

Bishop's New Mexico Legislative Luncheon
Scriptural Reflections for Faith Advocates
06 February 2019

Friends in Christ:

It's my 7th year with you! This day is always one of my favorite things to do, although I'm always afraid I'll run out of things to say. This year, I've known since Advocacy Conference in November. I want to take about relationship between advocacy and transformation.

Our theme for the ELCA Rocky Mountain Synod in 2019 is Be Transformed. We know advocacy is intended to bring transformation to our world. But it also transforms US who engage in this ministry, this faith practice. I want to explore how we are transformed in our engagement with advocacy by pointing to two Scriptural examples.

If we had time, we'd read these Scriptures and I'd have you identify the transformation that is at work. Perhaps you can take that home and do it! For now I want to lift up these stories and share with you where I see the advocates being transformed.

Stories:

- Esther advocating for the Jewish people before King Ahasuerus
- Apostle Peter advocating with his community for the inclusion of the Gentiles

Summary of Esther's Story

Esther, a Jew, lives in ancient Persia about 100 years after the Babylonian captivity. When Esther's parents die, she is adopted and raised by her older cousin Mordecai.

The king of Persia, Ahasuerus (A-ha-SHUR-as) deposed his queen, Vashti, and via a royal beauty pageant choses Esther for the throne. Her cousin Mordecai becomes a minor official in the Persian government.

Soon after, Mordecai uncovers a plot to assassinate the king. He tells Esther about the conspiracy, and she reports it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. The plot is thwarted and Mordecai's act of kindness s preserved in the chronicles of the king.

At this same time, the king's highest official is a wicked man named Haman. He hates the Jews and especially hated Mordecai, who has refused to bow down to him. So, Haman devises a scheme to have every Jew in Persia killed. The king buys into the plot and agrees to annihilate the Jewish people on a specific day. Meanwhile,

Mordecai learns of the plan and shares it with Esther, challenging her with these famous words:

Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this. (Esther 4:13-14)

Esther urges all of the Jews to fast and pray for deliverance. Then risking her own life, brave young Esther approaches the king with a plan. She invites the king and Haman to a banquet where eventually she reveals her Jewish heritage to the king, as well as Haman's diabolical plot to have her and her people killed. In a rage, the king orders Haman to be hung on the gallows--the very same gallows Haman had built for Mordecai.

Mordecai is promoted to Haman's high position and Jews are granted protection throughout the land. As the people celebrate God's tremendous deliverance, the joyous festival of Purim is instituted.

Esther's Advocacy

Esther 7: 1-6 – Esther as advocate for the Jewish people

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!'

Esther's Transformation

- From ignorance to engagement, from isolation to interconnectedness. “Not my problem” or “I have problems of my own” to “This matters, because it’s about all of us together” – Mordecai became the link, networking her to her own people and their need
- From fear to courage, from impotence to agency – there’s a risk in speaking out yet Esther comes to recognize that her own integrity is at stake if she remains silent – she also understands that her privilege and position give her access to speak in a way that her own people do not have

- Trusting God to be at work in and through us – God is never mentioned in Esther, yet God is acting in the whole story – one can presume that Esther began with a view of God as “up and out there” and comes to understand that God uses even us to accomplish salvation “for such a time as thing”

Is there other evidence of Esther's transformation thanks to her advocacy?

Peter's Story (schmoop.com)

In Caesarea, there's a guy named Cornelius who's a Roman centurion. He's a Gentile, but he observes Jewish customs and prayers. Basically he's living the Jewish life, but hasn't made things official.

One day, while Cornelius is praying, an angel of God appears and tells him to send some men to Joppa to pick up Peter. Cornelius is a little freaked, but he sends two of his slaves and a soldier right away. You don't mess around when God gives you divine directive.

Meanwhile, the next day in Joppa Peter is on the roof praying when he gets a little hungry and sees yet another vision. He sees a sheet being sort of lowered down from the sky with all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds running around on it. Um, okay. God tells him to go ahead and kill one and eat it.

Nice try, Lord, Peter tells the Almighty. I don't eat unclean foods. I keep kosher all the way. The voice tells him again, Seriously? I just told you it was fine. "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Peter hears this three times and the whole vision disappears.

Just then, Cornelius's men come into town looking for Peter. God tells Peter that there are some guys searching for him and he should go ahead and meet them. Get a move on, Peter. Peter meets the guys, they talk, and Peter agrees to head with them to Caesarea the next day. Things are pretty simple when they've been pre-okayed in vision form.

When Peter gets there he explains that it's actually against Jewish law for Jews to associate with Gentiles. Who knows what kind of weird Gentile germs they could pass on? But Peter decided to come because God showed him in that vision that he shouldn't go around labeling things as unclean. Good takeaway.

Cornelius tells Peter about his vision and asks Peter to tell him whatever it is that God needs him to hear. This should be good. Peter tells him that God doesn't play favorites. Jew? Gentile? God is cool with whatever your background is because he's "Lord of all."

Peter's Advocacy

Acts 10:34-45 – Peter becomes an advocate for the Gentiles

Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,

Acts 15:4-11

4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.'

6 The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. 7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers,* you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. 8 And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; 9 and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. 10 Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? 11 On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

Peter's Transformation

- Has to reconsider his preconceived notions about “the way things are” including what God desires among people and in the world – his working narrative (God favors certain people) is challenged and ultimately changed (God’s love is for all)
- Peter’s advocacy is rooted not only in his own faith and experience of God (the revelation) but in his relationship and experience with those for whom he becomes an advocate – Peter’s engagement with Cornelius the Centurion becomes a catalyst for Peter’s transformation, enabling his advocacy
- Although Peter advocates for the inclusion of Gentiles in the new Christian community, he is not ultimately the Apostle to the Gentiles – that falls to Paul and Barnabas – this work of advocacy is communal, not merely individual – Peter’s role was critical but others played an even larger role – it didn’t depend all upon him – his support of those on the “front lines” mattered

Are there other dimensions to Peter’s transformation as he advocates for the inclusion of the Gentiles?

Advocacy and Transformation

As you travel to lunch, I invite you to discuss how your engagement in advocacy has proved transformational for you, or how you are being transformed by engaging in this ministry/faith practice