

Has God Gone AWOL?

Esther 2:1-18

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

September 16, 2007

Pastor Dave Carver

Last week, we began to explore the book of Esther, a curious little story tucked into our Old Testaments between Nehemiah and Job. We looked at chapter 1, which introduced us to the world of King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, the ruler of Persia who is remarkable for his excesses and his appetites. You might remember from last week's reading that the king had a slight domestic complication that resulted in the office of Queen becoming vacant due to a rather unfortunate conflict between Ahasuerus and his Queen, Vashti. The culture of that kingdom, it seems, are marked by extravagance and by autonomy, by which we mean that everyone was more or less free to do whatever they wanted to do. And last week, we ended by asking three questions. Do you remember what they were?

Where is Esther? Where are God's people? And where is God?

This morning, we're going to pick up the story about four years later. After the incident with Vashti, Ahasuerus evidently decided that what he really needed was to get out a bit more, and so he led a military campaign against Greece. This war included the Battle of Thermopylae, which was depicted in the recent film *300*. That war ended disastrously for Ahasuerus, who lost many men and ships in the conflict. When Esther 2 begins, we see the king at loose ends. After all, what's a tyrant to do when he's down in the dumps and lonely? Hey, no problem – his crack squad of advisors has a plan all ready:

[1] After these things, when the anger of King Ahasu-e'rus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. [2] Then the king's servants who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. [3] And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the capital, under custody of Hegai the king's eunuch who is in charge of the women; let their ointments be given them. [4] And let the maiden who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

Our storyteller is setting the stage here, reminding us of the vastness of the kingdom and the power of the king. Why waste time filling out a personality profile on *eharmony.com* when you can simply get all the beautiful young virgins to come to you? Do you see that there is a huge search, a giant bureaucracy established to find a new queen.

[5] Now there was a Jew in Susa the capital whose name was Mor'decai, the son of Ja'ir, son of Shim'e-i, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, [6] who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives

carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away.

Aha! The plot thickens! Finally we have the people of God showing up in the story, represented by Mordecai. And what do we know about these people of God? They are not where they belong! Verse six gives us the root word for “remove” or “carry” – *galah* – four times. God’s people have been taken forcibly from their home in Jerusalem and in Israel and brought to this strange land. Mordecai is the first of God’s people that we meet, but immediately we see another – our heroine!

[7] He had brought up Hadas'sah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother; the maiden was beautiful and lovely, and when her father and her mother died, Mor'decai adopted her as his own daughter.

Esther makes an entrance into the story that bears her name. What do we learn about Esther’s life? Well, we see that it is one of tragedy upon tragedy. As if it’s not bad enough to be one of the captives in a strange land, we find out that Esther is an orphan – her parents have both died. She is really in a bad way.

But there’s something interesting that I want you to note about Esther. She has two names. She has a Hebrew name, Hadassah, and a Persian name: Esther. Why do we need to know this, I wonder. No one else in the book has two names – just Esther. Or Haddassah. Perhaps the narrator is trying to suggest that this is a young woman who has a place in two different worlds – she is a Jew, and she is in Persia. She is in one place, but of another. My sense is that there are people in this room who often feel as though you have several different names and identities. Do you feel as though you are one person at church and another at home? Or maybe people tend to see you one way at work or school and another way around the neighborhood? Is that a good thing? A difficult thing? What do you suppose it means to be people who are in different worlds at the same time? I think that we are there more often than we realize.

Back to the story:

[8] So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many maidens were gathered in Susa the capital in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai who had charge of the women.

Now I want to talk a minute about this process. I think that it’s easy for us to romanticize this and think of Esther as a fairy-tale princess – the commoner who wins the beauty pageant, like, you know, SNOW WHITE. But the truth is this: Esther, along with who knows how many other dozens or hundreds of young women, was caught in a police dragnet and then impounded by the king’s

soldiers – isolated from her people and her family. This was not the “Miss Mesopotamia” pageant, with Esther competing as the lovely Miss Palestine. After all, in a beauty pageant, the contestants enter willingly and hope for college scholarships or lovely consolation prizes. And it’s not “American Idol”, where fortune-hunters try to gain acclaim, notice, fortune, or fame. Esther is taken against her will and held in custody – luxury, but custody. Esther is now a double exile as she is not only removed from Jerusalem but from her own home as well. She is alone. She is not the only Bible hero who finds herself in that situation, though. Listen to the next few verses and think of the stories of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, or Joseph, or Paul & Timothy, for instance:

[9] And the maiden pleased him and won his favor; and he quickly provided her with her ointments and her portion of food, and with seven chosen maids from the king's palace, and advanced her and her maids to the best place in the harem. [10] Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mor'decai had charged her not to make it known. [11] And every day Mor'decai walked in front of the court of the harem, to learn how Esther was and how she fared.

Like some of our other Bible heroes, Esther served well and stood out from the crowd. We have come to expect that from “our team”. Of course she won the favor of the King’s people. She’s Esther, for crying out loud.

But unlike the men that we’ve mentioned, Esther chooses *not* to reveal her identity as a member of God’s people. Why not? Well, we see that her uncle Mordecai had warned her not to, but why would he do that? Are they afraid of what might happen to them? Is there already a hint of anti-Semitism floating around the castle or the harem? Or are Esther and Mordecai being cagey and biding their time? Why not declare her allegiance? We don’t know.

