

A Drink With the Antichrist

Job 1:6-12; Esther 3

So the book of Esther is a sort of literary roller coaster, high hopes followed by dashed expectations, followed by surprise happy endings followed by complicated twists and turns where the good guy looks more like a villain than a hero, and everything you thought you'd gained looks to be worse than lost. I've already asserted to you that, in this book, Xerxes the Persian was cast as the Savior, the Bridegroom, the forerunner of Christ whose arranged marriage with a noblewoman failed.

So what does Xerxes do? He lives out, 500 years before the fact, a number of the wedding feast parables of Jesus where the chosen guests turn their nose up at the Father and the Bridegroom and so the Master sends servants out onto the highways and byways, looking for someone, anyone who will honor the King and love and trust the Bridegroom. And who shows up for Xerxes' wedding, who arrives in the harem of the Persian emperor but a Jewish orphan girl, Hadassah, who came from nowhere and who had nothing, but her foster father, Mordecai, was a true friend of the Bridegroom, loyal to the king and he had raised Hadassah to possess the sort of humility and sincerity that fortified her to sit next to the Persian king without losing her character and bearing.

Because we've already said that the palace in Susa was a dark and snaky place, where no one was entirely safe and no one could be entirely trusted. So Hadassah became Esther, her Persian name, a name which said nothing about her faith or her ancestry. Mordecai had solemnly warned his foster daughter to tell no one that she was an Israelite, to say nothing about the covenant and faith and values that Mordecai and Esther shared together and sought to preserve in their own hearts and minds over and against the treachery and duplicity that defined life in the Persian palace.

And so far, for a number of years, Esther and Mordecai had done very, very well, managing to love and honor the king without ensnaring themselves in the twists and tangles that are always there when one gets close to the exercise of power. It was a good five year run for them that finally came to an end with the story we read in our Scripture Lesson this morning. Our passage opens with a new administration taking power in the Persian palace. Now we need to remember that in those days, the common people had no say in who governed them, it was the king who did the electing.

And Xerxes choose as his new prime minister a man named Haman, who was wealthy and clever and descended from the royal line of one of Persia's constituent peoples, the Amalekites. And the problem was that the Amalekites had been the bitter, blood enemies of God's people from the moment Moses had led Israel out of Egypt a thousand years before Haman and Mordecai came face to face in Xerxes' courtyard. Moses and Joshua, Saul and Samuel and David all had to go

to war to defend God's people against the wanton violence of the Amalekites down through the centuries.

And Moses himself had prophesied in Deuteronomy 25 that one day God would use someone from among his people to bring justice on the Amalekites and, as it turned out, this was the day a thousand years later and Mordecai, together with Esther and Xerxes, was the someone. The struggle began when Mordecai, who was by nature quiet and discreet and humble, would not bow at the sight of an Amalekite striding through the Persian courtyard, acting like there was no God and like the words of Moses counted for nothing at all. So after years of ducking and dodging and hoping to fly below the radar, Mordecai had finally run into a conviction that he couldn't make go away.

So he wouldn't bow. And people noticed! It was a gesture that the courtiers in the Persian palace immediately exploited to begin building a case to eliminate Mordecai from the stature he enjoyed as a proven Friend of the Bridegroom, a loyal servant of the king. So they interrogated Mordecai for the reasons he wouldn't bow to Xerxes' new right hand man, and then the other courtiers immediately handed their findings over to Haman, who immediately recognized that, as a Jew, Mordecai would never bow to an Amalekite trying to dominate the Persian palace. And the result was that all Mordecai's clever plans, all his careful warnings to Esther fell into a shambles and Mordecai was exposed as a Jew in a place where no Jew belonged in Persia.

That Haman the Amalekite turned out to be a relentless and bloodthirsty enemy of God's people shouldn't surprise anyone. The Old Testament treats us to story after story of Amalekite outrages in the centuries between Moses and Mordecai. Haman was descended from people who went for the throat and showed no mercy and expected none in return. So the moment Mordecai refused to bow in the Persian courtyard, he had to know that he was taking his life into his hands. For Mordecai, it was a breathtaking act involving some combination of faith and folly.

But what was a shocking and heartrending disappointment in this story was the behavior of Xerxes, the man Esther had loved as a Bridegroom and counted on as a Savior. But here was Xerxes the Persian king, so enraptured by his new best friend that he allowed himself to be talked into staging a holocaust against the Jews, a constituent people in his empire. By any biblical standard, Xerxes was evil to even entertain the idea and then stupid to hand his signet ring to a man like Haman, so that the king lost control over whatever stunt Haman hoped to pull in the king's name.

That someone like Xerxes, who later in the book will act like a Savior and look like Christ, that Xerxes would get involved with a creep like Haman needs to be understood in two ways. First, humanly speaking, we need to remember that the men who act as forerunners for Christ in the Old Testament are not Christ. Certain aspects of their lives and circumstances and characters foreshadow Christ, but even so the men themselves, Samson and David and Solomon are fallen and sinful and they all get involved in thoughts and attitudes and behaviors that are anything but Christ-like.

