

Live & Let Live?

Esther 1

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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When I was a kid, our family went camping a lot. As a parent, you know, there's a lot to worry about when you take the next generation into the wilderness. You're walking in the woods, chopping firewood, handling matches and fire – there are all sorts of ways for kids to get into trouble or to get hurt on the campsite. And, to be honest, my mom didn't usually let an opportunity pass to remind me of these occasions for disaster. She was a worrier.

My dad, on the other hand, was a story-teller. So when he wanted me to know the best way to split wood, for instance, he didn't just take an axe and give me the lesson. First, he told me the story of some crazy old character from the Old West – “One-Eyed Bill” or something like that – who had all sorts of talents and skills and so on, but because he didn't know how to split wood properly, he wound up getting eaten by coyotes in the Badlands of South Dakota. It was a pretty good story, especially for an 8 year old. After I had a while to chew on the fate of old One-Eyed Bill, my dad took the axe and showed me the right way, thus ensuring a) that he'd never have to split wood again and b) that I'd never be eaten by roving bands of coyotes. So far as I know, both of those things are true. I've never been threatened by a coyote and my dad has never split another log.

It never once occurred to me to question my dad as to whether One-Eyed Bill was an historical figure. The point of the story that my dad was telling me was true, and I didn't need to see Bill's birth certificate to embrace that truth. In fact, some of the more improbable aspects of Bill's life and times actually made the story more interesting, more memorable, and thereby more “true” in terms of making sure that I arrived at the age of 47 with ten fingers and ten toes.

I bring up One-Eyed Bill this morning, not because I'm sensing that it's time for me to impart that wisdom to you, but because you know what it's like to be told a story that shapes you and gives you truth. Some of these stories are undoubtedly historical facts, like the one about young Abe Lincoln splitting log rails back in Illinois. And some are surely fabrications, such as the ones about Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe. And some, like the one about George Washington and the cherry tree, are probably somewhere in between.

In our worship this Fall, we're going to listen to a story. Some of you know it, most of you don't. It's a little book hidden in the pages of the Old Testament, right before the book of Job, called Esther. And like my dad's description of One-Eyed Bill, the story of Esther is a tale that is designed to shape the life and behavior of those who are privileged to hear it. So let me invite you to turn to Esther 1:1 and listen with me to the beginning of this tale:

*[1] In the days of Ahasu-e'rus, the Ahasu-e'rus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, [2] in those days when King Ahasu-e'rus sat on his royal throne in Susa the capital,*

OK, like a lot of great stories, this is a “once upon a time” story. It takes place in the days of Ahasuerus. There was a fellow by that name who ruled in Persia from 486 – 465 BC (he also went by the Greek name of Xerxes, so some of your Bibles might refer to him by that name). But the story of Esther is not written like a newspaper account – it’s looking back. From what we can tell, this story was probably written a couple of hundred years after the events that it describes. One of the clues for this is the language – I want you to listen for the rich and abundant language that describes this kingdom: a man who reigned from India to Ethiopia! One hundred and twenty-seven provinces! This is a man to be reckoned with! What does he do?

*[3] in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his princes and servants, the army chiefs of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces being before him, [4] while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his majesty for many days, a hundred and eighty days.*

Holy smokes! This guy doesn’t mess around! A drinking bash that lasts for 180 days? Six months of partying, for everyone. Six months designed to celebrate the fact that Ahasuerus is THE MAN – he is rich, powerful, and not to be messed with. Now, if you gave a party for your entire country, what would you do when it was over? Go home? Sleep it off? Get back to work? Not our man Ahasuerus:

*[5] And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the capital, both great and small, a banquet lasting for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.*

He’s not done yet! When the nation-wide bash is finished, he calls all the people of the capital city together for a final week of celebration. Listen for the description of this “after-party”:

*[6] There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings caught up with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. [7] Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. [8] And drinking was according to the law, no one was compelled; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as every man desired.*

You get the picture, right? This is over the top! The King is larger-than-life, a cartoonish figure of power and wealth, playing host to a week-long stag party where every man could do exactly what he wanted to do. Remember what they always say...“What happens in Susa, stays in Susa...”

But what about the women? Where were they? Verse 9:

*[9] Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasu-e'rus.*

They were at their own party, hosted by the queen. Things are really rolling along for Ahasuerus, at least until the crisis breaks out in verse 10:

*[10] On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine [Really? After more than 6 months of partying his heart was "merry?"], he commanded Mehu'man, Biztha, Harbo'na, Bigtha and Abag'tha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served King Ahasu-e'rus as chamberlains, [11] to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to behold.*

Our narrator doesn't make any bones about what's up with Ahasuerus. He wants everyone to see how hot his wife is. She is such a big deal, so gorgeous, that she doesn't have just one attendant – no, he sends seven attendants to fetch her. Again, do you see the layer upon layer of excess? Do you see the lavishness of this story? What's next:

*[12] But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.*

Oooops! This is not good. An entire six months designed to show just how incredibly wealthy and powerful Ahasuerus is, and that's all undone by his wife. The man who wanted everyone to see how great he is is brought down to size by a single woman.

