

**When the Going Gets Tough.** A sermon in response to Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Mark 9:38-50; and James 5:13-20 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, September 30, 2018. (*Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.*)

Jews living as minorities in the *Persian* Empire, centuries before the birth of Christ... Christians making their way in the first century *Roman* Empire, facing challenges to their faith and growing persecution... People of God, citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century *American* Empire, enmeshed in a divided culture that threatens to squeeze from them the very salt... they are called to bring to a suffering world. +++ Today's readings reflect the relentless struggles faced by God's people since the beginning of time – struggles which continue today and have been front and center in our consciousness – and our news – this very week. +++ But they also point the way:: they show us how to **respond** positively – to find **courage** in the face of adversity – and to prayerfully seek **reconciliation** when we are beset by division. +++ This morning, I'd like to delve into each of our readings with you – seeing just what hardships are being faced – and what **WE** can learn from the lessons there.

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Beginning in our gospel reading – it is clear that by the time Mark was written, divisions were already growing in the young Christian church. New leaders in faith rose into prominence – new ways of thinking about Christ – and increasing diversity, as more and more Gentiles were drawn to the Church. Christians were also being persecuted – by *both* the Jewish *and* Roman authorities – so *some* believers had renounced their faith out of fear, and now wanted to be readmitted to the fold. And, many began asking if there should be some standard established that people have to meet to be “real” Christ followers – some compliance to established rules? +++ Resentments were growing – and the so-called “pure” Christians who followed the Apostles thought everyone else should conform to **them**. +++ +++ This is all reflected in John's explanation to Christ of what happened when they encountered a stranger on the road – casting out demons in Jesus' name:: “We tried to stop him, because he was not following **US**.” +++ Notice that word... **“US”... Not, “He wasn't following YOU, Jesus”** But, “He wasn't following **US**.” +++ The man was working **deeds of power** – *driving out demons* – in Christ's name – but he *had* to be **stopped** – because he wasn't part of **their** group. +++ But Jesus wasn't having it. +++ **Forget** deeds of power, he says, if someone so much as “gives you a **cup of water** to drink” in the name of Christ – then they belong – and they will have their reward. +++ +++ But these divisions – *judging* each other based on whether or not they are with **US** – whether they *agree* with **US** and our group – that sounds ALL too familiar right now – in **our** context – doesn't it?? +++

Christ *knows* that everyone who believes in him must remain united – he *knows* hard times are coming – warning that “everyone will be salted **with fire**.” +++ Christ reminds us here that we are called to BE the salt of the earth – and when hard times come – **When the Going Gets Tough**, we must not lose our saltiness. “Have salt in *yourselves*,” he teaches us, “**and be at peace with one another**.”

So, I have to ask, how are **we** *doing* on this whole unity thing? As the Church (big C Church), we continue to break ourselves up into more and more denominations – and many of those will neither share the Lord's Table or acknowledge the baptism of any other. “Only **WE** follow the true path that God intended.” +++ And in our **nation** – any common, shared, sense of righteousness has devolved into... predictable... talking points... – predetermined much more by which side of the *political* spectrum we sit than by the example of Jesus Christ. +++ And the validity – indeed the **morality** – of any action is measured by polls of independent voters – or whether or not it is likely to motivate one political base or the other. +++ +++ **This has never been** more devastatingly true than this last week or so as we've made a spectator sport out of the hearings in the Justice Committee of the United States Senate, as they consider confirming Brett Kavanaugh as a Supreme Court Justice... Before any testimony was given... – before the facts of the case could even be known (which, in fact, they *still* are not as I stand here this morning)... – before **any** of that, politicians and citizens alike lined up to support Judge Kavanaugh – or to believe his accusers – lined up according to their own **political** identity. +++ On social media, I have friends from all over the country and both sides of the political aisle. As I scrolled down the page, I could **predict** who would land on each side of the story – I could **predict** who would believe whether or not a... **violent... sexual... attack...** took place based on what I **already** know about their politics. We all fell right in line with our **side**. And the posts weren't tame, either – on both sides – they were not introspective. – Instead, they were filled with **accusations** about political agendas, lies, corruption, and much much worse. +++ On **both** sides, **we** echoed John's words to Jesus:: declaring with a **righteous**

voice, “We have to **stop** them, because they are not following US.” +++ +++ +++ +++ And Christ shakes his head as he asks, “If salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?”

