

The Dice, the Signet Ring and the Powers of Heaven

Matthew 24:29-39; Esther 7:2-8:2

It sort of fits that on this Communion Sunday the word of God in Esther meets us at a dinner table. We worship at table once a month because, in the ancient world, people's status and relationships and ultimately their sense of self and identity were determined by where and who they were with at dinner time.

Adam and Eve lost their place in the royal garden because they got caught eating the wrong meal in the wrong company for the wrong reasons. The first Israelite Judgment Day took place while God's people shared the Passover meal, called Passover because the blood that crisscrossed their doorways protected them from the angel God sent to judge those who wouldn't appear at banquet with his people. In the 23rd Psalm, David sang in bewilderment that God had "*...prepared a table for me in the presence of my enemies.*"

Jesus, a thousand years later, would express the same bewilderment to his disciples at Passover, at their Last Supper, when he said, "*Behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me at table.*" And right between David and Jesus, some 500 years after David's psalm and 500 years before Jesus' Last Supper, we find Esther confronted with an enemy at table, having to trust her Bridegroom and Savior, Xerxes, to come to her aid against the same sort of hateful enemy that David and Jesus both had to face in their turn.

The betraying hand at Esther's table belonged to a man named Haman, an Amalekite Judas, who had wormed his way to Xerxes' table, and who was poised to use the power he found there to strike at everyone and everything Esther held dear, beginning with her childhood guardian, Mordecai. And we saw last week that, after struggling through a world of despair and confusion, Esther finally was sure enough of her place in Xerxes' heart and her place at Xerxes' table to become who she was and to give voice to her conviction that her husband's new prime minister was a devil.

So like Passover before her, and the Last Supper after her, Esther's luncheon became a place of sifting where those who belonged to God would find grace and acceptance and help and deliverance. But the enemy at table who hated God and wished ill toward his people would hang that day, no mercy to be found on Esther's couch, no chance to find acquittal at the end of Xerxes' golden scepter.

Three men hang in all of Scripture that I know of, the first was Ahithophel who betrayed David and then hung himself, next comes Haman who hated and hunted God's people in the days of

Esther and who was hung by Xerxes, the Savior king, and then finally there was Judas who betrayed Jesus and also hung himself. When I was a young man, shortly before I found Christ, one of my favorite songs was “Behind Blue Eyes” by the Who. Do you remember the words?
*“No one knows what it’s like to be the bad man, to be the sad man, behind blue eyes.
No one knows what it’s like to be hated, to be fated to telling only lies.
But my dreams, they aren’t as empty as my conscience seems to be,
I spend hours, only lonely. My love is vengeance and it’s never free.”*

There was enough wrong inside me back then that Peter Townsend’s words spoke to those dark feelings that eventually drove me to return to my childhood faith and look for Christ. But those same dark feelings, that same hunger for vengeance drove Haman to play the dice. Remember we said last week that, in the ancient world, rolling the dice was anything but playing at random.

Because the ancients saw time and chance and swirl and coincidence as the playthings of those gods and spirits who lived on the far side of a veil that was invisible to the eyes of flesh and blood people like you and me. So when Haman rolled the dice on his plan to exterminate God’s people, he was consulting the gods, seeking guidance and power from those same occultic forces who had always taught his Amalekite ancestors to disrespect Israel’s God and hate Israel’s people. Haman wanted vengeance, he wanted mastery and he believed it was there to be found beyond that veil where Israel’s God has always forbidden his people to look.

So I think that we are supposed to see between the lines in the book of Esther that this very human struggle between Amalek and Israel, two nations whose outlooks and feelings and ethics were at odds, was actually a struggle between the invisible spirits that moved unseen in their hearts and minds. And the key to how the struggle unfolds in this story lies, humanly speaking, in the heart and mind and decisions of King Xerxes, the one human figure who owns a signet ring, in other words, he was invested by God with the sovereign power to determine how the story will end.

Now I’ve already made the case that, in this story, Xerxes stands in as a forerunner for Christ, that Bridegroom God empowered to save his Bride and all that is dear to her, which raises an uncomfortable question. If Haman drew power and gained direction by rolling the dice to consult occultic spirits, why would Xerxes, a human king ordained by God, ever give his signet ring and all the power it symbolized to someone so evil. And the answer is that it had happened before. After all, who was the original human king ordained by God to guard and save his people?

It was Adam. And what did Adam do with the power and authority God invested in him? Adam turned around and surrendered it all to a devil, the Serpent who slandered God and convinced the first human king to enlist in a cause that contradicted everything God had told Adam to do or be. So Adam handed the Serpent the signet ring so to speak. And ever since people have been rolling the dice, hoping to gain from the Serpent power and guidance to grab the mastery and exact the vengeance they need to keep themselves big and powerful and center stage in life.

And it would be an understatement to say that, in the process, Adam made the Serpent immensely powerful. In describing the struggle that Christians like you and I must make in the last days against demonic influences, Paul calls Satan and I quote, “...*the prince of the power of the air*...”. Do you remember that some time ago, when we first saw Xerxes give his signet ring to his demonic prime minister, the Call to Worship that day was from the Book of Job? And our worship leader remarked at how odd it was that the Book of Job begins with story about Satan visiting God in heaven, after the devil had been, and I quote, “...*walking to and fro on the earth*...”.

It’s odd because devout people wouldn’t imagine that Satan would be welcome in heaven, and to tell the truth, many of us resent the fact that Satan has liberty to walk “*to and fro*” wreaking heartbreak and tragedy here on earth where we live. But the Serpent attained some small standing in heaven and walking rights here on earth because the first man God gave a signet ring, Adam, handed over a degree of spiritual authority and walking rights on the planet when he trusted and followed the gospel of the Serpent rather than the gospel of the God who made and empowered him.

But that was the regime Adam set in motion when he betrayed his Creator to trust and follow a snake, and in the book of Esther, Xerxes briefly behaves like humanity’s original bridegroom when he gives his signet ring to a man who stood against everything God ever ordained human rulers to be. And Xerxes’ failure set God’s people within his realm into a state of outrage and confusion and despair.

So Esther and Mordecai rally God’s people to three days (Did you hear me?) of fasting and prayer. And, at dawn on the third day, the king who had looked like Adam all of a sudden began to look like Christ. He extends mercy and grace to the bride when she comes crashing into his inner court.

And then, like Christ, he stays up all night, rearranging his government so that Mordecai, the faithful friend of the Bridegroom, attains a place of honor. And then Xerxes attends to the desperate prayer of his bride and decisively judges the Judas at his table, the snake in his garden in precisely the way Adam ultimately failed to do. So early on, Xerxes looked to be Adam, but

ultimately, after a dark and scary three days, he turns out to be something more like the risen Christ.

And in the process the "*powers of heaven*" were "*shaken*", just as Jesus noted they will be when he returns to do on a larger stage what Xerxes did in Persia when confronted by the plan Haman had concocted at the behest of the spirits he had rolled the dice to consult. The roll of the dice which had brought Haman such wealth and power and mastery was immediately and totally reversed the moment Esther trusted her Beloved to take her side in the struggle. The point being that you've come to the right table this morning. You've offered your lives to the right king.

Some adversity is still to be expected before all is right and well in the realm, but the powers of heaven will ultimately bow to the will of the Bridegroom who loves us no matter what the roll of the dice says now.