

Esther 1:1-22

The Work of God God Behind the Scenes

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 beginning a new series through the book of Esther.

It's truly a beautifully written story - it almost reads like a play - it's a tale of sensuality and brutality - you have subtle Esther, resolute Mordecai, the fumbling drunk bafoon of a king - Ahasuerus, and finally the menacing villain - Haman the Agagite - descended from the great enemy of Israel - the Amalekites.

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

As we will see, irony or reversal is the key to the plot of Esther - (Esther 9:1 -The reverse occurred)

The feast of Purim is celebrated by Jews to this day to commemorate this story and the Jewish victory over their enemies. The word Purim comes from the Hebrew word for dice. It's ironically named after the lot cast to determine the the date the jews would be executed by the story's antagonist - Haman.

So we could call this story something like - God and the roll of the dice - Or The True Godfather - Think of the Marionette strings...What is this Shakespeare? It has all the fixings of an incredible story - A Tragedy, a Comedy and a Fairytale.

Even to this day when the Jews celebrate Purim they read this story out loud while participants dress up as characters and even perform skits from the story. The feast of Purim has carnivalesque atmosphere to it. Food and drink are given as gifts and charity is given to the poor...

1. Historical Context

1. The story takes place in the city of Susa (Modern day Iran) - the capital city of the Persian Empire. Biblical timeline is that God's

people after many years of God's patience, and warning - through his prophets - finally received their just judgment. The Babylonians came to Jerusalem in 586 BC destroying the Temple, and Jerusalem and taking the Jewish people into captivity. In 539 BC Cyrus the Great (The king of the Medo-Persian Empire) conquered Babylon and brought it and its conquered peoples (Including the Jewish captives) under his rule (200 year rule of Medo-Persia). The Medo-Persian Empire stretched from Modern Pakistan to Sudan in North Africa to the Northern most parts of Modern day Turkey - It was a vast Empire. Under Cyrus' reign the Jews had been allowed to go back to Jerusalem and had been given permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple. The year of our story is around 486-480 BC. Ahasuerus (or his Greek name Xerxes) is the King of the Persian Empire at this time and a main character in our story.

2. The Difficulty with Esther

1. Esther is one of two books of the Bible named after a female character. There is nothing particularly Jewish about this book - at least in a religious sense. God is not mentioned once - not his Personal Name YHWH nor the generic Elohim, (God in English). Interesting facts - The Essenes - the religious group that wrote and preserved what we call the Dead Sea Scrolls - did not include Esther in their writings because they considered it totally pagan and vulgar. The book of Esther is so vulgar and jacked up that the Christian church did not write any commentaries on the book of Esther for the first 7 centuries of the church. Calvin never commented or taught from it and Martin Luther said - *"I wish it had never come to us at all, for it has too many heathen un-naturalities."*
2. It's not surprising, Esther's (the Heroine) name is not Jewish - it is a derivative of the name Ishtar - a Babylonian fertility goddess. Esther as we will see - Is chosen to take part in a kind of beauty pageant to see who will become the next queen - She spends a whole night having sex with the king - She is picked to be queen because of her beauty, her beautiful body and her ability to outperform in bed - compared to all the other virgins that the king slept with....And Mordecai, he elder cousin, (the Hero) he doesn't fare much better - his name is a derivative of Marduk - the highest god of the Babylonians - He is the one who puts Esther up to the whole thing, and encourages her to conceal her Jewishness while doing it. - In the end, and with a strange turn of events these two Jews

orchestrate the killing of all the enemies of the Jews in the Persian empire - it's bloody and horrific - and this is why the Jews still celebrate the feast of Purim to this day. The End.

3. What is going on here? These characters are not portrayed as God fearing, covenant witnessing, law keeping Jews - quite the opposite. They are nothing like their contemporaries Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego the faithful Jewish youths in Babylonian Captivity — One person compared Daniel and his crew to New Yorkers - “This is how I talk, this is what I eat, this is my God, this is my lifestyle.. you don't like it? Burn me...” Mordecai and Esther are more like Millennials on spring break - Down for Whatever... They are very compromised, no saltiness, no distinction.
 1. In this book there is no mention of Torah, Temple, prayer, there are no visions, no prophetic denunciations or encouragements and no miracles - you think what is this book doing in the Bible? Yet that 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 - are culture and church culture are far from a biblical rootedness and identity— So maybe this book has something to say to us...
 4. Now not everyone sees the book of Esther this way - (others see it quite differently) - One Jewish Philosopher from the twelfth century said, *“When Messiah comes, the other books (of the Hebrew Bible) will pass away, but the Torah and Esther will last forever.”* Okay - there is a polar view!
 5. Alistair Roberts and Andrew Wilson in their book *Echoes of Exodus* see it all quite differently - They see this story through the lens of the Exodus from Egypt - *“That being the case the reader is ready for the tension where Israel will be oppressed and destroyed; we also know the attempt will fail. what is more - how it will fail - it will involve the antagonist (Pharaoh, Haman, the serpent) being deceived by the shrewdness of the righteous. It will include the poetic justice of seeing Israel's enemy having the tables turned on him, in this case hanging on the tree (Crucified) he had intended for the Jews, much as Egypt had drowned in the sea after trying to to drown the Israelite boys. The turning point will be a nighttime meal, in which the judgment of death - which was decreed on the day before passover (Est. 3:12) - will pass from Israel to their enemies (7:1-10). Israel will end up with the spoil from the very enemies who were trying to kill*

