

The Signet Ring, the Keys, and the Kingdom

Matthew 16:13-19; Esther 8:1-9

There's a verse in the tenth chapter of Luke's gospel where Jesus' disciples return to him overjoyed that God had given them power to free the people in their care from demonic influences. *"Even the demons are subject to us in your name!"*, they said to Jesus. And Jesus answered them, *"I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven!"* In other words, with the coming of Christ there has been a change in the economy in that invisible realm beyond the veil where the angels and demons interact with the Almighty. Precisely what's happened there and what it means that Satan had fallen from heaven to earth is more than I can unpack this morning.

Except to say that something very similar has happened in the Book of Esther in our Scripture Lesson today. Haman, the Amalekite Judas at Xerxes' table, the antichrist in that day and age, has been hung. Xerxes, the Savior king, has judged evil in his realm much as Jesus would judge evil five hundred years later when he suffered and died and rose from the dead. What did Jesus say to his disciples near the end of John's gospel? He said that in their ministries the Holy Spirit would, and I quote, *"convict the world concerning judgment because the ruler of this world has been judged."*

The point being that with the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, Satan has been undone by Jesus much in the same way that Haman was undone by Xerxes. So in our Scripture Lesson this morning we are treated to an elaborate ceremony were Esther, Xerxes' bride, receives everything, all the riches, that used to belong to Haman. And Mordecai, the Friend of the Bridegroom and the Guardian of the Bride receives the all-empowering signet ring that only days before had belonged to Haman, that devil in the Persian scheme of things who had rolled the dice and set his heart to destroying God's people and upending everything that was right and good in Xerxes' realm.

To which my reaction was, "Again? You're giving the ring away again? Because this didn't work out so well the last time you gave away your signet ring!" It is a puzzle that I would like to begin to work on with you this morning. Because I've asserted from the get-go that Xerxes the Persian is one of a number of forerunners that appear in the Old Testament for Jesus the Christ. But if that is so, why would Xerxes give his signet ring to a devil like Haman in the first place.

And I think the answer to the riddle is that, to serve as a forerunner of Christ in the Old Testament, a man must also be an echo of Adam. So mortal men like David and Solomon clearly do foreshadow Jesus in the way they lead and serve God's people in their day. David, the giant killer, who finally saved God's people from pagan oppression and expanded the boundaries of

the Promised Land so that Israel in David's day roughly matched the boundaries of the original Eden, so that the Promised Land was as big and wide as what God had promised Abraham way back in Genesis.

Or Solomon, the temple builder, who raised a sanctuary whose features also matched the original Eden, golden walls on which was carved a garden motif, brilliant candelabra, and movable carts carved in the shapes of animals, priests dressed like kings with all sorts of jewelry and precious metals embroidered in their hats and in their vests. Read Genesis 2 and you'll find all those elements in the ministry of Adam, God's original priest and king in the original garden.

And all these elements are there in the book of Esther's description of Xerxes' palace and garden and coronation as well. But the other feature that David and Solomon and Xerxes all share is that, like Adam, they all fell. David in his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder and deceit that followed. Solomon, who married pagan princesses from all the nations around him and followed them into idolatry, and Xerxes, who like Adam, was given a beautiful bride and then failed to protect her when a Serpent wound its way into the Garden. Instead, we're treated to the spectacle of Xerxes handing his signet ring to Haman, the sworn enemy of God and Israel and then we read of Esther's Bridegroom and Savior sitting and toasting a holocaust with an antichrist.

And all this, of course, is an echo of Adam's failure in the Garden. What did Adam do with the power and authority God invested in him as humanity's original priest and king? He turned around and surrendered it all to a devil, the Serpent, who, in Genesis 3, 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 like Haman 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 Ephesians 2, Paul describes the struggle that Christians like you and I must make in the last days against demonic influences, and 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 a 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 walking rights here on earth, that he walks "to and fro" wrecking heartbreak and tragedy here, where we live. But the Serpent attained some limited standing in heaven and walking rights here on earth because the first man God gave a signet ring, Adam, handed over to Satan a degree of spiritual authority and walking rights here on earth when Adam trusted and followed the gospel of the Serpent over and against the commands of God.

