

Crow For Breakfast, Toast for Lunch

Job 5:8-19; Esther 6:4-7:6

It's no accident that this morning's passage from Esther's story opens at sunrise. Because, for the whole book this far, Esther the Persian queen and Mordecai, her childhood guardian, have been operating in a sort of moral, spiritual twilight. They are Israelites, God's people, refugees from the Babylonian Exile. So Esther has grown up and Mordecai has grown old in a place called Susa, the Persian capital, where the shadows were so thick and the intrigue so complex that Mordecai worked in the palace and Esther actually married the king without either saying out loud in open court that they were both Jews.

And they have both, I think, paid a heavy price for the silence they maintained among their peers about the beliefs and convictions and history that had made them the people they were in that time and place; Esther, whose humility and respect and kindness had won over the heart of Persia's lonely king and Mordecai, whose loyalty and faithfulness had saved Xerxes' life even though the Persian emperor seemed scarcely aware that Mordecai even existed.

So now after years of being secretive about who they were and what they believed, Mordecai and then Esther had finally been backed into a corner where respect and discretion, bowing and scraping were no longer enough. The rise of Haman the Amalekite, Persia's new prime minister, had provoked Mordecai into publically objecting to the king's choice of a man who was an avowed enemy of Israel and Israel's God. And when Haman lashed back at Mordecai by manipulating a scheduled holocaust against the Jews for the end of that year, Esther found herself in the position of having to unlawfully approach the king, a Bridegroom with whom she was scarcely on speaking terms.

And last week we saw that it was a crisis they weathered, first with Mordecai continuing to express his grief and outrage in public. And then the queen, after some amount of hesitation and soul searching, decided to put her life on the line by approaching the king unbidden. But their ace in the hole, their secret weapon in this desperate struggle was to gather every believing soul in the city for a three day session of fasting and prayer to a God who couldn't be seen or heard or felt, a God who doesn't even get mentioned out loud in all the ten chapters of this book.

And so last week we saw the desperate queen take up the struggle inside the palace that her guardian had been waging outside in the city square. And, as is often the case when faithful people are in over their heads, her efforts looked like a failure. In her first stab at trying to say something to avert the holocaust Haman had stirred against her people, Esther couldn't even

choke out over lunch what it was she needed the king to do. She might have gone home that day imagining herself a failure.

But in fact, we learned last week that some combination of Esther's obvious distress and three days of prayer from God's people stirred a storm in the king's heart that wouldn't allow him to sleep that night. And we saw that, like Jesus up all night choosing apostles for his kingdom in the gospels, like Jesus, Xerxes wasn't going to rest till he got it right. And we saw how, almost miraculously, the king's thoughts centered on, Mordecai, the long forgotten Friend of the Bridegroom, who early on had the king's back, and now the king decided he was going to back Mordecai in return.

So our passage opens this morning with Haman striding into the royal court imagining that today was going to be like yesterday, Haman on top of the world, the queen so awestruck by the new prime minister that she doesn't even know how to speak to her husband over lunch! And today Haman is going to reach for one more trophy, Mordecai the Jew, hanging lifeless from a 75 foot pole that's been set up in Haman's front yard overnight. Haman thinks this is going to be his day and what he's about to learn is that he's a dead man walking. He doesn't even say a word about hanging Mordecai before the king announces that he has plans of his own.

"What should I do for a man I really want to honor?" , the king asked his early bird prime minister. Haman, who still thinks he's living in yesterday, imagines that he's the man the king want to exalt. So he imagines a ceremony with Haman center stage, wearing the king's clothes, riding the king's horse, led through the city square so that everyone can bow and scrape and then rise and cheer for the king's new champion. For Haman, the whole conversation is like a talking dream until the king tells him to gather all that stuff and put on the ceremony for Mordecai, the man Haman was hoping to hang that day.

It was an unmistakable message for all the courtiers in the Persian court who had plotted with Haman to see Mordecai done away with, unmistakable again for the marketeers who had seen Mordecai in the city square only days before, dressed in sackcloth, weeping and shouting his outrage at the palace gate. So what the Persians saw that morning was a political, spiritual tsunami which left them all blinking their eyes, shaking their heads and wondering what was next.

Which is exactly what Haman took to studying as soon as he had left Mordecai to be congratulated at the palace gate. And Haman rushed home weeping tears of his own with his elaborate scarf pulled down over his head to hide the distress and shame that overwhelmed him. And once more again, Haman assembled his partisans, trying to get a handle on what had happened and what could be done about it. Their stark assessment was that it was hopeless. *"If*

Mordecai is from the Jewish race...” they began. The centerpiece of his whole administration was to make the Jews the scapegoat for all Persia’s problems and exterminate them.