[12] Now when the turn came for each maiden to go in to King Ahasu-e'rus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women --[13] when the maiden went in to the king in this way she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. [14] In the evening she went, and in the morning she came back to the second harem in custody of Sha-ash'gaz the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines; she did not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

So here we get another view inside the “Velvet Prison” of the King’s harem. First, the women spend a full year in the beauty parlor. Maybe this is literally true; maybe this is another example of Ahasuerus’ famous excess. But the process seems to be pretty well cut and dry: A year of preparation, and then one night to sleep with the King. Again, let us not romanticize this. A year of treatment and preparation...why? To meet a lascivious stranger with insatiable

appetites. Each woman is led into the bedroom of the king for a single night. When that night is finished, she is dismissed into a second harem. Do you see what's happening here? These poor girls who have been snatched from their homes are forced into relations with a man they don't know and then banished into another kind of imprisonment. Once in the second harem, they were to remain there for the rest of their lives, unable to go home, unable to go into the King's presence. It is a dungeon. A luxurious dungeon, but a desolate and lonely one nevertheless. I'm sure that the girls hardly knew what to hope for – that the king would remember them and want them again, or that they would be dismissed into oblivion after a single night.

[15] When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Ab'ihail the uncle of Mor'decai, who had adopted her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her. [16] And when Esther was taken to King Ahasu-e'rus into his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, [17] the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. [18] Then the king gave a great banquet to all his princes and servants; it was Esther's banquet. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces, and gave gifts with royal liberality.

So Esther's number is called and in she goes. But here, she once more parts company with the other Bible heroes we've seen. Joseph fought off the wife of Potiphar when she made advances. Daniel proclaimed loudly that he would not worship anyone but the living God. But Esther seems to "cave" a little bit. She does not fight the system, but goes along with it. She keeps her identity a secret and she takes the advice of the inside men. And lo and behold, Haddassah, Esther, the orphan exile, pleases the king. And she becomes Queen. And that, if you ask Vashti, is risky business, no matter what your ancestry is like.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

All right. What are the three questions we came to the scripture with this morning? Where is Esther? Where are the People of God? Where is God?

Hey, two out of three ain't bad, right? I mean, here in Chapter 2 Esther and Jews show up right on time. It's just that...that I can't tell for sure where God is in this story.

Why do you suppose that this story is in the Bible?

Lots of times we like to hold up the people in the Bible as role models or examples for behavior. But is that the case here? I mean, really, do you want

your teenage daughter to read this book and follow in Esther's footsteps? What are the lessons here? Use your body to get ahead...Make your self as beautiful as you can, and God's will be done? No, I'm pretty sure that that's not the point of this story.

Where is God, anyway? Wouldn't it just be easier if he would show up here? What do you do when God is silent?

Last week I asked you all to read the whole book of Esther. If you did, then you know what I'm going to say next. If you didn't, then you can't blame me for spoiling it because I gave you a whole week to read seven pages. The fact is that God never shows up in the book of Esther. Now, the narrator knows where the story is going before he starts to tell it to us. But here, Esther doesn't know what is going to happen next, does she? We see Esther as a woman who is faced with a series of critical decisions that must be made in a confusing time – and God is simply silent. From what we can tell from the reading of scripture, Esther can't find God any more than we can. It's tragic.

You've been there, too, haven't you? What do you do when all of your choices look like bad ones? How do you respond when there is no one leading you?

Did you see *Time Magazine* last month? One cover story was an excerpt from Mother Theresa's private writings – letters and journal entries that reveal the fact that this blessed woman often felt as though God had removed himself from her. She wrote to a friend, "...the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, - listen, and do not hear – the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak..."¹

Wow. Of all the people I expected to have a close relationship with the Lord, Mother Theresa would be one. But even this woman, now being considered for sainthood by our Catholic brothers and sisters, knew the agony of silence.

I find the story of Esther to be an encouraging story for me right now. Because sometimes I feel the silence of God. Do you? Or is it just Pastor Dave and Mother Theresa who seem to have this experience? As Karen Jobes puts it in her commentary on this passage,

...life isn't always that neat and tidy. There comes a day when we find ourselves in a situation where right and wrong are not so clearly defined and every choice we have seems to be a troubling mixture of good and bad. We pray, believing that God indeed will give us wisdom and the strength to do the "right" thing. We search the Bible with open hearts, looking for "God's will" in a situation that perhaps the Bible does not directly address. While we are doing this, the situation

¹ From "Mother Theresa's Crisis of Faith", *Time* 8/23/07

continues to develop and either by deliberate action or by default we have to make decisions, ready or not. And in those times of great struggle, the last thing we want is for others to make simplistic moral judgments about us. Has God failed to provide the guidance and wisdom we need? In life's most difficult and complex situations, it may sometimes feel that way.²

See, we look back at Esther's story and we know the end of it. But right now, only God knows the beginning and the end of your story and my story. We are stuck in the middle of that story right now. Our task as Christians is to do the best we can with the things that we have. When she was an old woman, did Esther look back on this time in her life and say, "Yes, that was the absolute right thing to do?" Or did she regret it? We don't know. I know that I have plenty of experience of both of those moments in my life. Maybe a part of what I can learn from Esther's story today is to do the best with what I can right now, and then move on, and leave the future – and the past – to the Lord of life.

Give God your yesterday. Look for him today. And trust him with your tomorrow. Amen.

² Karen H. Jobes, *The NIV Application Commentary on Esther* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1999) p. 114