

A Tough Day At the Office
Esther 3:7-4:3
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
October 7, 2007
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Well, here we are, back with our old friends from the book of Esther. As it's been a while since we've looked at this story, let's remind ourselves about who's who here.

First, of course, we remember who Esther is. Even though she doesn't show up in today's reading, we would do well to remember the fact that she is in the story that bears her name. What do you know about Esther? She's an orphan who was raised by her cousin/uncle; she is a great beauty, she was caught in a sweep of the nation and ended up "winning" the contest to become the next queen of Persia; she's an exiled Jew.

There's another Jew in our story, another player from "our team". Mordecai is Esther's guardian and mentor. A few weeks ago we saw that while Mordecai is willing to honor the king, he is not willing to worship any human. For reasons that we don't really know, Mordecai has chosen not to reveal the fact that both he and Esther are Jewish.

Another fellow that we meet in this story is Haman, the Agagite. We talked about how being called an "Agagite" makes you the bad guy in any story about Jews – and in this morning's reading, Haman is living into his name by developing his plot to destroy not just Mordecai, who had offended him, but all of the Jews. Mordecai's secret is out, and now all the believers are at risk.

Today we see Haman looking for a good day for a genocide. He goes to the leadership body and they cast lots to determine on which day this murderous edict should be carried out. The "lots" are a kind of dice-like stone, and the name for them is "Pur". Two of them are "purim". Remember that, because "Purim" will be the answer to a question I intend to ask you on November 25th.

So Haman throws the dice, picks a date, and goes to the King, Ahasuerus. You might remember that Ahasuerus is a cartoon king – given to rash decisions, gigantic appetites, and excesses of every sort. It's about this point in the story when you look at the King and shake your head and say, "surely, someone else must be the brains of this outfit. Please don't say too much, Ahasuerus..."

Haman thinks that he's the brains here – and so he offers the king an enormous bribe – the money that he's willing to put up is about 2/3 the GNP of Persia – and says, "Look, King, these folks are no good. Let me take care of them." And the king, in keeping with his tendency to simply say "yes" to whatever his advisors put before him, says "Uh, OK." And Ahasuerus gives Haman the royal seal. Haman sets the plot in motion – the date that has been selected is nearly twelve months away, but he sends out the orders and seals them with the King's signet. There is no way out now.

And that's how chapter three ends. You get the sense that for Ahasuerus and Haman, they think that it's been a tough day at the office and therefore, "it's Miller Time" Now really, from what we know about Ahasuerus, when is it ever NOT "Miller Time" for this guy? But anyway, these two leaders sit back in the office and knock back a few, oblivious to the confusion that they've caused.

At this point, let me remind you that this is just a story from the Bible. I mean, after all, who can imagine a situation where a city, a state, a nation is being led by a small group of people who really don't have any clue what life is like for normal citizens? Who can imagine a group who cling to power and throw around huge sums of money like it's nothing? Who can imagine a small circle of advisors telling the big cheese what he wants to hear and then going on and doing whatever the heck they want to? I mean, that's crazy talk, right? Doesn't look anything like any of the cities or nations we've known in our lifetimes. Relax. It's just a story.

So while Haman and Ahasuerus are having a shot and a beer, the city is in an uproar. Listen for the word of the Lord from Esther 4:1-3:

When Mor'decai learned all that had been done, Mor'decai rent his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

While the city of Susa is in "confusion", the Jewish community is characterized by grief, questioning, mourning, fear. People are wearing sackcloth and ashes. These folks are clearly broken up.

Why? I mean, sure, the law has been passed, but it's twelve months away. What's the rush to grief now? Don't they have time to get out of Dodge?

Let's remember...Two weeks ago I said that the book of Esther raises a huge theological question. We've already talked about the fact that Esther and Mordecai are Jews. Why are they in Persia? How did they get into Susa in the first place? They were captured by Nebuchadnezzar, the man who had been king before Ahasuerus. Why were they captured by Nebuchadnezzar? Well, the scriptures are pretty clear about the fact that they were being punished by God for breaking the covenant that they had made with him back in the desert. God met the people of Israel in Egypt and promised to lead them out of slavery and into freedom, right? Do you remember: "You will be my people and I will be your God..."? Well, the people over the years said pretty consistently, "We are looking for something a little better. Thanks, God for the offer, and we'll let you know how things work out. In the meantime, don't call us, we'll call you..."

