

Judgment Day

Revelation 19:11-16; Esther 8:15-9:15

Julia Ward Howe was the daughter of a financier who was a strict Calvinist and she was the wife of a physician, who, like her, was an idealist in the decades before the Civil War. Julia and her husband were both abolitionists, against slavery. He was devoted to the treatment and education of the blind, and she had rebelled through the years against both the theology of Calvin and the male authoritarianism that both her father and husband tried to impose on her. Julia Ward Howe was well read and well-spoken and a published author by the time she visited the nation's capital only months after the Civil War had started, just at the time that it was beginning to dawn on everyone what a terrible struggle the War Between the States was going to be.

Julia had spent the day with a pastor, reviewing formation after formation of the Union Army that had garrisoned the city, many of the soldiers singing a ditty called "John Brown's Body". But that night in the Willard Hotel, unable to sleep, the soldiers' tune Julia had listened to all day became infused with passages of Scripture from her Calvinist childhood, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord! He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on!"

I think that Julia Ward Howe saw early what many of her contemporaries would come to believe in time, that the young American nation was on the eve of a terrible judgment in which injustices and greed and hatreds and raging passions would result in a bloodletting, the likes of which Americans had never seen before and have not seen since. "I have seen Him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps. They have builded him an altar in the evening dews and damps. I can read his righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps. His day is marching on."

Of course, we do have to be careful about reading divine sanction into any sort of military action. Abraham Lincoln famously read the newspapers shortly after the southern states began to secede, paying particular attention to the fulminations of clergymen on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, all of them claiming that God would protect their soldiers and vindicate their cause. Lincoln's reaction? He said and I quote, "The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party ..."

It makes sense to me. I've just finished reading the Book of Job which invests some 42 chapters of inspired prose and poetry, all to express the notion that God can use both blessing and suffering for all sorts of redemptive purposes which we can't understand while it's happening to us. The point being that God has overarching reasons for everything that happens and, as often as not, we don't know what they are. But both books, Job and Esther, offer us a trajectory in which the faith of believing people is tested, a storyline in which good people experience overwhelming confusion and grief before God ultimately saves them from forces that looked to be only evil.

Here in Esther, the story had revolved around the marriage of a Jewish orphan, Esther, to the Persian emperor, Xerxes, a Bridegroom who in the biblical scheme of things was meant to foreshadow Christ, was meant to faithfully love and protect and save his Bride from every kind of danger and harm.

But it turned out that saying "I do" and giving your life to a savior and king can end up to be something more difficult and complicated than it looked on the day you gave your heart to him. Things went wrong in the kingdom, and a sort of distance developed between Xerxes and Esther that tempted Esther to wonder if her savior really loved her, whether she could trust him against a sort of evil that seemed to have the king's approval and blessing. As it turned out in Esther's case, there were no worries. The moment Xerxes understood his bride was in trouble, the moment she appeared in his inner court, Xerxes the bridegroom did what he had to do save Esther and Mordecai and all God's people from danger and harm.

In a single morning, Haman the Adversary, who had scheduled a holocaust against God's people, was executed for the devil he turned out to be. And from that moment forward, the outcome of Esther and Mordecai's story was never in doubt. It was like Christ dying for our sins and rising from the dead for us. From the moment Christ did that, the devil was toast and we were saved here and now, just as Xerxes would save God's people there and then. Xerxes had already saved them for all practical purposes. After all, no one was going to attempt a holocaust against God's people with Mordecai, wearing and using Xerxes' ring and seal, Mordecai, standing on the palace balcony dressed in the sort of clothing you only got to wear when the king was on your side.

But, just like with Jesus and us, the day of reckoning actually came sometime after Xerxes had secured a happy ending for God's people. Nine months Esther and Mordecai had to wait before they would see for themselves the power that Xerxes had lined up to get them through their day of reckoning. And in the meantime, just like Jesus with us, Xerxes had required Esther and Mordecai to use their power, the power the king had given them, to govern and organize God's people to prepare for the struggle that was still nine months in the future.

And today's Scripture Lesson tells the story of how the Jew's efforts combined with the king's power to decisively overturn what the devil meant for evil against God's people. And like all judgments what happened that day was terrible and terrifying. Five hundred men alone were cut down in the capital precincts, including every last one of the ten sons of Haman. The king himself was absorbed in the horror of it, musing out loud to the queen in so many words, "If the Jews have killed so many in the capital, what must they have done out in the provinces?" Nevertheless, Xerxes' loyalties were entirely with his bride and all God's people.

