

Prayers, Courage, Anticlimax

Romans 8:18-26; Esther 4:9-5:8

Last week in the Book of Esther, we found Esther, the queen of Persia, and her guardian and mentor, Mordecai, each of them on the horns of a personal dilemma. Mordecai was in the city square of Susa, dressed in sackcloth and covered with ashes, devastated, because he had precipitated a confrontation with Persia's new prime minister, Haman.

And the result of the conflict is that Haman had used the king's signet ring to seal a proclamation authorizing a holocaust against the Jews later in the year. So Mordecai was distraught and inconsolable, first, feeling the horror anyone would feel about a holocaust against one's own race and, second, being overwhelmed by remorse that he was the man who had provoked the horror. "Oh my God!" he had to think, "What have I brought on my people?"

And Esther, when she learned of Mordecai's humiliation and upset, experienced a dilemma of her own. In the Persian palace, only Mordecai knew that Queen Esther was a Jew, and, five years in, her fairy tale marriage to Xerxes the Emperor was something less than a fairy tale. Enough distance had grown between the king and queen so that Xerxes and Esther had not spoken for a month, and under Persian law, no one was allowed into the king's inner court unless he or she was formally summoned by the king. So Mordecai's plan that Esther should save the day by appealing to her husband the king was complicated to say the least.

So messages flew back and forth between the city square and the queen's apartment with Mordecai finally telling Esther that he didn't care how dangerous it was to approach the king and come clean about her ancestry. She alone among all the Jews in Persia was in a position to save her people from Haman and she had to try whatever the risk. It is interesting that Mordecai's desperation was interwoven with a measure of faith. He said to Esther, "*...relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place...[but] if you keep silent, you and your father's house will be destroyed.*"

When Esther got this last severe missive from Mordecai she appears to have gulped twice and made a hard decision. She sent to Mordecai as follows, "*Go, gather all the Jews that can be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day, and I and my young women shall fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.*" So these two believers, Esther and Mordecai, lead all the other believers in the Persian capital in a three day fast, as an appeal to the God who strangely isn't even mentioned in this book.

My own guess as to why they fast to a God they won't mention was to highlight the gospel fact that it is worthwhile to appeal to God even in circumstances where God seems so far away that he doesn't even warrant mention. Mordecai and the Jews of the city, Esther and the maids and servants she had evangelized in the palace are fasting in the dark, praying in circumstances where God is unseen, unheard, unfelt and cannot be spoken of safely in a palace where a stray word in the wrong ear can mean the end of you.

Three days of silence and privation in the presence of God, and the queen lay aside what she wore to pray and dressed in the regalia that would help her fit in the king's inner court. And then she just took her life in her hands and hoped against hope that her Bridegroom would recognize and love her despite the distance that had grown between them. Her appearance in the doorway had to have drawn a breath from anyone who saw her there. The guards were likely already drawing their swords when the king offered the scepter and treated her like nothing had changed since she saw him last.

To think that your life was over, and to have the scepter of mercy extended to you, to think that you were no longer loved, and to hear the Bridegroom say your name in the same warm tone, look at you with softness in his eyes, it's hard to measure the roller-coaster ride Esther took in that moment. *"What is it, Queen Esther?"* the king exclaimed. In other words, what desperate need propelled you to take this mad chance and storm the inner chamber? And the king is not rebuking her! To the contrary, Xerxes says to her, *"What is your request? It will be given to you up to half my kingdom?"*

In the ancient world, this was a king's way of saying to a subject, "I absolutely trust you." You don't offer half your kingdom to someone you don't trust! The passage says that Esther *"found grace in [Xerxes'] sight"*, which was a turn of phrase we had not heard since Esther's wedding night. But Esther's response to all this warmth and generosity is curiously under-whelming. After being promised half the kingdom, all Esther can manage is a request for a lunch date. Three days of fasting, the whole Jewish nation at stake and the best Esther can manage is, *"Let's do lunch!"*

But we need to remember that Esther is operating in a twilight environment here. There's no prophetic word from God about how she should act. She doesn't understand what hold Haman has on Xerxes which led to this mad holocaust proclamation. How did the king's signet ring seal something so mad and evil? Esther has no idea! And the spiritual principle I think that's being taught here is that prayer is incremental. Paul wrote in our Call to Worship this morning. *"...we don't know how to pray as we ought..."*. So it follows that sometimes the best we can do is to get ourselves close to the Bridegroom, Jesus in our case, and to try to learn what we're supposed to ask.

So our passage culminates with Esther and Xerxes and Haman having lunch. Which defies modern expectations about how prayer is supposed to work. We want magic! We want the whole tangle sorted out in a single interview. But boys and girls I have to tell you that this is not how God usually acts. Usually, we have to pray our way through twilight, not knowing the why's and wherefore's and direction of our circumstances. Usually, we have to wait for it, and the solution God provides is not so simple as Esther striding into the throne room, telling the king to fire his prime minister, telling the court that the plans they've made are all trash and from now on they're all going to listen to Esther.

That's just not how God does things. Because if we always got the instant sort out, we would be insufferable. We wouldn't learn any of the traits that Jesus taught would fit us for heaven. We wouldn't see ourselves as little children in God's care. We wouldn't respect and defer to and be willing to serve others. We wouldn't take to heart that God is big and we are small, we wouldn't understand that God makes the rules and we obey them.

So Esther finds herself hosting a banquet with the Bridegroom and the Anti-christ both at the same table. Didn't David sing about that in the 23rd Psalm, "*You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies...*" and in the awkward twilight of her first glimpse at the evil threatening her and everyone she loves, Esther doesn't know what to ask for.

But she knows the Bridegroom she gave her life to, in her case Xerxes, she knows her Savior still loves her even though his seal seems to be on something sinister. So she deals for another chance to confront evil with the Bridegroom at her side. She prays to fight another day. And sometimes that's the best we can do. And it teaches us the lesson that if we keep the Bridegroom, in our case Christ, in our minds and hearts, then we can face all sorts of twilight circumstances even if we don't have all the answers.

So this is a passage where all the players God put on stage perform their roles according to gospel script. Mordecai stands in as the Friend of the Bridegroom. Mordecai is to Xerxes what John the Baptist was to Christ. Do you remember how tough the Baptist was on God's people when Christ was on the way and they had choices to make? So Mordecai was tough on Esther, "Stop thinking only of yourself and get yourself in to the Bridegroom whatever it costs you."

Esther was the Bride, she was to Xerxes what you and I are to Jesus. Doubting, and afraid, not sure the Bridegroom will love us or save us if we put our lives in his hands, Esther absolutely depended on Xerxes to help her and save her. And so can we with Christ.

And finally Xerxes in this book stands in for Christ. Did you catch the tenderness with which he treated her when he saw her trembling in the doorway she was forbidden to pass? The scepter went out to her before there was any chance of her being taken down. He addressed her by her royal title in case anyone was confused about where she stood with him. And his heart was open to whatever she needed from the moment he laid eyes in her.

The point being that our Bridegroom, Jesus, can be expected to show the same warmth and mercy when we approach him in our own twilight circumstances. He may seem far away, he may have allowed some terrible trial onto our path, but he loves us and we need to trust him to have our wellbeing at heart whenever twilight sets in.