So the people of God break faith with God and end up in captivity. And now the question is, "Will God break faith with us? Is God still mad at us? Are

we all going to die? Is God's promise forever dead?"

That's the question that is ringing in the minds of the Jews when Haman's decree comes out. And let me ask you about that decree. Do you remember when that was written and sent? Of course you don't. It was on the 13th day of the 1st month. Big deal.

What if I said to you, "I'll give you a marvelous gift on the 25th day of the 12th month." What is special about that day? It's Christmas. Everyone knows that. What if I said that we'll have a big party on the 4th day of the 7th month? Sure we will. It's Independence Day. You're supposed to have a party.

So the decree is written on the 13th day of the 1st month. That is the day that the Jews celebrated Passover. Do you remember Passover?

The Jews are slaves in Egypt. Following God's instructions, faithful people took a lamb and killed it. They ate its meat and covered their homes with its blood. Every year after they left Egypt, they were called to eat this particular meal as a means of remembering the covenant that they had with God. It was a reminder and a reaffirmation of the deal that they had made.

And so here we have the faithful in Persia who are keeping the Passover. They are strangers in a strange land, sent there because they have not kept their part of the bargain. And now, on Passover, they hear that the king has signed an executive order for their execution. And they think, "Omigosh! Is it true? God has abandoned us. God has left us. We are lost.

The actual day of destruction isn't until the 13th day of the 12th month, but who cares? If God has left me, then I have no hope. I might as well dress in burlap, heap ashes on my head, and stop eating now because after all, if God rejects me, then what's the point?

Have you been there? Have you screwed up so badly that you can't see a way out? Have you ever felt like maybe God is just plain angry with you – and you know that God has a *right* to be angry? Have you ever sat back and thought, "Well, that's it. I'm toast now."? Have you ever felt like you've got nothing left to hope for?

Let me tell you this: Esther lives through it. In the coming weeks, we'll check in on Esther and Mordecai and see how they live faithfully and discover God's provision...but for now, let's leave Mordecai weeping at the gate, fasting and praying and wailing and wondering what in the world is going to happen next.

And let's leave Mordecai there and fast-forward about 600 years to a small room in Jerusalem. And there we meet a young Rabbi who has spent three years teaching and healing. He has challenged the religious hypocrites, blessed the poor, and spoken with remarkable authority. He has lived his life as God has directed each of us to live.

And now, this Rabbi, whose name in Hebrew is *YSHUA* – the way we say that in English is Jesus – this Rabbi is in this small room on the 13th day of the 1st month – on Passover – and he takes a piece of the meal and says, “For generations, you have used lambs to remind you of the covenant that you made with God. You have taken lambs and broken them and killed them. Well, from now on, when you think of God’s presence, remember my body that is broken for you.”

The Rabbi continues: “And for years, you have thought about the lamb’s blood marking your doors as the sign of God’s promise to protect you from evil. From now on, you are not covered by the blood of a lamb, you are marked by my blood. You belong to me.” That’s what Rabbi Y’shua was doing on the 13th day of the 1st month.

And today, on world-wide communion Sunday, we remember that Rabbi. We honor him and worship him as the Son of the Living God. As Lord. As Savior and Christ.

And today, beloved, I want you to look me in the eyes and know that there is no place that you have gone, there is nowhere you have been, no sin that you have committed that puts you too far from God’s saving love and power in Jesus the Christ.

Mordecai and Esther eventually learned it (I’m promising you, we’ll get back them). The first disciples learned it. And you need to be certain of this: that the covenant stands. The deal holds. It does not still stand because you are somehow going to “do better”. God is not waiting around for you to “straighten up and fly right” before God extends his grace and peace to you. Now, the covenant stands because Jesus has already done it all.

It is amazing. It is outrageous. To think about where you have been...where I have been...and know that none of that matters to God. Wow.

And do you know what? It’s even bigger than that. It’s not just about me and you. And on world-wide Communion Sunday, it’s not even just about the Methodists and the Episcopalians. The grace of God is for you. Amen. But it’s also for the gangbanger out on the street. For that punk. It is open to the greedy business tycoon. To the calculating public official. God has not abandoned them, either.

You are here. You know that. How are all those other people going to know that there is nothing that can separate them from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord?

Who knows? Maybe God will send them walking into the front pew at 11 on a Sunday morning. Maybe. But maybe God will send you walking in their lives at three o’clock on a Thursday afternoon. Either way, they need to know: Has God abandoned me? What answer will you give them? And how will you give it?

