught; of how he has observed these wires vibrating and has discovered that the music comes from them. And though it challenges their beliefs in an Unseen Someone, he knows that the truth he has learned is what matters most.

The story of Esther is a drama that finds people being challenged in their beliefs. Esther and her people are forced to live conquered and captive under Xerxes the Great. This is Persian king most known to people today for his armed confrontation with 300 or so Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae. To Esther and her fellow Hebrews, he is Ahasuerus. This is the king who has chosen Esther for his queen. All the Esther as ever known is Persian captivity. Subjection, oppression, and quiet desperation are all she knows about living as child of God.

Her uncle, however, is different. One day, when the king's right hand man, a fellow name Haman, is riding through town, Uncle Mordecai refuses Haman's demands that he bow down. Furious, Haman tricks the King into signing a decree that assigns all the Jews to be put to death

on such and such a date. Obsessed with revenge, Haman either forgets or does not care that his trick has now condemned the Queen herself to death. In the interim, Mordecai learns of a plot to kill the King; and through Esther, he warns the King. Ahasuerus investigates, finds the charge to be true and credits Mordecai as his true friend. That's when Mordecai appeals to his niece for help.

The reading from the Old Testament today brings us the peak of the drama. Esther invites the King and Haman to dinner in her royal quarters. It is a bold thing to do. To take this initiative as a woman in her day is sufficiently out of order that the King could have her executed for it, and it would be entirely consistent with the laws of the kingdom to do so. But maybe he thinks Esther's audacity is charming. Maybe God is subtly at work, maybe it's both. They accept her invitation, and here she musters the courage to expose the King's chief minister plan, and to save her people by bringing the king to care about truth at last and greater justice for all.

Esther's story, then, tells of someone whose beliefs are challenged. She and people face an arbitrary and unjust death. It may be that the initial challenge for Esther is around her belief in the very existence of God. But as events unfold, what is ultimately challenged is Esther's beliefs about her *own* existence. Though oppressed and enslaved, Esther comes to recognize that she is in a unique position of privilege and power. And what distinguishes Esther from these others who have their own privilege and power, is Esther decision to use it to seek the benefit of others even at the risk of her own life.

How ironic is it, then, that the book that tells her story and bears her name, is that one book of the bible that never even mentions God? How ironic is it that another book is written 2500 years later, telling the story of a self-proclaimed atheist and mentioning God on almost every page?

The family of mice in the piano have heard of the wires and their vibrations. And as time goes on, other adventurous mice wander upward, outward, from their comfortable space in the piano. They return to tell of

hammers that strike the wires and set up the vibrations. And though they have wandered away from their original approach to it, still the music moves them, touches them, holds them. And, now they have a much more complex theory that explains the music that they hear.

The reading today from the Letter of James makes clear that even in the earliest generation of the Church, people did, as James puts it, 'wander from the truth.' So, aside from providing the biblical foundation for the sacrament of Unction, and for the ministry of Unction Ministers such as our own, James suggests also that if one is to, as he describes, bring back the wanderer, then one is going to have to do a bit of wandering oneself. One is going to have to move off and away a bit from one's own safety and comfort for the sake of helping someone else to come home again, or maybe to *find* home really for the first time ever.

Which may be the reason we hear Jesus in the gospel for today warning his disciples not to dismiss a fellow wanderer, just because that person happens not to be wandering with *them*. After Jesus has ascended the disciples will recall this episode in the community of the infant Church. They will look around, they will listen to the stories of the people adding themselves to the movement, and they will realize the huge variety of the ways that people have wandered into this growing fellowship.

'What if we really had cut someone off?' they will wonder. 'What if we had told people, "You have to be just like us; and you have come to Jesus just the way we did it, or else your desire to know him, to know God through him, is just not valid"? What if we told them that they are not allowed to name God as their God, because they were never really one of us? It's hard to admit that we ever even thought like that,' they will say to themselves. 'If I had to make a choice,' each will realize, 'it really is better to cut off my hand or my foot, or to give up an eye, than ever to tell anyone that they aren't allowed to name Jesus as *their* savior, too. I'm glad we wandered far enough with Jesus,' they will say, 'to get away from that.'

Author Julian Barnes makes an observation: "A common response to surveys of religious attitudes," he writes, "is to say something like, 'I don't go to church, but I have my own personal idea of God.' 'Soppy,' I cry" Barnes

continues. "You may have your own personal idea of God,' he allows, 'but does God have His own personal idea of you? Because," he writes, "that's what matters." "The notion of redefining the deity into something that works for you is grotesque," Barnes declares. "...[What matters is] that He exists." That this comes from someone who believes that he has wandered away makes me wonder if his wandering has brought him closer to God than he has ever been before.

Back in the piano, again one of the mice goes wandering off. Recognizing the wires and hammers, feeling their familiar vibrations, drawn by the music, the wanderer presses onward. Finding itself at the top edge of the piano, it raises its head to see. After a time, the wanderer returns. And it brings home vision of the Great Player who has been there all along.

It may not be the usual way we think about ourselves, and maybe it would be a good thing if we did, but everyone in Church today, whether here or elsewhere, has been a wanderer, each in his own way, or hers. Maybe for awhile we rested in the security of knowing the limits of our place. Maybe we had wandered so far and so wide that we really came to believe for awhile that we had answered all the questions at last. But somehow we were drawn to wander on. In order to take a risk on becoming what God needs us to be; in order to risk doing what God's people need us to do. And here where our wandering has led us, we find the questions, we find the answers, we find ourselves, we find God. And just as we give God thanks for our own sake, so, too, for the sake of all those wandering in the world around us, we give God thanks that they may wander *to* us and *with* us, and all of us together may find that we have wandered home.

And now may Almighty God, whose grace draws our hearts from worldly anxieties and faithless fears; that no distraction of this mortal life may keep us from that heavenly love for all that is immortal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns One God, now and for ever. Amen.

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