

Preparing For His Presence  
Esther 5  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
October 21, 2007  
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Do you remember the morning of the big day? I don't know what the precise day would be for you...maybe the morning that you were on your way in for the ultrasound and see your baby for the first time...maybe the morning that you had to go in for your cardiac catheterization and you didn't know how many arteries were blocked...maybe it was the day that you bought the diamond ring and were looking forward to dinner with your girl that evening...but do you remember a day when you had a sense of anticipation? A mixture of tension and wonder and excitement and fear and worry?

Last week we talked about the importance of defining moments in our lives. Do you remember a time in your life when you stood on the threshold of such a moment as you prepared to walk down the aisle, to bury your mother, or to get the test results back?

If you can remember that, then maybe you have a glimpse into the kinds of emotions that must have been rolling around in Esther's spirit on the morning she went into the king. She is about to take the biggest risk of her life: going before the king without an invitation. And once she gets there, it doesn't get any better, because if she lives through the greeting, she has to come up with a way to tell him that she is a part of the nation whose extermination the king has just ordered and she has to ask him to change his plans concerning that genocide.

Kinda makes your uncertainty about Tuesday morning's root canal look a little weak, doesn't it? But that's the task awaiting Esther in this morning's reading.

Esther 5 starts off with the words "on the third day." That's crucial. The third day of what? The third day of the fast. The third day since she has heard of the King's order to eliminate the Jews. The third day since Mordecai has challenged Esther to step forward and take the risk.

Two things have happened in the three days. First, Esther has confirmed the fact that her true identity lies with her Jewish roots. And second, somehow in that, she has become more convincingly the leader that God has made her to be. In verse two, for instance, the narrator refers to her as "Queen Esther" for the first time. Up until now, when she has been mentioned, it's been either "Esther" or "Haddassah". Now it's "Queen Esther". What does that tell us?

It tells me that when you know who you are on the inside, it's easier for you to relate to the world on the outside. Look at Esther, for instance. On the morning in question, we know that she has been fasting for three days. I don't know if you've ever done that, but trust me, it's not a lot of fun. And at the end of

the fast, Esther does not have a nice meal to look forward to, but rather a dangerous meeting with the man who holds her life in his hands.

In the last chapter, Esther, Haddassah, came to see that her real self, her core identity, was as a child of God and a member of God's people. For three days, she has embraced that identity by walking through the fast. And now, look at what she does on the third day: she gets out of bed and she puts on her royal robes and goes to see the king.

Parenthetically, I want you to remember Esther chapter 1 and the first time we met this king. Remember that the first queen, Vashti, got into all kinds of hot water because she did not go to the king when he called for her. Here, in a mirror image of that night, we see Esther risking her life by going to the king when he had not called for her. Do you see? It's a reversal.

Esther puts on her robes and goes to the court and gets ready to fulfill the task that has been assigned to her. Outwardly, she is more a queen than ever before. I am suggesting that this is due to the fact that inwardly, she is more certain of who she is than ever before.

As I was studying this passage earlier this week, it reminded me of the letters that I have sent to some of our young men and women who wear military uniforms. My plea is for them to remember, first and foremost, whose they are. To remember that their first identity is as one of the baptized. As a child of God. And when they know who they are, then they can wear the uniform and then they will know how best to behave when wearing the uniform – because they are certain of who they are before they enter a world full of people clamoring to give them an identity. The uniform does not make them who they are. You did, through the sacrament of baptism that God gave you.

I think that this morning we do well to remember this truth. Own the person that God is calling you to be. Remember your baptism before you try to be a student, or a mother, or a worker, or a nurse, or a teacher. Anchor yourself in God's call on you, and that will allow you to hear everyone else's call in a truer light.

The other thing that caught my eye about this chapter this week was the way that Esther approached the king. I think it might be instructive for us to look at her, and to compare the ways that she went to Ahasuerus with the ways that we go before God. Even though this part of the story deals with one human approaching another human, I believe that there are lessons for us on the nature of prayer and service in this chapter.

First, look at Esther's approach to Ahasuerus. She is incredibly humble and gracious. She puts on her best clothes and she goes and waits in the court. In other words, she positions herself so that he will see her and invite her to approach – she does not barge in and demand an audience. She waits, and catches his eye, and approaches when he extends the scepter to her. And when

she speaks to the king, she frames her speech so that he and everyone else knows that she is centering her hopes and her being on the king.

