***The Disappearing God***

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, May 26, 2019

Esther 4:10-17

Rev. John Suk, PhD

 The God of the Jewish Bible is quite unlike most Gods, in most religions. The God of the Jewish Bible, from its beginning to end, disappears.

 According to the creation myth of Genesis, God actually walked and talked with Adam and Eve, regularly. But eventually, Adam and Eve left God’s garden and then encountered God less frequently. Noah, builder of the ark, was personally warned by God of the coming flood, but it wasn’t as if God was always around. God was not showing up as often as with Adam. Abraham met God—or perhaps angels, he was never sure—a few times. Moses met God in a burning bush, and later, on Mount Sinai, where he received the ten commandments. But that last time, Moses was only allowed to see the back of God. God was disappearing.

 But not fast enough for the people of Israel. They didn’t want to see anything of God. They pleaded with Moses, “You, speak with us, and we will listen; but don’t let God speak with us, lest we die.” God hears their plea, and agrees, saying, “I shall hide my face from them.” Which means, of course, “I shall disappear.”

 From there on in, God appears less and less frequently to Israel’s leaders. Miracles fall off. Dreams by which God speaks to the prophets are important but infrequent. By the time the Babylonians conquer Israel, and deport them to foreign lands, angels have stopped visiting Israelites altogether, and God’s home among the Israelites, his Jerusalem temple, has been utterly destroyed.

 In exile, God receded even further from Israel, until Isaiah, the great prophet of exile, says simply, “Truly, you are a God who hides himself.”

 And after that nothing.

 Only the Book of Daniel, written in the Aramaic language rather than Hebrew, and a late interloper into the Jewish Bible, records miraculous interventions by God.

 The book of Esther, on the other hand, is amazing mostly for this one thing—God is gone. God does not appear in any of Esther’s or King Xerxes’ dreams. God doesn’t send angels with messages for the Jews or the Persians. In the book of Esther, God is not mentioned at all, not even alluded to. God has disappeared.

 In the Book of Esther, Esther the beautiful Jewish woman becomes one of King Xerxes’ concubines by winning a bedding contest. It was a cushy job for Esther, so long as she didn’t mind prostituting herself.

 But soon after she becomes the number one concubine, things go wrong for Esther. It happens that a powerful, narcissistic Persian, Haman, is so offended by one Jew’s behavior that he decides to kill all Jews. As the most powerful man in the empire, after Xerxes himself, Haman can get this done.

 Mordecai, Esther’s uncle, and also the Jewish chap who happens to have offended Hamen, learns of this evil plan. And so, he asks his niece, Esther to intercede for the Jews with King Xerxes.

 Such intercession is dangerous. If Xerxes doesn’t want to be bothered by Esther, he very well might execute her. She’s just a pricey prostitute, after all. Harem girls are a dime a dozen. Why, the emperor hasn’t even asked her to bed in over a month. She’s probably fallen out of fashion. Why would King Xerxes bother with her?

 Esther doesn’t really want to risk it, doesn’t want to risk asking Xerxes to save her Jewish people. So, Mordecai says to Esther—If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place. But who knows, perhaps you have become queen for just a time as this.

 This is as close as we get to God in the Book of Esther. “Who knows?” says Mordecai. “Who knows?”

 God has disappeared from the Bible at this point. And this is a good thing. It seems, to me, that God’s disappearance is a divine strategy for making us humans self-reliant, fully human. Xerxes may snap his fingers to make it so, but not God. God wants us to figure it out independently of his meddling. We were fearfully and wonderfully made to walk on our own two feet. It is as if the God wants humanity to graduate from the child who has to be told to “look both ways before you cross the street” mentality to the adult who takes such precautions as a matter of course on the way to his or her destination. God wants us to grow up—to love our neighbours without having to be browbeaten, to be empathetic on our own, to seek justice on our own.

 The Bible portrays God as a divinity who wants humans to move from the early months of the winter to—as our Persian songs put it—the beauties of spring. God wants us to mature to the point where we have the same care, the same compassion, the same delight in creation and each other and life and love that God had when he made the seasons, and when he made the earth.

 And the Book of Esther, then, without an intervening, nagging God, is actually a divine invitation for us to live as a fully mature human race that doesn’t need to be pulled by the nose, by God, with a thousand religious laws and warnings or else. God disappears, but God has not abandoned us; God, in his or her divine wisdom, has set us free to become fully human.

 Of course, there are no guarantees. Even in the Book of Esther, there are great disappointments when the characters try to live free. Haman wanted to kill the Jews. That would be genocide. He was, thankfully, prevented by Esther’s courage. But then, if you skip ahead from where we read this morning, you will learn that the Jews subsequently took revenge on their enemies, and killed 75,000 Persians. This tit-for-tat foreign policy has been a regular part of the Middle Eastern, indeed the whole human race’s arsenal for far too long. It’s depressing.

 So, we must choose. Will it be the megalomania of Haman or the Wisdom of Mordecai? Will it be the magnanimity of Xerxes or the revenge the Jewish exiles took? Will it be the courage of Esther? Or . . .?

 Or, will we please God, and each other, by choosing on our own, as humans, to do what God dreamed in the beginning, to justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with each other?

 Can we live as the adult children of a disappearing God? That is the question the Jewish Bible leaves us with.