

The Bride And The Friend Of The Bridegroom

John 3:22-31; Esther 2:15-23

This is one of a number of passages in the book of Esther that we're going to have to begin by reminding ourselves that the circumstances we're reading about will sound bizarre to people like us who've been influenced by 20 centuries of Judeo-Christian civilization as a way to view life and events and people. Because this passage opens in Persia, some five centuries before Christ, with a young woman, Hadassah, a Jewish orphan, who's been brought up by her much older cousin, Mordecai, and now she's been swept without her consent into the harem of the Persian emperor for a full year and we join her on the night that she will be brought into the king essentially to audition to be his wife and queen. It is a set of circumstances utterly foreign to modern sensibilities.

And the way to start to understand this story, the way to open our minds and hearts to what God was up to in the lives of people there and then, is to observe that, when God intervenes in human history to help and to save and to move his redemptive plan forward, he typically works with the people and the circumstances he finds at hand. Which means that God allows for all sorts of things in redemptive history that he doesn't actually approve, for instance, oriental despots who fill their palaces with innumerable wives and concubines, and who enslave all kinds of people, just because they can.

Which tends to frustrate us because we want a God who works by fiat, we want a God who fixes everything and makes life absolutely the way it should be in the moment he finds us. Of course, we don't think much about what a violent, disorienting experience it would be if God just imposed absolute holiness and justice on us in that single moment we wish he would fix everything. It's all too easy for us to forget that we are part of the problem we keep wishing God would fix. So his suddenly fixing everything and us along with it might actually hurt!

So what God has always done with people like you and me who sin and lose our way is to meet us where we are and then to gently, gradually bring us in the direction he knows we need to go. Which means that God typically works, back then in Esther and in the gospels and here and now today, God works with people whose circumstances and lives and characters are far from ideal. In Esther, this is made evident by the names our main characters have to answer to in this story.

The name, Mordecai, means "Devoted to Marduk", who was a wild, old Babylonian idol, and Hadassah's Persian name, Esther, likely means "Devoted to Ishtar" who in Near Eastern mythology was the girlfriend of Baal, the idol whose worship had driven Israel into exile in the first place. The point being that, even though they were both Jewish and both devout, both Esther and Mordecai had to take these strange names because they were entirely at the mercy of the foreigners who both named them and ruled their destinies. But we've already said that Esther is a book where no one and nothing is what it seems to be.

So it follows that Esther is no victim. To the contrary, she is exactly where God meant her to be. God placed a Jewish orphan in the imperial harem precisely because Esther possessed exactly those qualities her Bridegroom would need beside him to become the savior God called Xerxes to be. Because I think the Book of Esther offers us Xerxes as a forerunner for Christ and Esther, his bride, as a forerunner for us, the church Christ came to love and save and invite to a wedding banquet.

So this overnight audition Esther has to endure is far from the travesty that our modern sensibilities want to make it. To the contrary, Xerxes the Persian will become Esther's savior as the story unfolds and Esther will become that bride whose loyalty and respect will so capture the heart of the Bridegroom that he will save all God's people in answer to the prayers Esther will bring into his throne room. So far from being tawdry and exploitative and wrong, Esther's night with the king becomes the occasion where she finds the love and grace and favor that would empower her to become light and salt there and then. Esther becomes the person there and then through which all God's people would be saved. Which is exactly what God intends for you and I to become, here and now as the Church, as we learn to trust and act on the love and grace and favor that Christ bestows on us when we give our lives to him and become, all of us together, his Bride, wending our way through twists and turns and shadows to the wedding supper Christ has promised us in heaven.

So there and then on Esther's wedding night and here and now when you and I give our lives to Christ, our relationship with the Bridegroom begins as a kind of happy ending. There and then, Xerxes was no longer alone on his throne, unloved and unwanted by a queen who didn't believe in him. There and then, Esther was no longer a woman without a family or a home to call her own. As Xerxes' bride, Esther lived in a palace with a Bridegroom who loved her and a royal office that was hers because she was his.

And so it follows for us, here and now, that once we believe in Christ, we together begin to become someone different and better than what we used to be. We're loved, Paul taught us, even though we're far from ideal. Paul wrote: "*But God shows his own love for us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*" And like Esther, we also come to hold royal office. We are, Peter wrote, "*a royal priesthood, a holy nation*". In other words, all the honors, all the affection Xerxes showered on Esther that night, all those things are but a pale foreshadow of what becomes ours once we learn to trust and follow Christ. But we shouldn't presume that one happy ending early on makes for a whole life story.

Because Esther's story there and then didn't stop with a happy ending in the early chapters. To the contrary, our passage continues with the ominous note that Esther's cousin and guardian, Mordecai, had warned her that it was not safe to reveal "*her kindred or her people*" to anyone in the Persian court. She might be queen, she might be loved and honored by her Bridegroom, but she was far from safe.

It appears that all along Mordecai had served as a sort of midlevel bureaucrat in the Persian palace, and very soon after Esther was made queen, Mordecai became aware that a pair of commanders in the king's bodyguard had hatched a plot to "*lay hands on King Xerxes*". The point being that nothing good ever happened to an ancient king once the palace guard had put him under arrest.

So Mordecai risked blowing Esther's cover as a Jewish orphan in order to alert King Xerxes to the danger he was in. The point being that Mordecai's loyalty to Esther's bridegroom outweighed the danger he and Esther incurred by revealing that they were connected to each other in that dark and snaky palace.

