

The Casting Out of the Pur
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Esther 3:1-11

Today we come to the third sermon in our series based on exile texts from the Old Testament. These are texts that show us God's people living in a time of weakness and pressure. My hope is looking at these texts will help as we face our modern weakness and pressure. Today's text is a unique exile text. It's the book of Esther. Esther is one of the least read Bible books and the least preached on. I've never preached on it before, and I was feeling ashamed about that until I read that John Calvin never preached on Esther either. It's also a different kind of exile text in that it's not from the Babylonian portion of the exile: it's from the time after the Babylonians had been conquered by the Persians. After that conquest, the Persians create a great empire. It stretches from India to Egypt—an enormous stretch of territory. The ruler of this empire is Xerxes. The Greek historian Herodotus writes about Xerxes and calls him one of the three great Persian emperors. Herodotus says Xerxes 'was the tallest and most handsome of the Persian Kings—ambitious, ruthless, a brilliant warrior, a jealous lover.' That's a secular description of the king and it totally fits the picture given in Scripture.

The book of Esther begins with a lavish description of Xerxes' court. We are shown a place of power and decadence. Chapter 1 describes a party in the palace. It wasn't just a regular party; it was a party that went on for 180 days. That's 6 months of partying. For the party, the imperial courtyard is decorated with couches of gold and silver, on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. Wine is served in goblets of gold and Xerxes orders that there should be no limit on the amount of wine consumed. So the bar is wide open.

As you can imagine, there's a lot of drunkenness. And on one of the days of the party, the emperor who is completely drunk, gives order that his wife, Queen Vashti, dress herself up and parade in front of all the men. He wants to show her off in front of all the nobles. Like a prized possession. Vashti, who is sober and has some personal dignity, says, 'forget it.' Xerxes flies into a rage and he banishes Vashti. She's done as his queen. To replace her, Xerxes gives an order that his servants scour the kingdom for beautiful women. These beautiful women will be forced to come to the palace so that he can check them out, and ultimately choose another wife/trophy. So the court eunuchs go through the empire, find beautiful women and compel them to join the Harem. Xerxes vanity and decadence is so great that when these women arrive, they may not come into his presence as is. Each woman must undergo an extravagant makeover. How extravagant? Here's a quote. "Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete 12 months of beauty treatments prescribed for them. Six months with the oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics."

This is the first two chapters of the book and it gives you a sense of Xerxes court. It is a place of pride and lust and gluttony and decadence. That's the culture the exiles must engage. But here's the interesting thing, in the book of Esther, all this is presented without criticism. When I told you about Xerxes, I editorialized. I made it clear that Xerxes' court is not a godly place. But the actual book of Esther doesn't do that. It offers no moral commentary on Xerxes' behavior. The narrator gives no hint that all this partying and vanity is a problem. It's just reported. If you were the sort of person who's attracted to the idea of 180 straight days of

partying and excess, there's nothing in the text to discourage you. That's so different from other books of the Bible! Most Bible books will tell you, 'this is bad! It goes against God's will and God's way.' But Esther doesn't even mention God. In this book there is no direct reference to God or his law or his will or his character. Nothing.

And that's why you don't hear it preached on much. If God is not mentioned, how do you proclaim the good news? It may be a really interesting story, but we come to the Bible to hear God speak to us. We come to the Bible to learn his character and his will, and if he's not mentioned what can we learn here? Where's the gospel in this story? It's a real question. Martin Luther—who was never one to hold back—said this about the book of Esther and 2 Maccabees: "I am so great an enemy to the book of the Maccabees and to Esther that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen un-naturalities." He wished Esther wasn't in the Bible.

Can such a book help us be God's people in this world? Let's see. So far, I've described the decadence of Xerxes' regime. What happens when God's people encounter that place? One of the young beauties taken to Xerxes is Esther. Esther is a Jewish exile, raised by her uncle Mordecai, who also works in the city. Esther is beautiful. Really beautiful. So beautiful that out of all the women Xerxes sees, she is chosen to be the new Queen. So this young Jewish girl, enters into the court of the emperor. She keeps her Jewish identity hidden, but she finds herself immersed in this culture of pride and decadence.

But then the trouble really starts. A man named Haman becomes second in command of the empire. Haman is cruel, conniving and vain. When he walks through the city, he wants people to bow before him, to worship the ground he walks on. But one day as he goes through the city, he notices that while everyone else prostrates themselves before him, Esther's uncle Mordecai does not. He stays standing. Haman is enraged and he resolves to get his revenge on this Jew, and his pride makes him so angry that simply getting rid of Mordecai isn't enough.

So this is about as bad as it gets for exiles. This is genocide. This is holocaust. Haman hatches his final solution and he successfully manipulates Xerxes into signing off on the extermination of the Jews. Now he has to choose a date for the plan and to do that he decides to cast the pur. Casting the pur is a little like casting lots, though it's a little different from the lots mentioned in other places in Scripture. This is the only time in the Bible where the pur is mentioned. Scholars say that the pur is a kind of primitive dice. And you rolled them as a way to make a choice. It's a tool for divination, for discerning the will of the gods. Haman seems to roll it here more like we roll the dice today. He rolls it to make a random choice. He rolls the dice so fate and chance can choose the day of Jewish destruction. In addition to rolling the dice, Haman erects a 75-foot pole outside his home and he makes plans to impale Mordecai's dead body on that pole as an example of what happens to anyone who does not bow to him. Haman's plot seems perfect. It seems as though the Jews are doomed.

