

Esther 4

The Work of God The Moment of Crisis and the Coming Home

Introduction: If it is your first time joining us - Welcome! We have dedicated this year to Biblical Literacy; meaning we as a church are reading the Bible for ourselves to know first hand what it teaches and in order to be shaped by the story of God. And along with that we are teaching through the Bible on Sunday mornings - the main themes, characters and storyline. This morning we are continuing our short series through the book of Esther.

As has been mentioned this is a crazy book to find in the Bible - There is no mention of YHWH or the generic term for God (Elohim) - no mention of Torah, Temple, Prayer, there are no visions, no prophetic denunciations or encouragements and no miracles - It's a wonder what this book is doing in the Bible..

God not being mentioned at all is actually a brilliant move by the anonymous author - it's as if the author is saying - "reader can't you see all the ways YHWH is so very present and at work behind the scenes??) The providence of God is all over this book..

Esther is a story that chronicles God's surprising preservation of his people when their very existence is threatened by a superpower.

The book of Esther feels a lot like the days we are living in - We are not familiar with experiencing divine intervention in the way the Bible often describes it - our culture and church culture are far from a biblical rootedness and identity similar to those who were born in exile — So maybe this book has something to say to us...

I can't help seeing this story as a story written for the church in this era of History. It seems to me that Esther is a story about a girl who was so far from Home, so removed from the morality of her people, and an identity with the people of God who never the less - found her way home...

1. Choosing between Death or Death

1. Last week Nicolai covered chapters 2-4, building the tension of the story. I would like to camp out in chapter 4 today because I really think this is the climax of the story of Esther and it's worth sitting in!

2. As we know, there has been an edict that has been sent out, sealed with the king's ring, that all the Jews in the Empire are to be wiped out on a certain day - determined by Haman and the rolling of a dice. This came about because Mordecai would not bow to Haman, the king's newly appointed Vizier. Now we don't know exactly why Mordecai doesn't bow - Is it because he knows the ruthlessness and evil of this man and he will not pay him honor? Is it simply because of the fact that he is a Jew? - that is the reason that he gives when asked.... Whatever the nuances behind this - it sets Haman on a trajectory not only to kill Mordecai but all the Jews in the Persian Empire.
3. In response to the edict it says, **"When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes."**
 1. As has been mentioned - Mordecai seems like he was a compromised Jew at best and we really don't know about the other Jews living in Susa - all we know is that these wee Jews who could have returned to the Land of Israel and chose to stay in a foreign land.... but the point is wherever these Jews are "spiritually" on the faith loyalty to YHWH spectrum - when tragedy strikes they turn to "mourning, fasting, weeping and wailing."
 1. Of course mourning in this way is customary for the Jews - And as a whole they are very expressive people - But the author uses these very specific words to describe what happened. It's interesting because these exact words were written some 400-500 years earlier by the Prophet Joel.
 2. **"The Lord thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty is the army that obeys his command. The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it? "Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning." Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious**

and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God. Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests, who minister before the Lord, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say, “Spare your people, Lord. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’” - Joel 2:11-17

1. In this scene from Joel, judgment is at the door, it is coming and nothing can stop it - God is bringing justice upon the nation of Judah for their sin... and yet God says - **“Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing...**
2. Could it be that these exiled Jews are reading and applying the book of Joel to their situation?? If Mordecai’s spiritual awakening took place when he refused to bow to Haman, then is this his act of repentance - turning back to YHWH? We can’t know for sure but I think these three terms are used by the author intentionally to get us clued into what is really happening - a Spiritual revival - repentance through fasting, weeping, and mourning.
4. Esther is clueless to what is going on. Now I’m not blaming her - She lives in the palace - an image of security, of comfort and ease - Esther is removed, She is far away from the fight - and from any threat or any danger of death... or is she?
 1. Esther gets word of Mordecai’s state and she seeks more details about it - she sends him items to console him, to bring comfort

or ease to his pain...And he sends word about what is happening via her servant - **“Mordecai told him (Esther’s Servant) everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king’s presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.”**

2. Esther’s response is a completely rational response given the situation - **“All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.”**
 1. In essence she says - my royal position really doesn’t mean anything - If I approach the king uninvited it could mean losing my life....
 2. **When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”**
 3. This is of course is the climax and turning point in the story - the question is will Esther join in the suffering of her people, will she take up her true identity or insulate herself from pain, suffering and fear...This creates a crisis in her life - what will she do?
 1. Mordecai’s warning is so interesting to me - He tells her in essence - no palace walls, amount of luxury, insulation and protection can keep you from this wave that is coming - Esther - you cannot escape this threat! But then he gives another warning - If you do not do something - You and your Father’s family will perish...

