

Finding Favor With The King  
Esther 6:1-7:10  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
November 4, 2007  
Pastor Dave Carver

Somebody once said that “Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous”. If that’s true, then God’s fingerprints are all over the scripture readings that we have for this morning.

Steve read to us a few moments ago the events of one crazy night – a night that was supposed to be Mordecai’s last night on earth, if you’ll remember what happened in Esther 5. But this night – it’s like one of those television shows where you know what is happening, but the characters themselves are oblivious to it.

King Ahasuerus has insomnia. This night, of all nights, he can’t sleep. So what do you do when you’re the most powerful man in the world and you’re restless? You have a lackey come in and read you stories about how great you are. And what should happen on this particular night but the reader reminds the king of the day that Mordecai saved his life. And now Ahasuerus has a problem: he never said “thank you”. What to do, what to do...

Lucky for him, along comes Haman, the “bad guy” of our story. And Hamnan, as well, is suffering from insomnia. What a coincidence! Haman’s sleeplessness is not due to excess caffeine or trouble at the office; no, Haman is angry at Mordecai – so angry, that he can’t sleep. And I want you to notice something about Haman’s anger – it is so severe that not only does it keep him awake – but it gives him self-destructive tendencies. Haman can’t sleep, and so who does he go to see? The King.

But we did we learn in Esther 4 – that anyone, male or female, who approached the king uninvited, would be put to death unless the king granted mercy. So look at this – Haman’s anger is so severe that he risks his own death just to talk to the king about how upset he is at Mordecai.

Has that ever happened to you? You have been so overcome by anger or some other negative emotion that you do something that you know is wrong, something that you know is risky – just so you can blow off some steam or do whatever it is that you desire? It shows up here, and it costs Haman – in a surprising way.

The King allows Haman to live, but before he hears why Haman is wandering around in the middle of the night, he comes out with *his problem* (he is the king, after all...). He looks at Haman and says, “Well, what should I do for someone I want to honor?” This is, you remember, a tendency for Ahasuerus. He’s always ready to take suggestions from underlings.

And you heard how chapter six unfolded: a comic scene wherein Haman is brought low and Mordecai is raised up. Let's look at the next few verses in Esther as the action here is fast and furious.

*Esther 6:12 Then Mor'decai returned to the king's gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered. [13] And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had befallen him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mor'decai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him."*

I love this. Haman, full of grief and embarrassment, hurries home after leading Mordecai through the capitol and honoring him. Do you remember at the end of chapter 5, how his wife and friends all listened patiently to his stories and accomplishments? That's how you treat the man who's number two in the kingdom...But this is a different day, and even his wife looks at him and shakes her head and says, "Good luck, fella." But she skooches her chair back a bit, seeking to distance herself from him. It reminds me of the old joke where the Lone Ranger and Tonto were riding along and all of a sudden, a huge gang of Indians came from the North and West, intent on killing the masked man. They fled East, only to find another angry mob. To the South was a cliff – there was no escape. The Lone Ranger says, "Well, my faithful Indian friend, it looks like we're surrounded." And Tonto says, "What do you mean 'we', Paleface?"

All right, let's keep going. Esther 6:14 *While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and brought Haman in haste to the banquet that Esther had prepared. [1] So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. [2] And on the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." [3] Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request. [4] For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king."*

The banquet starts – the second banquet in as many days, if you'll recall. Finally, the queen makes her request to the king – she wants the king to save her life, and that of her people.

Now you might think that Ahasuerus is a little thick here. And, truth be told, he probably is. But I want to point out that back in chapter 3, when Ahasuerus was presented with a plan to do in Mordecai and the rest of the Jews, he never heard which specific group was the target of his genocide. He was simply told, "You know you've got a group here that's causing you trouble, and I'll

take care of them for you.” The king never asks who they are...but here, Esther reveals the truth – it’s her group.

In our text, Esther says something that sounds a little out of place. She says, “You know, honey, if all he wanted to do was make us slaves, that would be one thing. I wouldn’t even bring it up. But killing us, well, that’s something else.” And you wonder where that comes from. The word for “destroy” is “ay-bad”. The word for “enslave” is “hay-bad”. So what Esther is doing here is essentially saying, “Look, King, you might have thought that your man was talking about rounding up a few thugs and putting them on the chain gang – “hay-bad”. But he wants to wipe out my entire nation – “ay-bad”. Again, we see Esther’s skill as a negotiator – she is providing the king with a “way out” – a way to do what is right without looking bad or appearing to change his mind.

*Our story hurtles forward in Esther 7:5: Then King Ahasu-e'rus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, that would presume to do this?" [6] And Esther said, "A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!" Then Haman was in terror before the king and the queen. [7] And the king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden; but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that evil was determined against him by the king. [8] And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was; and the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face.*

Uh-Oh. Things are tough for Haman. He’s unmasked, and the king flies into a rage. Ahasuerus storms out onto the veranda, and Haman should follow him out. There was a law that no male (other than a eunuch) was ever to be with the queen unless the king was present. Strike #1. Ahasuerus comes back into the room to see Haman sitting on the sofa with the queen. Chapter 3 tells us that Haman had already received the king’s signet ring. Chapter 6 tells us that Haman wanted to wear the king’s clothes and ride the king’s horse. And now, Ahasuerus sees him apparently hitting on the king’s wife! That’s not good for business! Strike #2!