*[13] Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times -- for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, [14] the men next to him being Carshe'na, Shethar, Adma'tha, Tarshish, Meres, Marse'na, and Memu'can, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom -- : [Do you notice the literary parallels here? How many eunuchs did the King need to fetch Vashti to begin with? 7. And here, how many lawyers does he consult about his problem? 7!] [15] "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasu-e'rus conveyed by the eunuchs?"*

Does it seem strange to anyone else that the KING of the country doesn't know the laws of his country? You see, this wouldn't make sense in a history book, but in a story that is designed to teach us something, we're not surprised at all. Ahasuerus appears to be a bit of a buffoon, and this just adds to our sense of him as a clown who can't be taken seriously. Pay attention to what happens next: the lawyer who speaks first could be the Attorney General of the

USA:

*[16] Then Memu'can said in presence of the king and the princes, "Not only to the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also to all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasu-e'rus. [17] For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt upon their husbands, since they will say, 'King Ahasu-e'rus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' [18] This very day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will be telling it to all the king's princes, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty.*

Do you see what Memu'can has done? He's upped the ante in a big way. "Look, King, this isn't just your problem! This is a national crisis. After all, if you can't boss your wife around, then nobody will be able to boss their wives around! Vashti is not guilty merely of disrespecting you – she's guilty of treason! She's undermining the very fabric of our society!" If that's the case, then, we don't need a reconciliation between Vashti and Ahasuerus – we need a legal solution. We've got to make an example out of her and make sure that this doesn't go too far! So Memu'can continues:

*[19] If it please the king, let a royal order go forth from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is to come no more before King Ahasu-e'rus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. [20] So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low." [21] This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memu'can proposed; [22] he sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be lord in his own house and speak according to the language of his people.*

So there you have it – the first chapter of the book of Esther. It's the introduction to our story. But there's something strange, it seems to me, about this chapter that is found on pages 433-434 of the Story of the People of God. What do you notice about the story so far?

Where is Esther? Who is Esther? The book bears her name, after all, and she can't be bothered to show up in chapter 1? And where are the children of Abraham? So far, this is a story about a strange king in a strange land. Isn't the Bible the story of the people of God? And finally, where is God himself? Not a mention in these pages!

Let me promise you, we're going to get to those questions in the days to come. But I don't want to rush ahead. Instead, I want to take a look at what we have read, and make a couple of observations that will help us hear the story in our context.

What do we have so far? We have a story of an Empire that is defined by its wealth and its excess. An Empire that is ruled by a king and a cadre of leaders who are portrayed as being boastful, arrogant, power-hungry, and even cartoonish.

Look at our own situation. I'm not interested in politicizing this at all, because I think naming names or political parties is simply irrelevant to our discussion this morning. Think about the United States of America for the past twenty-five years. Do we know something about "lifestyles of the rich and famous?" About individuals who have more money than brains? About national leaders who are portrayed in the media as bumbling and ineffectual and eager to use the law to serve their own purposes?

I think we do. And hearing a story, from the Bible, about life in that culture then ought to have some connection with our lives. So in this first chapter of Esther, this set-up to the main event, I want us to notice that this occurs in a culture that is not unlike our own.

But that is not even the main similarity I want us to notice this morning. I want to point to two places in chapter 1 that are insightful. Look at verse 8, where it says, "*for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as every man desired*". Now hold that, and skip to verse 22, where we find that Ahasuerus "*sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be lord in his own house*".

Do you see the thread that runs between those two verses? One of the things that was true about the culture of Persia in the time of Ahasuerus is that every person was free to do what they wanted to. Every man was lord of his own house. The self was the highest authority: Want to go to the 6 month drinking binge sponsored by the king? Hey, knock yourself out. Want to beat up on your girlfriend? No big deal. Do what you want. Do what feels good. You're in charge.

The theological term for this outlook is "autonomy". That's an English word that comes from two Greek words: "auto" or "self" and "nomos" or "law". When we say that a person is "autonomous", we say that that person is independent of external controls. You might say, "Well, my son is autonomous now, he's 22 and on his own." And in that case, we can point to some positive aspects of independence and freedom.

But when we speak theologically of autonomy, it's almost always in contrast to understanding your place in community under the Law of God. In that understanding, then, autonomy is sin because it's me saying that I don't need you and I don't need God – I can do whatever I want to do. Live and let live, right?

Again, beloved, can you think of a sin that infects our culture more than

the sin of autonomy? Oh, we want to be the masters of our own destinies! The captains of our own fates! We don't want to be stuck with a bunch of losers; we don't want to be responsible for anyone else! It's just us, right? I'm FREE!

All right, it's past time for me to be finished with this introduction to Esther. Here's what I want you to do: I want you to go home and sometime this week sit down and read Esther. That's right, all 7 ½ pages of it (in my bible, anyway). And I want you to come back here next week ready to ask these questions:

How do God's people behave in a culture that is defined by wealth, excess, and autonomy?

Where does God show up in that same culture?

Think about this, and pray about it, and we will talk more next week. God bless you. Amen.