

Binding, Loosing, and Eternity

Matthew 16:15-19; Ephesians 2:19-22; Esther 9:20-10:3

Our passage this morning resumes the story of Esther on the day after what was a sort of Judgment Day in the Persian Empire some 500 years before Christ. It turns out that the Old Testament describes a number of events that serve as terrible dress rehearsals for Judgment Day, descriptions so blood soaked and terrifying that modern Christians have largely stopped reading and discussing them in Church, I think, because we consider passages like these as bad public relations for our Savior.

We want to describe Jesus to the people around us in terms that they can readily accept as noble and good and, in this day and age, the terrifying and relentless Judge of the Old Testament doesn't seem to fit the bill. But in the Book of Esther, Xerxes, the Bridegroom who loved his Bride and her people with a zeal that led him, in the language of the book, to "*destroy...kill and annihilate*" anyone who would raise a hand against them, Xerxes, actually does serve as a forerunner for Jesus, who appears in the gospels as a humble servant, a gentle, forgiving King and Bridegroom.

But Jesus also appears in his own teaching and in the visions of Revelation as that Judge from whom sinners will flee in vain on the day of his return. So just as his grace is all-encompassing to those who find and know and love him, so the judgment of Jesus will relentlessly run down and condemn those who imagined that the King could be treated lightly and safely ignored. To get to today's passage, I've skipped a paragraph from Esther that largely amounts to a casualty count.

We saw last week that 800 people perished in capital precinct of Susa on the two days that Xerxes authorized God's people to strike against out those had plotted a holocaust against the Jews. Had I read on, you would have learned that across the Persian Empire that day some 75,000 people met the same fate. They were complicit in Haman's scheme to exterminate God's people and they found no mercy, no hiding place beyond the reach of God's people and Xerxes, the king who became their savior in that day and age. So we have here another in that series of Old Testament events that were meant to warn us that there is a terrible judgment waiting for those who have no use for God's amazing grace, the Flood, Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah, Pharaoh and Egypt, Jericho.

And one of the clues that this is what the Book of Esther was meant to teach is a turn of phrase that we read twice last week, that God's people, in the course of attacking their enemies, "*laid no hands on any plunder*". The norm in the ancient world was that, if you defeated an enemy, you were entitled to anything they had. But in special cases, where God wanted his people to understand that they were acting on his behalf, to execute his justice, the Israelites were not

allowed to take a thing that had belonged to their enemies. The plunder was holy. It belonged to God.

You remember Jericho where God's people began to execute a judgment against Canaan that had been declared thousands of years earlier in Genesis by God through the prophet Noah. So God said to his people through the prophet Joshua, in so many words, "Don't even think of acting like this is your victory. Don't you dare imagine that any of this plunder is yours." The battle of Jericho was fought by God and won by God to establish the principle that people who shake their fist at God will eventually answer to his justice. So likewise, here in the book of Esther, God had announced a judgment against the Amalekites through the prophet Moses a thousand years before Haman the Amalekite dared to shake his fist against God and his people.

So God's people in Persia didn't touch what belonged to their enemies as a way of saying, "This is no human blood feud. We are not fighting today for any sort of vengeance or profit." This is the judgment of God against people who have wantonly and hatefully shaken their fists at him and raised their hand against his people. And the lesson to be learned from the whole story is that there is no such thing as a Savior who is not also a Judge. To save people from sins, to forgive people for sins means nothing unless sin is taken seriously and understood to be both evil and lethal. So that lesson having been taught and learned in Esther, we now turn to the happier topic Esther teaches this week which involves the nature and structure of salvation.

The headline for this morning's passage from Esther could have simply read "Good Guys Win!" Not only was Haman's holocaust averted but the intervention of Zerxes on Israel's behalf so totally turned the tables that anyone who threw in with Haman and the Amalekites was run down and put to death by God's people and the Persian authorities. I've known modern readers to shudder at the paragraph that I decided not to read to you last week. But we shudder at such terrible justice because you and I have never been targeted for such a holocaust. We don't imagine that anyone would hold such hatred against us as to want to see us utterly destroyed and we are wrong.

Jesus in the tenth chapter of John's gospel goes on at some length about how anyone who finds and wants and loves and knows him becomes a member of his flock, a sheep in his pasture. But the path we take in following him is anything but a harmless environment. There are false shepherds who would steal us and use us for their own purposes, mostly our cash. There are "*hirelings*" who would lead us out into the open and then abandon us at the first sign of danger.

