

1) Is it just me, or does some of what we've just heard sound—well—just a little harsh?

All this stuff about amputating hands and feet and plucking out eyes --
radical prophylactic surgery as strategic hell prevention.

On Wednesday noon a group of us sat here sort of poking around at these dire, shrill words

- *I like the first part about 'those who aren't against us are for us'—said one. Inclusivity is good.*
- *Wouldn't it be more helpful to integrate the problematic parts of ourselves, rather than cut them off?*
a second questioned, reasonably enough.
- *Well, I guess they did cut off people's hands and feet as punishment back then—observed a third*
(Being good Episcopalians, none of us said anything about the “going to hell” part.)

Truth be told, in adult language, what we were all sorta saying, I think, was: *EEUE—GROSS!!*

Really now, what *kind* of explanation is there for language harsh as that?

- Maybe Jesus is just getting swept up in the heat of his own rhetoric.
- Maybe Mark is trying to organize the sayings of Jesus. He comes upon some weird ones—
throws up his hands, and tosses them all in together—*salt, fire, millstone, drowning in the sea—whatever!*
- Or—maybe there is more going on in this story than what we've heard so far.

Options 1 and 2 are interesting, but Option 3 is more promising—So—What's the story here?

Hold that question--because this isn't the only partial story we have heard this morning.

2) There's clearly more to the story of Esther and Mordecai, Haman and King Ahasuerus
than the little snippet in the lectionary leaflet, which is part of why I asked our middle school class
to tell us a bit more of the Esther Story this morning—

{Their previous study and presenting it as a puppet show to the younger children }

We didn't get the puppet show this morning; but at least we got the story.

The Book of *Esther* written as political fiction: a story to encourage exiled people under foreign domination

- *Esther* helped God's people laugh their captors down to size. (It has some very funny scenes.)
- *Esther* let folks vent their frustration at some really truly "bad guys".
- It gave God's people hope that they wouldn't languish in exile forever
- And *Esther* reminded everyone that, societal assumptions and restrictions notwithstanding,
women could be far more resourceful than men—especially men drunk with wine & power.

BUT—there is another piece of the story we still haven't heard:

Queen Esther ends up helping her people slaughter those who were gonna slaughter them.

And Esther sees to it that Haman's ten sons also get hanged—for their father's crimes.

In this fictional folk tale, therefore, God's people are “saved”--but at considerable cost.

3) The week after 9/11, you may remember, there was a national day of mourning,
with a moving service at the National Cathedral.

At the outset of the service Dean Nathan Baxter urged the nation:

“let us pray that we not become like the evil we deplore.”

But, at the end of the service, after leading the nation in grief,

the president, with consummate rhetorical skill, fired up the nation for war.

In the last eight years, I've often been haunted by Baxter's words: *Becoming like the evil we deplore*

The fires of war just do keep fueling each other—don't they?—like they always have.

Is that the way the story always has to be?