But what to do? Remember, Ahasuerus isn’t the world’s best at thinking on his feet. What can he do about this situation? Do you remember a few weeks ago when I suggested that the servants and the eunuchs ended up having a lot of power and responsibility in the book of Esther? Right now, when king Ahasuerus is sputtering with rage, Haman is scared stiff and Esther is just beginning to breathe normally, one of the eunuchs clears his throat and offers a helpful suggestion:

*Esther 7:9 Then said Harbo'na, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, "Moreover, the gallows which Haman has prepared for Mor'decai, whose word saved the king, is standing in Haman's house, fifty cubits high." [10] And the king said, "Hang him on that." So they hanged*

*Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mor'decai. Then the anger of the king abated.*

Gee, King. Do you see that gallows over there (remember, Haman had made a gallows six stories tall – you could see it from anywhere in town)? That was built for the man that you just honored. The man that saved your life. And then Harbona the eunuch practically says, “King, you could ang-hay aman-Hay on the allows-Gay” but of course it has to be the king’s idea, so he just does that little eye thing and nods his head at the man on the couch and Haman is a goner. Strike #3.

Esther chapter seven. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

So that’s the story – so far. A story that is increasingly action-packed – but a story that, like all stories, asks us big questions. I saw three in this morning’s reading...

What kind of world do we live in?

How did the worst day of Haman’s life begin? The king could not sleep. The author of the book of Esther believes in a world that is guided by the powerful hand of an unseen God – a God who created and rules heaven and earth. The Persians and the Greeks and the Romans, however, believed that the world was ruled by a pantheon of gods, and human existence was often vexed by getting caught up in a tug-of-war between various divinities.

We are beginning to see emerging in the story of Esther the bold assertion that things do not happen by accident. How did the Jews end up in Susa, of all places? How did the orphan girl get onto the throne? Why was the gallows so big? Are these all coincidences? Or is there a larger story being written? I would suggest that the book of Esther asserts pretty plainly that God works through human activity to accomplish his purposes.

So if I’m right, and I think I am, and question number one is “What kind of world do we live in” and answer number one is “A world in which God is at work at every level – in the lives of individuals and in the affairs of nations”, then that leads to question number two.

How is God at work in your life?

Really. Why are you here? What got you out of bed this morning? Was it because of the time change and no Steelers game and you had an hour to kill and didn’t know what else to do? Or did you need to hear the second hymn today. Is there someone in the center section who needs a word from you? Are you wondering if maybe you fit in after all and need to hear a word of acceptance from the Lord or feel a pat on the back from one of God’s people?

And more than just today, where is God at work in your life? What is he trying to teach you? How can you listen? If I’m right (and I think I am), God is

not only at work in this world, but in your life.

How?

For many of us, that might lead to question number 3. “How in the world am I supposed to know?” I mean, OK, Rev., I’ll accept as at least theoretically possible the notion that God is at work in my life. But how do I find out what he wants from me?

It seems to me that answer number three is simply “In humility.” Look at Haman in this chapter. In less than 24 hours he goes from being the #2 man in the kingdom, the man who signed all the royal decrees and had full access to the treasury to being, quite literally, ‘hoisted on his own petard’ and executed as treasonous and disloyal.

This is Sunday. The first day of a new week. This week, you will have all sorts of chances to show up in people’s lives. You will make decisions about spending your time and money. You will give and receive love. You have a chance to vote on Tuesday. Every day – all day – you will be presented with opportunities to seek to align your life with God’s purposes for your life. It’s easy, and it’s tempting, to want to live as a “free agent”. To think that our world is not guided by anyone or anything. To think that you do not need a community of faith to back you, to challenge you, to nurture you. But don’t do that. Hang in there and ask yourself, “what kind of world do I live in? How is God at work on me as I am in this world? And what can I do to better sense his presence and guidance?”

I started this message mentioning the idea of coincidence. One of my favorite authors, Frederick Buechner, writes in *Wishful Thinking*:

I think of a person I haven't seen or thought of for years, and ten minutes later I see her crossing the street... A car passes me on the road, and its license plate consists of my wife's and my initials side by side. When you tell people stories like that, their usual reaction is to laugh. One wonders why.

I believe that people laugh at coincidence as a way of relegating it to the realm of the absurd and of therefore not having to take seriously the possibility that there is a lot more going on in our lives that we either know or care to know. Who can say what it is that's going on, but I suspect that part of it, anyway, is that every once and so often we hear a whisper from the wings that goes something like this: 'You've turned up in the right place at the right time. You're doing fine. Don't ever think that you've been forgotten.'<sup>1</sup>

In a world tended to and cared for by God, whether you are an orphan girl

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted at [http://intheven.typepad.com/the\\_city\\_gate/2007/01/coincidence\\_or\\_.html](http://intheven.typepad.com/the_city_gate/2007/01/coincidence_or_.html)

in a strange world or a queen on the throne, you are not forgotten. You are an agent of God's presence in this world, and God longs to speak and act to you and through you. God bless you as you seek to understand that in the days to come. Amen.