Jesus called himself "*the Good Shepherd*" but he would have to earn that title, he said, by laying down his life for his sheep. He talks about wolves out on the landscape, aiming to divide and scatter and devour the flock and hired hands who flee from the conflict and avoid the responsibility of the task. The point being that no one lives for Christ, we don't build his kingdom in a no risk, no cost environment. Jesus warned us as his flock that "*The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy, but I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.*"

The whole drama of Esther the Bride and Xerxes the Bridegroom and Haman the Devil and Mordecai the groom's friend and bride's guardian was given to lay out for us in physical, tangible terms the desperate struggle that we will find ourselves in if we ever take Jesus as our Savior and King and his kingdom as the cause around which we base our lives. Occasionally in the Christian centuries, there have literally been Haman's on the landscape, we have literally been rounded up and slated for death. A few years ago, we hosted a pastor from Kenya at the manse, who a year or so later was shot dead by Muslim terrorists as he rode a bus in territory they claimed as their own.

But more often the assault against us is spiritual, forces and circumstances let loose in our lives that tempt us to be disloyal to Christ and gospel and church. Ideologies and habits and patterns of life that would tempt us to ignore what God says is right and true and important and necessary. Evil is quite willing to be like Stalin and Hitler and Haman, dramatic and violent and terrifying. But more often evil is content to be subtle, to play to complacency, to hint that marriage isn't really important or necessary, that worship and study and prayer and fellowship are discretionary.

In my experience, Church is most often the target of the demonic whispers. "They don't really love you there. You can't really trust them there. What goes on there isn't really genuine, not very interesting, doesn't relate to my own experience." All of the above can seem to be true at times, but it's never essentially true. The Church, this church, is the Bride of Jesus, there is no other Bride. There is no way to follow Christ without being loyal to the ministries of a local congregation. The leaders God calls to serve in this place and that, this congregation and that, are like Mordecai, the guardians of the Bride, whatever sins and flaws they may be working out along with the rest of us.

"Good Guys Win!" was the headline Esther and Mordecai published the day after Judgment Day in Xerxes' realm. They wrote a letter to God's people throughout Persia, "*obliging them*" our passage tells us "*to keep*" the days that had "*turned...from sorrow into gladness, from mourning to holiday...days of feasting and gladness...sending food...and gifts to the poor.*" It is almost an oxymoron to modern ears, an obligatory celebration. Who celebrates when someone says you have to? The correct answer throughout human history has been God's people. We celebrate the seven day creation with weekly worship, we celebrate the Passover, now the Lord's Supper, the Resurrection, our salvation from the judgment for sins all because God told us to.

So the Book of Esther is not just a dress rehearsal for Judgment Day. The whole story, the love between Xerxes the Bridegroom and Esther the Bride, the devotion of Mordecai the Guardian to the Bride and then in turn the Friend the Bridegroom, the faithfulness of the Savior King to God's people in their moment of need all speaks to the love and faithfulness and salvation Jesus would offer to us his people if we would only devote our lives to him and trust and obey

him in the kingdom he's called us to build. It's a far cry from the casual, clubhouse loyalty that we are so often tempted to settle for.

Think for a moment about how formal and binding was the language Esther and Mordecai used with God's people. Their message to God's people was a gospel to be sure. Our passage tells us that Mordecai wrote to God's people *"in words of peace and truth."* But this gospel is formal, written. The verbs to "write" or "record" appear in this passage seven times in fifteen verses, the verb to "obligate" four times, always following what was written

The point being that the remembrance and celebration and joy that grace ought to invoke in us is anything but automatic. What comes naturally to us fending for ourselves, drifting center stage in our own thoughts and feelings, listening to the demonic whispers by through which our enemy wants to steal our souls. The truth is that grace gains traction in our souls and begins to lift our hearts only after we obey the command to celebrate grace, when God tells us, weekly, where God tells us, in church with all God's people.

I chuckled at the end of the passage. Xerxes levied a tax which the text treats as a glorious thing. I think because where there's a tax, there's a kingdom. And where there's a kingdom, there's safety and rhyme and reason and salvation. Mordecai himself is celebrated as being second in the kingdom after Xerxes, because a human leader who will stand for God's people, lay down his life for the sheep, is something to have. The point being that the kingdom Jesus called us to serve is not make believe. It involves real cash, real sacrifice, flesh and blood men and women whose names and virtues and flaws you know, real people to love and forgive and persevere with.