Now what is your wish?" the king says to his bride, *"It shall be shall be granted you! And what is your request? It shall be fulfilled."* And what Esther wants is shocking to modern ears. In so many words, she asks the king, "Give us another day to hunt down the people who plotted against us. And hang Haman's sons around the city as a sign against anyone who would raise a hand against God's people." The point being that God's judgment, once it is unleashed, is total and relentless, a terrible reality that none of should want to face if we can avoid it.

You can hear Esther's yearning for justice, you can see the trajectory of Esther's story echoed in the sixth and seventh chapter of the book of Revelation. John's vision there opens with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse spreading conflict and violence and poverty and death in the name of human ambition and greed. And then suddenly the scene changes to heaven where the souls of believers *"slain for the word of God"* gather under the altar and cry out to the Almighty, just as Esther had been crying out to Xerxes for months, *"How long, O Sovereign Lord, before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"*

And God's response to their outcry is not that different to how Xerxes had answered Esther some time ago when she begged him to do something about a holocaust that was still on the schedule and enemies who were still free and unpunished in the land. Like Xerxes, God tells the martyrs in heaven to wait, and then God dresses them in outfits, *"white robes"*, not unlike the outfit that Mordecai wore when he took his turn on the royal balcony. The point being that God knows how meek believers suffer at the hand of proud unbelievers in the fallen world. He is not blind to how badly we suffer in the face of human injustice and cruelty.

But he asks us to wait on justice, it says in Revelation, *"until the number of [our] fellow servants and [our] brothers should be complete..."*. In Esther, we're told that in the nine months between Haman's execution and the day of reckoning that *"many from the peoples of the empire declared themselves Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen on them."*

In Revelation 7, we're told that while the martyrs in heaven wait for justice, *"a great multitude ...from all the tribes and peoples and languages"*, is gathered before the Lamb, all of them dressed like Mordecai *"in white robes"*. The point being that judgment for sin is real and

powerful and inevitable, but that it waits for God to gather from the faraway peoples brothers and servants who will suffer like the martyrs had to suffer, because for the moment, God's judgment has taken a back seat to his grace. What did Jesus cry against the soldiers who nailed his arms to the cross? Did he cry for justice? *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!"*

Nine months Esther and Mordecai had to wait with the sword of a holocaust hanging over their heads, trusting that Xerxes, their savior and king, would see them through the struggle. So they celebrated their victory in advance of the date, because they believed that what the king had only so far written on paper would come to pass. They knew a Judgment Day was coming and they believed that God had provided them a human savior there and then who would see them through the terrifying struggle that still lay ahead. They might have sung something like this, "He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat. He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat. O be swift my soul to answer Him! Be jubilant my feet! Our God is marching on."

It says in our passage from Esther that *"many from the peoples of the empire declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them"*. The point is that this struggle between Haman the Amalekite and Mordecai the Jew had not escaped the notice of all the other peoples of the empire. It was a struggle in which Xerxes was forced to intervene and identify for all of Persia who was in the right and who would be condemned when the day of reckoning came.

So where you landed on Judgment Day depended on where you stood with Xerxes himself during the nine month interim. And fear was a deciding factor in the process. Because Xerxes was not just a Bridegroom, wooing and charming and courting his people. Xerxes was the king, the judge. And so it is for us today. It's quite possible that we are blasé about sacred things because we no longer see Jesus as a King and fear him as a Judge. We can take or leave church and faith and we imagine that there will be no consequences either way. After all, Jesus is easy, right?

"In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea, with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me. As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free, while God is marching on." I don't want to tell you that Julia Ward Howe or Abraham Lincoln were Christians. They were both non-conformists, untamed by much in the way of formal doctrine or discipline. But they lived in an age when people saw God as someone to be feared and not presumed upon.

I love my Bible because the characters I read about there are not paragons of conventional religion. Their sins and faults are put on display in living color. They clearly rode the same roller coaster through life that you and I have had to ride. But there is in their hearts that combination of fear and want, love and trust, knowledge and respect that makes people too humble and meek to be blasé about what is sacred, king and kingdom and eternity. They repent of their sins in tears.

They tremble at the thought of judgment and their hearts leap at the promise that God in Christ has provided a love and forgiveness that will allow us to be on his side when judgment comes. Real grace leads us to real love and gratitude and it all begins with fear.