So their cover was blown! And what this story establishes about Mordecai is that, once the daughter in his care had married a Bridegroom, his primary loyalty went to the Bridegroom. Note how carefully our passage establishes the respect and affection that existed between Mordecai and Esther. Even after she had become queen, our passage tells us, "*...Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.*" The point being that in a very real way, all her life, Esther had belonged to Mordecai.

But now that God had sent Esther a Bridegroom, it was Mordecai's job to let her go and to teach her to love and trust the Bridegroom first. Which is a pattern we almost always see whenever anyone is lifted up to foreshadow Christ in the Old Testament. It was Moses in the wilderness who taught and prepared Israel to love and trust Joshua to lead and save them, once it was time to enter the Promised Land. You do know that Joshua and Jesus share the same first name, that Jesus is the Greek for Joshua. So Moses prepared Israel to love and trust a savior and bridegroom, Joshua and Moses actually gave Israel away to the Bridegroom at the end of his life.

Likewise, it was Samuel who taught Israel to love and trust David when it was time for Israel to untangle from her sins under the Judges and to spread her wings over the whole Promised Land from northwest Iraq all the way to northeast Egypt. So Samuel ruled Israel, brought up Israel for a time and then gave her away to David, who was Israel's Bridegroom there and then.

In the same way, a generation later, it was Nathan the Prophet in 1st Kings who taught Israel to love and trust Solomon, over and against a false suitor. So Solomon became that Bridegroom in the Song of Solomon who would foreshadow Christ as the Prince of Peace, who would build a sanctuary and lead Israel through an era of prosperity and blessing that both echoed the Garden of Eden and looked forward to heaven and the New Jerusalem that Christ is building there right now for his bride, the Church.

Which leads us to the Book of Esther where it was Mordecai who brought up Esther and taught her the humility and faithfulness and courage she would need be the bride and to trust her bridegroom through the twists and turns and shadows it would take for Xerxes to save God's people there and then in Persia. So that pattern is that. when God sends his people a savior, a bridegroom, he typically sends a best man in advance, a Friend of the Bridegroom to teach the

bride what she'll need to know to love and trust the Bridegroom when the time comes and the bridegroom arrives.

Which leads us to our Call to Worship where John the Baptist calls himself "*the Friend of the Bridegroom*" when his disciples warn him that Jesus was stealing his thunder with God's people. Because in the years before Jesus left the carpenter's shop, John the Baptist had taken Israel into his care and prepared her for the day when the Bridegroom would arrive on the banks of the Jordan and the Holy Spirit would descend on Christ, marking Jesus as that one true Bridegroom toward whom all the others had pointed, Joshua, David, Solomon and strangest of all, Xerxes the Persian.

So our Call to Worship is about what happened after John had lost the crowds, given the Bride away so to speak and we find John, like Mordecai, sort of lingering around the king's gate, so to speak, observing the progress of Bride and Bridegroom together. It was a tough thing for John's disciples to watch. Because their guy had been center stage in Israel, the last prophet of the Old Testament era and now suddenly John was eclipsed by a man from Nazareth who hadn't endured all the rigors of wandering the wilderness preaching a tough repentance and handling the persecution that always comes when you have to set God's people straight with the truth.

But like Moses and Samuel and Nathan and Mordecai before him, John knew that real prophecy, real ministry was always about preparing God's people, preparing the bride to love Someone else, getting the bride ready for the day she wouldn't need him anymore. Which only brought John joy because John considered himself a friend of the bridegroom. Which means that John himself had longed for the day when Christ would appear and the bride, God's people, would be safe in his care and beyond the reach dangers that only a Savior could prevent from leading God's people astray.

And the thing to learn from Mordecai and all the rest is that the Bridegroom, the Savior, is in a different category from those ordinary mortals who have to teach God's people the truths they'll need to know to love and trust and follow the Bridegroom when he appears. In the Exodus, Moses was the prophet, teacher and shepherd. But only Joshua would possess the power necessary to be the savior. Samuel and Nathan likewise would preach and teach and lead only until the day God raised up David and Solomon to be bridegrooms and saviors. Then it was time to give the Bride away and let the Savior enjoy the love and trust and obedience that belongs to the Bridegroom alone.

It's an important lesson to take to heart because we live in an era when the power and prominence of media tempt us to grant mere mortals the sort of power and influence in our minds and hearts that rightfully belongs to the Bridegroom alone. We would do well to remember that the highest office a mere mortal can hold in God's kingdom is Friend of the Bridegroom, which entails not gathering evermore power and prominence and influence for ourselves.

But rather preparing God's people for that moment when it will fall to us to give the Bride away and to watch her love and trust the Bridegroom through the twists and turns and shadows that life will send her way. It was as he watched the backs of his disciples heading away for Jesus that John the Baptist took to heart the central principle of all sacred leadership, "*He must increase, but I must decrease.*" Hard for Moses to watch someone else lead God's people into the Promised Land. Hard for Samuel to lead Israel faithfully for decades only to be asked to step aside to make room for a king. Hard for Mordecai to watch his little Hadassah be swept away to become Queen Esther, the bride of the only man God gave power in Persia to save his people. To give the bride away, we need to learn to love and trust the Bridegroom ourselves.