So Adam established Satan as the prince of the power of the air when he betrayed his Creator to trust and follow a snake. And in the book of Esther, Xerxes briefly behaves like Adam, 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. And it's in that dark moment when gospel power begins to find traction in Esther's story. Mordecai, the Friend of the Bridegroom, the guardian of the bride, stirs Esther out of her despair and paralysis and exhorts her to approach her Bridegroom and Savior.

And together Esther and Mordecai gather all God's people to pray and fast for three days and three nights. How long? For three days and three nights, God's people sat before him in grief and desperation, not knowing how God would deliver them from the apparent tragedy and injustice that had befallen them. Does this sound familiar to anyone? And at dawn on the third day, a woman storms the entrance of that inner court, the place where the Bride thought she had lost her Bridegroom, only to find that the King she had trusted and loved was alive again, his real self, not some tarnished echo of Adam, but a living, breathing Savior who still loved her and who promised to use his sovereign power to save her whatever it cost him.

And, for some weeks now, we've watched it all unfold, as Xerxes sorted out the dangers that so distressed his Bride. Xerxes, like Jesus, up all night sorting out how his kingdom could be governed so that his beloved would be saved. Xerxes, like Jesus, judging and conquering evil, exposing the Judas in his court and exalting and appointing Mordecai as his true apostle and giving Mordecai the signet ring, which in fifth century BC Persia passed for the "the keys to the kingdom".

So we see here in Persia, five centuries before Christ, a situation something like what transpired between Jesus and the women he loved at the cross and at the tomb, between Jesus and the apostles in whom he invested binding and loosing power to organize his kingdom to face the dangers that would continue to exist even though Satan and evil and death had been essentially conquered and dealt with. I think that's what our Scripture Lesson is about today.

Haman is hanged and dead and gone. All the authority and wealth the devil had enjoyed before the third day dawned has now been transferred to the Bride and her people. The essential danger that threatened God's people has now been judged and done away with. The signet ring, the keys to the kingdom are now in the hands of Mordecai, someone who loves the King and will care for the Bride. So all is well. Except that, on the very next day, Esther has to storm the inner court again, has to make her way past the menacing guards again and reach for the scepter that speaks of the King's grace again. Why?

Because, like the women at the tomb and the apostles Jesus appointed to care for them, the essential victory Christ won for us over sin and death and evil is only the beginning of the struggle. The fact that "*the ruler of this world has been judged*", that Haman is dead and gone, the fact that Xerxes has emerged from his inner court the Bridegroom and Savior all God's people hoped he would be has put us in a place where we can deal with sin and death and evil only as we continue to love and trust and seek the Bridegroom, only to the extent we use the authority the King gave us to build the kingdom he has entrusted to our care. Did you notice that Xerxes didn't do anything himself to address the second barrage of concerns Esther brings before his throne?

It's not necessary, the King says to his Bride. You already have the power to deal with the problems that distress you. You have the signet ring, you have Mordecai the apostle, and he has authority to bind and loose in a way that will sort out what's left of Haman's fading legacy. It's a rich paragraph filled with principles that entirely escape most modern Christians. Namely that under the authority of the apostles, according to the binding and loosing principles they left for us, the kingdom is ours to govern, the struggle against evil is ours to sort out, as God's own Spirit teaches us God's own gospel.

So this is not a matter of you and I, him and her, individually approaching God in séance fashion and being led in some course of action that doesn't require relationship and procedures, obligations and policies. To the contrary, Jesus, at the Last Supper, on the very same night he spoke to his disciples about they're being his friends, he said this in Luke's gospel, he said, "*You are the ones who have stood by me in all my trials, and I confer upon you, as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*"

What it says to us as modern Christians is that the informality we crave, that the relationship free, obligation free, loyalty free religion we want to practice may not have that much to do with the gospel Jesus actually taught, the kingdom he's actually called us to serve. We are

responsible, all of us together, each of us individually, for how God's kingdom unfold here at Jerusalem Corners.

To be sure, the inner court where the Bridegroom sits, extending a scepter of grace to all us, is open all the time to each of us. We can approach him anytime we need. But should expect that, often as not, what Jesus will do is to send us back to each other, to sort out with other what we must do to conquer what remains of sin and death and evil in our own lives and our common experience. We do it together as part of a common kingdom, or we don't do it at all. And we'll get into the particulars next time.