- 4) There *is* more to the story Mark tells us this morning—it goes like this:
- On their own steam, Jesus’ disciples try to cast out a demon, and they fail spectacularly.
 - Jesus tells them that their skill in praying could use a bit of training.
Then he reminds them—for a second time—that *he’s* headed for the cross.
 - The disciples are terrified—so terrified, they can’t bring themselves to talk w/him about it. Instead, they turn their terror energy inward, and start fighting among each other.
Our leader is as good as dead--What will become of us?--Who can fill his shoes?—
Who’s the greatest? Well, I’m no Jesus, but I’m the next best thing. You are not! I am so!
Tempers flair, the temperature rises, sparks fly. A firestorm is about to explode.
 - *STOP! Just STOP!* says Jesus, and he puts a child in front of them.
Do you see this defenseless child? he says; “greatness” looks like *THAT!*
 - John decides its time to change the subject: *By the way, teacher (you’ll be SO proud of us), we caught an exorcist casting out a demon—using YOUR name. And we shut him up, ‘cause he wasn’t with US.”*
(Besides, how dare he succeed at what we so miserably failed?)
 - Jesus takes a deep breath and says *OK, Guys, Listen up—Let’s try this again. Greatness is not about being bigger, or bossier, or better connected than others. Greatness is about using what God gives you for the good of others. AND, since you didn’t get it—either the first time or the second time, let me spell it out for you in Great Big Letters:*
NO act of kindness is random--ALL care for the weak, is a work of peace— even if it’s as small as fetching them a drink.
On the OTHER hand, any act that trips up one of God’s little children is a work of violence. So—do you hear me? Do whatever you have to do to keep from letting works of violence loose. Cut off those acts IN the act, cut yourself no slack, cut to the chase. Your acts, you see, work like salt. So—will you use your salt to purify, preserve and flavor? Will you let your salt go flat? Worse yet, will your salt drench the ground with acid so thick that nothing has a chance to thrive? Every action starts a fire. So—What kind of fires will your actions start? Fires that warm and cheer, that protect and cleanse, fires that bring bright light? Or fires that simply scorch the earth, and burn it to a crisp? What kind of fire will your acts be? Consuming fires of sacrificing love? Or fires like the one on Jerusalem’s garbage dump, where decaying bodies are forever being rendered into ash— fires that, once you start, you will not yourself be able to escape?
(Jerusalem’s ever burning garbage dump is, in fact, what Mark’s Jesus is describing when he speaks of “hell”.)
- 5) There is, in short, an alternative story to the one in which, our best efforts notwithstanding, we end up finding ourselves “becoming like the evil we deplore”.
This alternative story—God’s story—follows a very particular trajectory, a most peculiar way of being salt and fire. This way is the way the cross—the *only* way to be, as Jesus urges, at “peace among ourselves.”
What does that way entail, specifically, behaviorally? Let’s have a brief go with that:
- 6) A couple of weeks ago, with Susan’s help, the letter writer we call James spoke to us in stark, vivid terms about what destructive fires our tongues can set off. But James does NOT say *Speech is inflamatory, so shut your mouths.*
Today he suggests a series of practical strategies—a whole spectrum of ways by means of which holocaust fire is countered by holy fire:

- *Are you suffering?* James says. *Well, Pray it out!*
- *Are you joyful?* *Sing it out!*
- *Are you sick?* *Call out for help!*
- *When sick calls do come in, go out to the suffering ones, touch them—make connection with them—and join your tongue in prayer with theirs.*
- *Have you sinned?* *'Fess up! Not "Oops, my bad!" But "I am so sorry!" spoken face to face.*
- *Have you been sinned against?* *Well, hard as it is, listen attentively to the sinner's confession, with all the compassion you deeply need when your time for confession comes.*
- *Have folks wandered off?* *Well, go in search of them, calling out: 'You're in danger, come on back; besides, we can't do community as well without you!'*

These are the tongue-using tactics James suggests—can you think of others?

Holy fire dances in the heart of conversations like that.

Nobody gets tripped up in conversations like that.

Nobody thinks about who's the greatest in conversations like that.

The tingle of purifying salt flavors such speech and prevents conversations from turning toxic.

7) Easier named than done, of course,

not just because egos are involved, but because issues are complex—

urgent issues are at stake—and layer upon layer of misunderstanding and mistrust

has to be descended into and backtracked over—and over, and over.

How can we undertake such a journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem—

we who live in a climate of such caustic, incendiary speech?

A good place to begin is by engaging with others in the Adult Education series that convenes this month.

Another starting point might be a personal examination of our deepest passions—

passions not just with which we identify,

but passions that seem essential to our identity—

passions, which, to lose, would be like losing an arm or a leg,

burning visions that so fill our imaginations we can hardly see anything else.

Are these “good” passions—or “bad” passions?

(Pretty hard to tell from the inside of them, isn't it?)

So, why not sit down, with a trustworthy, truth-telling friend,

and share you passions with each other.

And then pose with one another other this one question:

How does this passion energize me to offer a cup of cold water to one of God's vulnerable children?