But that's not how the story ends. Mordecai hears about Haman's plot and he goes to Esther. He pleads with Esther to help out her people, to say something to the king on behalf of the Jews. Remember Xerxes has no idea that she's Jewish and doesn't realize he's okayed the slaughter of his wife's people. Esther is reluctant at first because anyone who comes into the presence of Xerxes without being asked must be executed on the spot, unless Xerxes lowers his scepter and gives pardon. To go to the king is to risk her life. Here's how Mordecai responds to Esther's uncertainty: 'Esther, your life is under threat either way, and besides "Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this."'

So Esther puts on her dress and she puts on her courage. For the sake of her people she goes into the king's presence. She enters the courtroom without permission. Silence falls over the place. All the male eyes turn towards her with disapproval. 'What is she doing?' Everyone waits to see the king's reaction, but the king smiles and he lowers his scepter. "Esther my queen! It is good to see you! What do you desire? Ask me and I will grant it to you." Esther requests a banquet and at that banquet she asks that all the royal courtiers be there, including Haman.

When the day of the banquet arrives, after the king was full of food and wine and was in good spirits he says again, "My darling this is wonderful! Ask me anything, and I will give it to you, up to half my kingdom!" Esther makes her play. She reveals that she is a Jew, and with tears she pleads for the king to revoke his order to kill her people. Xerxes is not only sympathetic; he is furious that such an order exists. In his rage he asks, "who caused such an order to be given! Who manipulated me!?" And Esther points at Haman. The king storms out of the courtroom. Haman is terrified. He falls down at Esther's feet to plead for mercy and clutches at her skirts in desperation. That's when Xerxes comes back. He sees Haman grabbing his wife's skirt, and he thinks he's accosting her. He orders that Haman be executed. Not just executed but hung on the very pole meant for Mordecai. Then he decrees that everyone who participated in this plot—all the enemies of the Jews—should be executed, and it should happen on the day Haman had chosen for the destruction of the Jews. It's a complete reversal. On the very same pole intended for Mordecai, Haman dies. On the very same day chosen by roll of the dice for the destruction of the Jews, Israel's enemies will perish. In the moment that it seems everything was lost, there is a great reversal.

So as we said, a great story, but where is God in it? It has a happy ending, but on the surface it seems like everything in this story is just the ordinary machinations of power and politics. On the surface it looks like human beings plotting and planning. To see under that surface, you have to know that the story of Esther becomes a feast. One of the great Jewish festivals still celebrated today is based on the story of Esther. It's a one-day festival where people eat and drink and party. The feast is celebrated on the 14th day of the month of Adar—the day selected by the roll of Haman's dice. The day of the great reversal when the destruction of God's people was turned into the triumph of God's people.

Do you know the name of the festival? Some of you do. It's called Purim. Do you know where that name come from? It comes from the name of the dice. It's named after the pur, the dice that Haman rolled. Why is this festival named after the dice?!?! Why wouldn't you name it after Esther, or Mordecai, or something like that? This is such an important question for understanding this book. Why is the festival named after the dice?

It's an ironic title. The people look back on what they've been through and they say, "We were so worried! We couldn't sense God's presence, it all felt random and senseless, it felt like we would be destroyed, but God was with us the whole time. God was in complete control! It wasn't random at all. Hey everyone, let's have a festival and let's call it the festival of "chance." Let's call it 'the festival of the dice' as a way to proclaim to the world that God does not play dice with the universe."

So it's an ironic title, but it's more than that. When the Holy Spirit moves the Jews to name this festival Purim, to name it after the dice, he is lifting up a particular aspect of God's providence. He's emphasizing the great reversal. The dice aren't just a symbol of randomness; they were meant to be the instrument to choose the moment of Israel's destruction. But in the twinkling of an eye, God turns the instrument of destruction into the instrument that chooses the

moment of victory! So now by calling it Purim they take this symbol of death and chaos, and they repurpose it as a symbol of salvation. They lift it high and make it the center of a feast.

In that sense this is just like another symbol that we know pretty well. What other time did God take an instrument of chaos that was meant to destroy his work, and then work a great reversal, a great victory, through that thing? Such a great victory that this thing which was supposed to destroy God's purpose, destroyed God's enemies instead? A thing that was meant to be a symbol of death, but is now lifted up and becomes a symbol of salvation and something that causes us to feast?

That's right, the cross of Jesus. The cross was a symbol of chaos and torture. The powers of evil thought that they could use that cross to finally destroy God's plans. And they lifted Jesus high and displayed his naked body on high on that pole. The evil one thought that his victory was near. But instead, through the cross of Jesus dealt a mortal blow to the evil one, and now the ancient powers of evil are in confusion and retreat. Now we put this cross on the top of our churches, and we lift high the cross in our songs and we say, let's have a feast because the power and the promises of God are unshakeable.

The fact that Esther never mentions God is part of its power. Esther is like a lot of regular days in our life. On a lot of regular days, and especially when those days take place in exile times, there are no really obvious movements of God. No glorious miracles. No voices from heaven. In most of our ordinary days there are no burning bushes, no people walking on water. I'm sure a lot of you can go through a whole day where no one says anything about God, or seems to be thinking about him at all. His name just doesn't come up. And so it can seem like the world is governed by random chance and the plotting of the powerful. But do not be fooled. This world belongs to God. And he is working in all things for your salvation. So this week when you are about to walk into a situation where trouble is winning, where it feels as though you are losing ground, where it feels too much for you, and where you can't find God's name in the situation. Remember, the God of Esther is with you. The God who raised Jesus is with you. And he has equipped you for such a time as this.

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