This humility is contrasted later in the chapter as we have to listen to Haman's boasting. Whereas Esther is sure to make it a point to direct attention to the king, Haman wants everyone to know how important he is. His wife and his friends have to listen – not for the first time, we would imagine – to the litany of “achievements” and “blessings” that Haman has managed to pile up.

Another characteristic of Esther's approach to the king is the patience that she shows. As we've already seen, she positions herself so as to be ready when he calls her name. And even when he does, she does not rush in and blurt out the fear that has gripped her – even when it's been the subject of three days worth of fasting and prayer for Esther. Instead, she relates to the king as the king – which, in Ahasuerus' case, means appealing to his appetites. When she has treated him as he believes a king should be treated, then she makes her request...

Except that request isn't really the request, is it? No, she simply asks him for another opportunity to treat him well. We can't know what Mordecai or the other Jews may have thought of this strategy, but it seems incredibly deliberate and demonstrates a great deal of patience and submission.

Again, we see a contrast between Esther and Haman in this very chapter. Whereas Esther is patient as she seeks to allow an uncertain outcome to unfold, Haman is greedily impatient. Even as he is regaling his wife and his friends about his own greatness, he can't stop being angry with Mordecai. And even though he himself has set into motion the plot that will ensure the death of Mordecai and all the Jews, that's eleven months away, and he just can't wait. So Haman and his wife cook up a plot to rush Mordecai's death along even sooner. And, true to the exaggerated character of much of this story, Haman can't just plot to hang Mordecai – he's got to hang Mordecai on a gallows that is fifty cubits high. Fifty cubits is about six stories high. That's a little...can I say...overkill, don't you think?

So what you have this morning is your pastor suggesting that as each of us approaches God in prayer, we can learn something from Esther and Haman. As we come to God, are we humble? Are we patient?

But before you answer that, your pastor needs to point out one crucial difference between Esther's story and yours. As we read through Esther, we see a lost and lonely woman forced to play a game of calculated strategy, where she balances need and risk. We see a woman who approaches the king with a heart full of fear and uncertainty, a woman who is desperately trying to get the king to consider something that doesn't really matter at all to him.

When you and I approach the Lord, there is no need for fear. Jesus has already paved the way. Jesus has given us full and complete access to the

throne of the Father, and so we can walk before God with confidence and joy.

So now I'll ask you again. When you come before the Lord, are you able to do so in humility and patience? I'm not so sure that I am. There are too many times when I breeze into the presence of God and am anything but humble. I pop in and blurt out exactly what I need, and then I leave quickly. I'm not always willing to stick around for any discussion. I'm not always open to asking God what God thinks of my situation. So often, my prayers are presumptive – that is, I walk in thinking that God will agree with me on the spot, and I'm just showing up as a courtesy. “You know, Lord, we really do need to figure out a way to get this part of my life straightened out. Look, I'm kind of busy here, so will you just handle that? Oh, and, while I'm here, I think I remember that my neighbor's mother has something going on with her thyroid. Will you check into that for me, Lord? You're the best. Amen.”

OK, that's a slight exaggeration – but it might be closer to the truth than I wish. I hope that you will join me in seeking to come before God with humility. I hope that I am someone who listens to God. I hope that I am someone who trusts God.

And similarly, I hope that I am someone who will not be impatient in the presence of God. If I really believe that God has my best interests at heart, can I trust God when – as in the book of Esther – he appears to be silent? Can I open to him the desires of my heart and allow him to work not only on those desires, but on my heart, too? The brief reading that we had from the Gospel this morning is one of a dozen places where Jesus spends significant time in the presence of his Father. This is a model for us, my friends- a call to spend some time alone, simply dwelling in the love and care of God and seeking God's best for our lives.

So here is my invitation to you as I close this message. I'm going to ask Brian to play for just a few moments, and I will invite you to enter into God's presence. Nothing exciting is going to happen in this room for the next two or three moments – all I want you to do is to claim your core identity as a child of God. And to accept as true the notion that God delights in you. To hold on to the fact that God has called you, and is eager to be with you. Enter into God's presence and ask him to help you look at your life. Humbly and patiently, give yourself to him. Share with him, and listen. Amen.