

Lights Out

Psalms 44:4-18; Esther 4:1-11

So the Book of Esther started the way most fairy tales end. Xerxes, the unloved bridegroom, a king who reigned for years beside an empty throne, who sat through a world of banquets with an empty seat beside him, Xerxes finally finds Esther, who is devout, beautiful inside and out, whose years of hard training as the orphan, Hadassah, had softened her heart to be grateful for and respectful of the grace the king could give her. And Mordecai, Esther's guardian during the years she was just Hadassah, had that special joy of watching his child find a place of honor in life. After all, who would have imagined that a Jewish orphan could wind up a Persian queen?

But there's a reason that fairy tales end at moments like this. Because in real life, in a fallen world, fairy tales just about always evolve into something else. So the real Xerxes we know from global class in high school had already brutally conquered and then violently been run out of Greece, years before he ever met Esther. The point being that Persia was a big, wild, violent, treacherous empire where a man like Xerxes could ill afford to be anything but a moving target, shifting and dodging to stay one step ahead of his fast talking, fast moving princes and nobles, most of them looking for a moment of weakness to take down Xerxes and to claim the empire as their own.

Xerxes' moment of weakness apparently came some five years into his marriage with Esther. The queen and her guardian Mordecai had evidently lay low during those years, secretly practicing and sharing their faith with their servants in a palace where any noticeable qualities would expose you as a target. But now Xerxes, in his hunger for a strong man to organize his affairs and watch his back, had settled on an Amalekite, a sworn enemy of God, to be his new prime minister. Haman, a ruthless, wealthy wheeler dealer had risen to the top of the heap in Xerxes' palace.

And for some reason Haman's rise provoked Mordecai to abandon the humility and discretion that had marked his career for years as a mid-level palace bureaucrat in Xerxes' service. We read a month ago that Mordecai refused to bow to an Amalekite prime minister, and that, pressed for a reason, Mordecai had done what he forbade Esther to ever do, he spoke in open court about his faith and his ancestry. Why? My guess is that he thought, "What the heck? I've bowed to a parade of clowns for years and years. And Haman is the worst ever! What can they do to me? The worst they can do is kill me and...I'm old. Hadassah is safe. Time for me to stand up for what I am."

But Mordecai, the wily old palace bureaucrat miscalculated. Because he had no idea of the level of evil he was dealing with in Haman. A thousand years before Haman, the Amalekites stalked Israel all forty years in the wilderness, picking off stragglers, stealing their things, their animals, even their children and then killing the witnesses so that no one would know who they were or follow them. So Haman has a hunger for vengeance that won't be satisfied with the execution of a single old man.

As soon as Haman learns that Mordecai is descended from Israel, he decides that here is the chance to run the table in a thousand year blood feud that had forced Moses, Joshua, Saul and David all into desperate combat with Haman's Amalekite ancestors. So, Haman, the Amalekite wheeler dealer charms and cons and bribes Xerxes the Persian into giving him a blank check to mobilize Persian provincial forces to execute a holocaust against the Jews at the end of the calendar year just started.

So... Mordecai's act of conscience has provoked a sort of evil against God's people that no one could have predicted when the old man decided not to bow to the new prime minister. And Mordecai's response to the holocaust Haman declared was nothing short of absolute despair. He tore and shed his palace uniform for the sackcloth and ashes people wore to funerals and he took to the city square in front of the palace where he wept and wailed for his own people, knowing in his heart that he was the cause of all their trouble, that if he had just kept his mouth shut one more time, if he had just swallowed one more outrage against conscience, the Jews would not have been declared enemies of the Persian state.

So this discreet, proper man made himself a wailing, weeping spectacle within sight and sound of the palace gate. Which sent the maids and eunuchs who served the queen scurrying back into the harem to inform their mistress that something unspeakable had happened to Mordecai, her guardian. This behavior was so out of character for Mordecai that Esther must have feared for his sanity. She sent her servants out to the city square with a palace uniform to clothe Mordecai and get him safely within the walls before the whole city knew of his troubles. But Mordecai was inconsolable and uncooperative, would not resume discretion as a way of life.

So Esther sends out the best she has, Hathach, her chief advisor, to find what has sent her dear old guardian over the edge and into disgrace. And Hathach doesn't fail her. Mordecai trusted him with the whole sad story and now it was Esther's turn to despair. Because her fairy tale marriage to the emperor had turned out to be something far less than she imagined. And Mordecai had charged her with begging the King Xerxes to intervene against his chosen prime minister on behalf of the Jews.

But in fact, Esther's relationship with her Bridegroom didn't show much promise that is affection and respect for her would tolerate her barging into his private throne room and holding forth about imperial policy in front of his advisors over and against Haman, the king's most trusted advisor and friend. The fact is that, five years in, Xerxes and Esther didn't seem all that close. Esther had not spoken to Xerxes in private for more than a month.

And no one visited a Persian emperor uninvited. The level of treachery was such that his guards had orders to kill any unscheduled person who entered the inner court unless the king himself indicated otherwise. So Mordecai was begging little Hadassah to take her life in her hands and throw herself on the mercy of a Bridegroom who was looking more and more like an unsympathetic stranger as time went on. So our passage leaves us with Mordecai in public disgrace and despair and Esther not quite believing that Xerxes, her bridegroom, still loved her and respected her enough that she could dare to trust him.

Because, again, the question underlying this whole story will be, "What has happened to Xerxes that he would allow such a crisis to take place in his kingdom where he reigned?" And it is relevant to you and me because we live in a universe where the Son of God is king and we believe a gospel in which God is good and yet under God's reign evil is allowed a degree of latitude and power that everyone of us will struggle to accept sooner or later.

When we read last month about Xerxes and Haman treating with each other, and Haman obtaining a degree of authority that could only lead to trouble, we remembered the Book of Job, where God and Satan treated with other, and Satan obtained permission from God to try Job to the very limits of his faith. None of us wants to imagine God engaging with evil to that extent, allowing for heartbreak and tragedy in the life of a person God says he respects and loves. But it happens.

And I told you about a pointless, stupid tragedy that God allowed in my family and my guess is that most of you could remember events in your families equally tragic and inexplicable. And I think the point of our passage today is that when things like this happen and the lights go out in our own hearts, it is not sin for us to throw aside the tidiness and discretion that usually we want to govern us and to go ahead and grieve and cry out to God against events and injustices that only look like evil. And it's not sin for us to look at our Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus, and to ask if he really cares in the face of events and heartbreaks that break the bounds of rhyme and reason.

God understands the grief that grows from being small and finite and overwhelmed and he understands the anguish we feel when we think that some tragedy or absurdity was caused or helped along by some misstep of ours, he understands. God understands that, when the lights go

out in our hearts, it is tempting for us to wonder if he really loves us, if it's really safe to approach him with events and thoughts and feelings that all but overwhelm us.

And the message we're meant to learn from the Book of Esther is that even when God is hard to understand and seems far away, even when the lights are out and God can't be felt or seen or, as in the book of Esther, not even mentioned, he continues to love us and to understand us. He can be sought and trusted even in the sort of darkness that overwhelms the tidy religion we want to practice and renders it incoherent. He is still there, he still loves us, and we should try to trust him even when we can't understand.