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This brings us to Esther – which may speak even more directly to **this** #metoo moment, **this** #whydidntreport moment, than does our gospel reading. Let me start with a little background for those of you who may not be very familiar with Esther. She is a Hebrew woman living in a minority Jewish community in the Persian capital, Susa. In the opening verses, we learn about the precarious role for women in the kingdom, as the king calls for the queen to come show off her beauty for his drunken friends – and she refuses. The penalty for refusing to strut for inebriated strangers: the queen is stripped of her title and the king conducts a “personal” search for a *new* queen among the virgins of the kingdom. +++ Esther is selected and becomes the new queen – fearfully hiding for the moment the fact that she is Hebrew. Soon afterward, a powerful member of the court named Haman plots to commit genocide against all the Jews in the kingdom. +++ When Esther finds out about the plot, she is terrified – for herself and all her people. But she believes there is nothing she can do – that no one will listen to her – and that she would just be putting herself into more danger by exposing herself – +++ and so she says nothing. +++ +++ But eventually the threat is just too great, and Esther finds the courage to stand up for herself and people like her all over the land – people who have been sidelined – people who are treated like second-class residents – people who are never listened to – people who are taken for granted by the men in power. +++ Esther finds the courage to stand up before the king – her husband. She tells him what she knows to be true – what his friend Haman is plotting to do – and **the king believes her**. And *because* he believes her – God’s People are saved.

Earlier in the narrative, when Esther believes she is powerless to stop what is happening, her cousin Mordecai disagrees, saying, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for **just such a time as this**.” +++ “... for **just such a time as this**.” +++ And... **I** ... believe, as events have unfolded in our nation these past months – as survivors of sexual violence have found their voices – **I** believe – that the power of Esther’s heroism was recorded in our scriptures for just such a time as THIS, +++ here +++ now +++ when palace intrigue – political expediency – and maneuvering for **power** – **continue** to **blind** us as a nation to the pervasive... reality... of sexual... violence... against... women – **continue** to step on the throats of victims to silence or minimize their outcries for justice – **continue** to neatly categorize their trauma into our tidy bins of advocacy or disbelief. +++ +++ **Now, please don’t get me wrong** – I am NOT standing before you today weighing in on the particular matter of a judicial appointment. +++ I’m talking about what it is a **symptom** of – **about our regrettable state as a people** – that even makes it possible for us to **come** to this crossroad. +++

When our Lord Jesus Christ honors the simple act of giving a cup of water to drink – why must it be political to say we need to listen to each other and care for one another’s trauma? This is exactly the question James is asking when he opens our Epistle reading with the question, “Are any of you suffering?” +++ James compels us to use our voices in constructive ways to unify and support one another – **NOT** to tear each other down. We should pray for those who are sick and sing songs of praise when we are cheerful – we should confess our sins to each other without danger of judgment, to find forgiveness – and we should use our voices to gently call those who wander from their faith back into the fold of the Church. James reminds us of the power of prayer, reminding us that Elijah was a mortal just like us – and look what he accomplished by lifting his voice up to God. +++ We’ve discovered together that James is all about **action** – how our loving **acts** of faith really **define** our faith – and he is always focused on building each other up and serving those who are less fortunate – those who are suffering – and he pushes **reconciliation** and unity – **NOT** fostering division for the sake of power.

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The GOOD NEWS is: When the Going Gets Tough – as it always does – when we are divided against one another: **Christ wants to bring us together – wants us to be reconciled – and he shows us how to do it:**... By listening and lifting each other up in prayer... And, by recapturing our lost sense of unity among believers – reminding ourselves that it is Christ himself who binds us together... +++ +++ While we will **always** face trials and grief – know that God gives us the strength we need to remain faithful... and to strive for peace. +++ As Esther compellingly reminds us (and challenges us): there is **always** a place for courage – **always** a reason to stand up for our convictions – and there is **always** a time – such as this – to dig deep – and tell truth to power.

+++++ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.