But if the king suddenly loved Mordecai and Israel, there was no way Haman could reverse field and pretend he loved the people he was already committed to slaughter. More to the point, I think, Haman’s advisors saw something supernatural working against them from the far side of that spiritual veil that pagans and Jews alike believed in and feared. You’ll remember that, months ago, we read that Haman and his partisans had tossed dice to plan the timing and execution of the holocaust they had in mind. What you may not realize is that dice in the ancient world were seen as a way of receiving messages from the far side of the veil where the gods and spirits lived.

Even Israel’s priests under Moses were equipped with dice to toss in case Israel’s leaders needed a quick and simple message from the Almighty. But the point here is that Haman’s party was sensing, not only a change in the political tide, but that the dice and the spirits and perhaps especially Israel’s God had been working against them all along. After all, the Amalekites had almost a thousand years experience with how badly things could turn if you ever got on the wrong side of Israel’s God. Moses, Joshua, Saul and David had all broken Amalekite armies trying to do by force what Haman was trying to manipulate in the Persian court.

And, as if to punctuate their dread, that moment a party of palace eunuch’s began to pound on Haman’s doors, sent by the king to make sure that his prime minister was prompt to honor the queen at her second luncheon. And my guess is that Haman spent most of the meal wondering if he was the guest of honor or the main course. And he soon found out that Esther was not the tongue tied, awestruck non-entity she had appeared to be the day before.

At their first luncheon the day before, Esther hadn’t known what to do or say to convince the king that his hand-picked prime minister was a devil. Esther knew her bridegroom loved her, but she wasn’t sure the king would stand by her, if Xerxes knew she was a Jew, that strange race of people who worshiped a desert God and practiced a spirituality that seemed so foreign and unreasonable to the pagans from the east. Sure, all the believers had prayed and fasted that Xerxes would come around, but how could Esther know the king was receiving signals.

But the second day’s sunrise had ushered in a whole new set of circumstances. The king had decreed at sunrise that morning that this day would be a holiday to Mordecai, his one outspoken Jewish advisor. So Esther went into her second banquet with Xerxes and Haman knowing that she stood on solid ground, knowing that the king would back a Jew if he was convinced that Jew was faithful and loyal to his throne. So when Xerxes finally insisted that the queen let him know

what was going on, Esther was finally free to be herself, and to say that Haman was her “*enemy*”, the “*foe*” of all that was right and true and good.

The point being that it is quite possible for us to be faithful and loyal to God and still be subject to circumstances that undermine our confidence in where we stand with him. After all, until the sun rises on our passage this morning, it was Haman who was riding a bandwagon, Haman who was coming up a winner every time the dice were thrown. And we need to take to heart the notion that, more often than not, God allows the good guys to look and feel like losers precisely so we don’t become so full of ourselves that we lose contact with what is right and true and good.

Think of all the Bible stories where loyal, faithful people are driven to their knees by desperate circumstances entirely beyond their ability to solve, so that in their weakness God can sort things out in a way that leave God center stage, and us thankful and grateful and humble.

Abraham and Sarah, unable to have children till they lost all hope, and then Isaac came. Jacob, the fugitive, always manipulating for a better hand, but he doesn’t become Israel, he doesn’t lay hold of God until he returns home and throws himself on the mercy of the brother he had cheated.

Think of Joseph, Jacob’s golden boy, Israel’s favorite son, a slave in prison in Egypt, betrayed by the brothers he had dreamt would love and honor him. Think of Jesus in the garden, begging his Father for an easier way, and in the end, trusting his Father that the cross would work and rising on the third day, Sunday at sunrise, to be given the name above every other name, to which every knee shall bow.

Paul was the apostle that never saw Jesus in the flesh, and for that reason people doubted him his entire ministry. But God gave Paul visions, incredible visions he tells us in 2nd Corinthians. But with the visions came a thorn in the flesh, I think, some physical handicap. “Why?” Paul asked Jesus. Jesus answered, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*”

Think of the congregation here at First Church as we round the corner toward our glorious 200th Anniversary, and everything is breaking, the highway sign, the organ, the sanctuary furnace, the front steps. We could begin to wonder if, after 200 years, God were getting tired of us, until we remember that this is how God refines, this is how God perfects. the people he loves the best. Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Paul, I don’t have time to list them all, up to and including Jesus.

We know God really loves us when he sorts our circumstances so that they drive us to our knees where real goodness and beauty and healing and wholeness can be found. But all too often our knees are the last place we want to go. Prayer and fasting is the last thing we want to do. We think we should confront trouble by being big and strong and tough and smart. We think it’s all about grabbing the levers and doing something. When, in fact, we are at our best when it all

gets beyond us and we finally give up all the hoopla and busyness and learn to pray and worship and hear God's word together every seven days as he has always commanded us to do.