1. It seems to me that Mordecai is saying to Esther - you have a choice between the threat of death and a death of your true self - You and your father's family - A loss of Identity with the people of God. There are worse things in life than dying - specifically to lose who you really are - to neglect and reject that God has made you for himself, for his work, for his glory, for relationship with him - To kill the image of God in you Spiritual death is far worse than physical death or danger.. It reminds me of what the book of Hebrews says about Moses, - **“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.” - Hebrews 11:24-26**
2. What is worse than physical death? To bury your talent in the ground, to gain the whole world, and yet not be rich toward God, to insulate your life from all fear, threat, pain...and lose your own soul. As C.S. Lewis once said - do this - lock your heart away, protect it - *“lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation.” - C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves*

2. You Were Made for a Fight

1. People have been talking for sometime about the end of Christian era - The post Christian era - the church will become obsolete - Not by annihilation or at least not a physical snuffing out but a slow burn.. by being colonized more and more by the culture around us...Having our desires and identity shaped by culture and not by the word of God and the Spirit of God
 1. *“The Church of the west often fails to live up to it’s high calling because it is hamstrung by, “A low spiritual state of the church, a lukewarm love for Christ, a sickly worldliness, and a lack of vital prayer. The reason? Self-satisfaction that comes from comfort,*

compromise with capitalism, and accommodation to the consumeristic spirit of our age” - Michael Goheen, Introducing Christian Mission Today

2. I think we are at a crisis moment - Similar to the threat of the people of God in the book of Esther - we are in danger of Spiritual Annihilation and if it hasn't already hit.. it can't be far off. Some of you are holding on to a semblance of Christianity - mostly covered up in a cultural conditioning...
3. Some of you are like Esther in the sense that your identity with the people of God is hanging by a thread - it's only gonna take one more Trump endorsement from Jerry Falwell Jr, and the Christian conservative party and you're done.. just one more derogatory remark about sexual minorities.. One more global warming denier..
4. For others it just takes one more liberal judge, or politician telling us what we can and can't say or do in the state of California - Restricted speech and religious liberty, etc. One more law and you're heading to Idaho..
5. For others all it takes is the right person, right relationship or right career opportunity to come, to offer you something better - a fixed identity - something stable, something to really commit your life to and your gone.. Whoever you are you are one step away from your spiritual funeral!!
1. This might be the last season of your faith if you don't choose now to re-join the people of God, to re-engage with what it means to trust in Jesus alone for salvation, joy and hope, to follow Jesus with your whole heart and to seek first the kingdom of God, to be on God's mission to his kingdom come and his will be done on earth as it is in Heaven!!
2. Church - it might be scary as hell but God made you for a fight! The real fight, not against people but against the forces of darkness that seek to lull us to sleep, to draw us into apathy and spiritual lethargy - while the rest of the world and culture around us remains in the grips of slavery to sin, brokenness, hopelessness and meaninglessness..
1. Let me quote the Great Prophet Neil Young - and preface it by saying for the People of God - It's better to burn out than to fade away!!

3. Choosing to Die

1. **“Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him”**

1. Esther who seems to be at best a cultural Jew and at worst a want to be pagan, is brought to a place a spiritual and national crisis - not because she sought a spiritual awakening - but was in need of real deliverance, because of her threatened life and nation... she was led there by others.. she didn't seek it out.
2. We, like Esther, need to awake to the dire situation of our own spiritual lethargy. Our own lethargic spiritual state cannot long withstand the onslaught of our godless, anti-christ culture. If we are not committed to Jesus, and his kingdom, if it is not the desire behind and underneath all other desires - we too will experience a clash of worlds and a loss of our true selves
3. No person can long remain in the state of ambivalence, apathy or complacency or in the words of Jesus - no one can serve two masters...Don't wait for the breaking point - recognize the wave that is coming and seek the LORD
4. Esther recognized the serious threat of what was coming and she enters into a three day time period of grieving, a mourning, and weeping - Asking all the people of God to join her. This is that will produce in her a transformation of character.... A bold and renewed identity with the people of God (She goes from living in Fear - blending in with the Persians, hiding her name - to boldly, and cunningly facing the enemy, and proclaiming her name and place among the people of God) - A renewed spiritual life, an awakening really only comes by a death - this is the pattern for God's people - something must die - in order for much fruit to come Jesus himself says, **“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains alone, but if it dies it will produce much fruit...Of** course we Know that this is what God has ordained for the world - it is through the death of Messiah - that the way is opened up for life... I think what we often fail to forget is that - the way of the messiah doesn't mean - Jesus died so I don't have to but in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer - *When Christ calls a person - he bids them come and die...*” - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

4. **Closing:** One main message of Esther seems to be that personal renewal comes from a death to self - seen in Esther and her calling on the people of God to fast - a kind of death to self, to self reliance, to our addiction to amusement, our numbness to reality, our apathy to the decrepit state of our spiritual health..
1. Esther - the royal queen of the known world - lays aside her royal garments and takes upon herself the garments of brokenness, weeping, and mourning, She enters into the pain of her people.. then courageously walking into her own potential death as her people's representative.. outwits the evil ruler Haman, and saves her people from annihilation - bringing them self-defense and prosperity in the land....
 2. Our way back to God, to renewal, and to an identity in him, and with him is through the Son, Jesus Christ.. who went through suffering and death - three days he was laid in the tomb - without water or food, (and yes, for others, there was weeping, and mourning) But at the end of 3 days he rose to a new creation..outwitted the serpent, triumphing over him through death and securing blessing and hope for his people now and in the age to come.
 3. This is the pattern by which God makes us new creation as well - Yes, by trusting in what Jesus did in his life death and resurrection for us, but also by modeling that life in our own lives - Church - it's time to come home - back to identity with God, and with his people.
 4. Paul says, **"I have been crucified with Messiah it is no longer I who live but Messiah who lives in me, and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."** - Galatians 2:20
 5. **"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness,**

humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. - Colossians 3:5-17