In other words, they are very, deeply imperfect in the ways they foreshadow Christ. However Christ-like Xerxes will appear later in the book, we need to remember that, humanly speaking, he is an ancient pagan oriental despot, born and raised in a world where troublesome ethnic groups were routinely exterminated because no one back then valued human life and dignity the way we do today after twenty centuries of worldwide gospel influence. And, even with all that gospel under our belts, we can be tempted to think that certain people are less than human even today.

But the second way Xerxes behavior needs to be understood is both more profound and relevant even than the first. That Xerxes the Sovereign appears to be in cahoots with a bloodthirsty monster raises an issue that believers have wrestled with ever since we were expelled from the Garden and began to experience the consequences of the Fall. And the issue runs something like this. The Bible teaches that God is absolutely sovereign and absolutely good. James' letter to the early Christians teaches us that God is untouched by evil and that "*...he himself tempts no one.*"

God is always and only ever good and yet he is sovereign over a realm where evil exists, which at times makes him look bad. It says in Proverbs 16:4, "*The LORD has made everything for his own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil.*" Which means that if you see him at the wrong moment, if you happen to catch him raising the glass with Haman, it could look like the Sovereign is in cahoots with the evil that takes place in his realm. And that will become one of the two questions around which the rest of the Book of Esther will revolve.

The first question is: "Is Xerxes really good? Will Xerxes really save us if we continue to love and trust him?" And the second question is: "Does Esther really love and trust the Bridegroom? Will Esther continue to believe in the king through circumstances where the bridegroom doesn't look good or wise or trustworthy?" And the reason it's critical that we both ask and answer the questions raised in the book of Esther is that ultimately the book of Esther is about you and me and the lives we live in fallen world today. Because in this book Xerxes stands in for Christ, who has sworn to love and care for and stick with us "*to the end of the age*", Jesus said. But Jesus also promised that in the process of loving and trusting him through the Last Days, there would be a cross for us to carry, that we could be beaten and imprisoned and impoverished and betrayed even though all the while we love and trust him. Jesus promised us both!

The point being that in this book Esther stands in for us and life will present us with dilemmas like what Esther faces in this book before we're done. God will seem invisible and far away. Things will happen to make us wonder whether the Bridegroom is good or strong or wise enough to see us through. After the Easter holiday, we'll see Mordecai in something like despair, we'll see Esther waver and hesitate before approaching the Bridegroom for help, not quite sure that this stranger she's been watching was the Xerxes she loved and trusted and married years before. She won't know whether Xerxes will help her or kill her and so she'll be afraid to reach out and hope for mercy.

And the reason we're offered this story is that it pictures all the stages, paints out all the shades and colors we'll have to live through to stay faithful to the Bridegroom we loved and trusted when we gave our lives to Christ whenever and however we did that. Which was always a source of contention for me and my mom. Because for me, I became a Christian when I asked Christ into my heart at the counter of an ice cream shop when I was 16 years old and tired of living like a fool and having my heart whipsawed in the bargain. So I gave my life to Christ then and there.

"No you didn't!" my mother would tell me, "I held you in my arms and you were baptized and from that moment on you belonged to Christ whether you knew it or not!" Truth be told, my first memory of belonging to Christ was in our living room when I was 3 or 4 and my Uncle Francis took my brother and me into his arms and prayed for us with my father and mother both looking on. Francis was on his way to becoming a Catholic priest and he wore a long black cassock that day that had more buttons down the front than I had ever seen on a single garment.

I sometimes think the buttons made as much of an impression as the prayer. It was the last time I saw him, because some years later he drowned in a stupid, pointless boating accident just months before he would have been ordained. I've told you about it many times through the years because it was the event that defined my childhood. The grief was too much for my family to bear. Francis was the apple of my father's eye, his bright, dreamy little brother who was the pride and joy of his whole Irish family. And the unspoken question that echoed through my childhood was, "Where was Christ? How did the Savior lose track of the one person whose prayers carried the whole family?"

And we never did get an answer. The grief was too strong and the math was too hard. Our Call to Worship from the book of Job is far more ancient than Esther. Many scholars think that the book of Job predates the writings of Moses, but it is remarkable how similar God's interview with Satan is to what transpires between Xerxes and Haman in the Persian palace a thousand years after Moses. It looks for all the world like God is having a drink with a creep. And Job will have hell to pay.

Except that Job doesn't land in hell. Somehow in a book whose poetry swirls all over the landscape, Job is able to bear the unbearable without ever learning the math that landed him in the world of hurt he had to endure. God appears at the end of the book and says to Job something like, "I am God and you are not, so you'll have to trust me anyway." God starts the book bargaining with a creep and ends the book proving that he is good whether we understand his math or not.

Which makes me think that my mother was right when she said that belonging to Christ isn't so much a matter of saying a tidy prayer at the end of a tract as it is loving and trusting a Bridegroom and a Savior whose actions we can't always explain and whose math is often entirely beyond us.

God is good, absolutely untouched by evil, and he is sovereign over a realm where evil exists and has an inexplicable purpose. I can't explain except to say that the answer to it all is to trust him to be good and reach for him whatever shadows and tears and tragedy we have to work through to get near him. Because he does love us, and he is sovereign, even when the twists and turns and math of our circumstances may be entirely beyond us.