them and security in the land. The whole episode will be commemorated with a feast and a holiday from that day forward (9:23-38) Echoes of the Exodus are everywhere.” - Roberts and Wilson, Echoes of Exodus

1. As I said before, God is not mentioned at all and it's 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 clearly at work - the circumstances that get Esther - this Jewish captive - next to the seat of power in the empire - Mordecai her cousin and gatekeeper to the palace - just happening to overhear two men plot to kill the king and getting credit for saving the king's life... the turn of fortunes upon Haman, his family and the enemies of the Jewish people. Something is going on.. but what? - The sovereignty and providence of God. Now for some people that really freaks them out and bothers them - that God is sovereign - And there are some bothering definitions of sovereignty out there - but it seems that when we look at scripture this is what we see - Sovereignty means - *“God does what he pleases, but not everything that happens pleases him. He is the one that sets the guidelines and everyone ultimately answers to him.” - Gerry Breshears*

3. God Behind the Scenes

1. Ahasuerus, the King, is characterized as a bafoon - a drunken, self indulgent, flying off the handle, fool; and yet he is the ruler of the world - And his kingdom is vast, his lifestyle and wealth is beyond extravagant.
 1. He throws a party that last 187 days?!?!? Who does this?? What is going on here? This is the king rubbing shoulders with the princes and powers of his empire in order to make war plans to invade Greece - (historical context - The Persian and Grecian wars - not long after Sparta, 300 - guys, you know the story)
 2. King Ahasuerus is most likely very drunk - He had given command that there be no end or limit to the drinking - we're talking the longest and most extravagant "open bar" maybe in history. It says when he was of good cheer, or in high spirits because of the wine... So while the wine is flowing and party is going - he has this great idea - He commands his wife, Vashti, the Queen, to be brought by the 7 Eunuchs so she can come and parade her beauty before all the princes - because she was beautiful to look at - The Midrash -

the Rabbinical telling and interpretation of the OT - believes that this is an order for Vashti to parade naked before the male gawkers - a kind of royal striptease for all of the king's princes, advisors and captains to lust over - it's gross, it's appalling and dehumanizing... The whole scene has been described by Robert Alter as "A *Carnavalesque spirit of sensuality and dissipation.*" - Think Louis the 16th and Marie Antoinette type stuff - Mardi Gras, but more grotesque..

3. Vashti, the queen, refuses the king's command - **way to go girl!** And the king throws a royal fit - He gets super angry and has to call all of his best counsel together to figure out how to respond to his wife.. **"According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?"**
4. The guy can't even have a conversation with his own wife when he is refused by her — he wants her to be displayed naked in front of all his mighty princes to see - He literally throws a royal fit when he doesn't get his way and has no idea how to handle it..
5. So his royal advisors tell him - Vashti has to be banished or else all the other women in the empire will disrespect their husbands... make an example out of her.. Just listen to the ridiculousness of this - **"Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike."** This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. He sent

letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.”

1. I mean - What do you do when bafoon's rule the world and make ridiculous decrees?? Everyman be master in his own household... - you can say it but it doesn't make it true. People, this guy ruled the world - I mean c'mon!
2. There are times and seasons in life and in the history of the world when it seems that God is not present, or that he is silent...we wonder what is going on in the world; does God care? Who is running this world, where is God - The world has gone mad!!... Do you ever feel this way? It's Beyonce's world and were just living in it - You hear the philosophies and lifestyle of the richest most powerful and influential people in the world - and you think - this is absolute insanity!! The world is ruled by those swimming in self indulgence, decadence and debauchery and were just a bunch of pawns, were just the little helpless people....my life, good or bad, righteous or unrighteous, just or unjust - is just a drop in the bucket - what can I do, and what difference does it make anyway? - And the resounding answer seems to be - nothing. Sounds a little like Ecclesiastes doesn't it?
3. If this isn't bad enough - Then you look at the church and you see equal amounts of insanity. Past generations of the church were more faithful than we are - the church in our generation is grossly compromised - we are a lot like Esther living in Exile - never knowing Temple worship, Torah teaching, kosher keeping - the distinct lifestyle and witness of the people of God— We are living in a post Christian age and WE have lost our roots - a sense of our christian heritage and identity as the distinct people of God.
 1. *“Christians in general consume as much mass media and are addicted to pornography, as likely to divorce, as consumeristic, and as obsessed with social media as the rest of the culture.” - Mike Cosper, Faith Among the Faithless*
 2. We look more like the world than the faithful remnant. More like Esther than Daniel. But maybe there is a way forward - Just like Esther who started off so very much like the culture she lived in (Even hiding/denying her identity), but found her way back to an identity among the people of God and ended

up being a deliverer for them - Maybe her story can show us a way forward...

1. *“Esther’s great moment is marked not by a show of force but by vulnerability. The climax of her story comes when, after, weakening her body for three days and nights of fasting, she walks the path that could most likely end in her death, in hopes of saving God’s people. Esther’s story reveals a way forward in a culture where people of faith find themselves at the margins of society. She neither clutches for power nor seeks self protection. Instead, she faces reality, embraces weakness and finds faith, hope, and help from a world unseen. Her story is also an invitation to those whose faith, convictions, and morality are less than they wish they were.” - Mike Cospers, Faith Among the Faithless*

6. **Back to the question** - What do you do when bafoon’s rule the world and make ridiculous decrees; what do you do when the world has gone mad?? We Remember 2 Things: The Sovereignty and Providence of God and the End of the Story

1. The Scripture says, **“The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.” - Proverbs 21:1**

2. Everything going on in this story is being set up for God to rescue and redeem his people...

3. Here is the good news - God is at work - even though at this moment you cannot see it! God is always present, and NEVER absent, even when his presence isn’t obvious. Even in the midst of faithlessness God is Faithful. Though we don’t deserve it and our conscience may deny it - He is faithful. So when we see things arise that might threaten the Church or the work of God, when enemies seek to overtake and snuff out the gospel whether in the 3rd world or right here in our own State - although it seems God is absent and the crazies have taken over the asylum - God is ultimately in control..Remember God is Sovereign and at work behind the scenes..

4. Know and remember this - The story isn’t over - we’re just in the middle of it and we cannot see what God is doing and we cast our judgments like it’s the final act - but we know the end of The Story - not just Esther but the story of the world - We know of God’s great victory at the cross over the powers and rulers that rule this present age -

1. Paul writing to the Church in Ephesus - an insanely licentious and evil city - with very powerful people and influencers and a spiritual darkness and power as well. He says, **"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."** - Ephesians 1:15-23
2. In this passage here Paul reminds us that our God is a God that brings light out of the blackest darkness - that God turned the greatest defeat the world has ever seen into the greatest victory. He took the shamed and crucified Messiah and set him on the throne of the universe!
3. Remember Peter's words on the day of Pentecost? **"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it"** - Acts 2:22-24
4. Even when all the greatest powers of the world, the greatest political power, the greatest religious power, the devil and the demonic realm aligned to destroy Messiah and snuff out the redemptive work of God (And even Jesus Messiah himself

cried out on the cross - My God, My God why have you forsaken me) - three days later Jesus rose, triumphant over the grave... Peter is showing us something we overlook or forget - it wasn't in spite of all of this that God did his work but through all of it that he accomplished his will!

1. *“What looks like (and indeed was) the defeat of goodness by evil is also, and more certainly, the defeat of evil by goodness. Overcome there, he was himself overcoming. Crushed by the ruthless power of Rome, he was himself crushing the serpent’s head. The victim was the victor, and the cross is still the throne from which he rules the world.” - Stott*

5. Church never forget - We know the end of the Story. God will set all things right, he will judge all evil and sin, all exploiters and tyrants, all oppressors and dehumanizers.. We know the promise - that he will make all things new (Revelation 21:5)

6. Know that God, YHWH, is at work behind the scenes...Even though you can't see it - he hasn't forgotten his people - he will be faithful till the end. Even though we don't know what is happening or what is coming next, God knows what's coming and he is going to preserve his people through it all. And on top of that who's to say if God might not turn the tide for our generation, pouring out his spirit - so that many would find their way into the kingdom of God! I pray it would be so..

4. **Closing** - Maybe you've given up trying.. maybe you've lost all hope - maybe you feel like you don't belong in this church - with these “good and faithful” people - join the club - the good news is this - when you've given up, lost hope and don't feel like you belong or that you are powerless to change yourself, your circumstance to change the world - you are in the perfect place to receive grace, forgiveness and help from the Sovereign Lord who made heaven and earth - to watch him do something amazing - turning the tides, to see God's power and presence in the rolling of the dice - So in light of that - Let's pray a prayer of surrender, and repentance together

1. **Prayer** - Lord today we want to surrender - not to anyone or anything but you - not to culture, to to our own self, not to anyone but you - we want to release control so that we can begin to get into what you are doing in the world, where you are moving and working - give us the eyes of faith to see your hand, your will at work in even the most darkest of times - we know the God who is Light. And we

pray that your light would shine brightly through us in these dark days - In Jesus name we pray, Amen.