

The Great Reversal
Esther 8:1-17
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
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A little girl went to a church wedding for the first time. As they were leaving, her mother asked her how she liked it. "Oh, it was fine. I just have one question: why did the bride change her mind?" Her mother didn't know what she was talking about, and the little girl went on to say, "Well, she came in with one guy and then after they all talked about it up front for a while, she left with someone else!"

As we turn our attention to God's word in Esther this morning, we see all kinds of changes going on. In fact, I'm calling this part of the story "the great reversal" because there are so many parts in this chapter where the action seems to mirror, or even reverse, something else that has happened earlier in the book. Let's take a look at a few aspects of this reversal.

The chapter opens with Esther, also known as Hadassah, receiving a house and property. When we met her, she was an orphan girl, descended from captives in a strange land. She married the king and moved into the palace. And now she has her own home and her own property.

And, of course, it's not just any property, it's the property that belonged to Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite. The one who had sought to destroy Esther and her people who was, in fact, destroyed by his own pride and greed in chapter 7.

Chapter 8 reveals another reversal, although it's not as obvious as some. In chapter 1, Ahasuerus has a queen, Vashti, whom he cannot summon into his presence – she wouldn't come. Now, his queen Esther, is in the opposite place: she's in his presence, but he cannot save her from the threat of persecution and death that was issued in his name by the evil Haman. As she laments the fact that Haman's death doesn't change the fact that the genocide of the Jews is still scheduled for a date about nine months in the future, the king essentially shrugs his shoulders and says, "Well, you know, there's nothing I can do about it."

But he does do something, doesn't he? He takes the royal ring, the symbol of his power, from the dead hand of Haman and puts it on Mordecai's hand. Another reversal.

And Mordecai himself...how do we best remember his appearance from previous chapters? He was wearing sackcloth and ashes, weeping and wailing at the gate. Here in today's reading, he's wearing the royal robes and a fine crown on his head.

And while even this power cannot allow Mordecai and Esther to prevent the planned attacks against the Jews from taking place, they do take the time to

send another letter throughout the Persian empire. And this letter is almost an exact copy of the letter that Haman had sent out, with a huge exception: instead of *ordering* people to kill the Jews on the 13th day of the 12th month of Adar, this letter *permits* the Jews (and others) to defend themselves from attack on that same day.

When the first letter was sent out, what was the reaction? In chapter three, we learn that the entire city of Susa was in a state of confusion. But after Mordecai's letter goes out, the city rejoiced! In chapter three, the Jews were weeping and fasting, while in chapter eight, they are filled with light and gladness.

Early in the book, the first Jews that we meet are so concerned about their safety that they hide their identity. Esther is not allowed to tell anyone of her heritage or faith. But how does today's reading end? "And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them."

Let me digress for a moment, because that verse in Esther is the only time in the entire Bible that the Hebrew word that is translated as "declared themselves Jews" is used. Is there some sort of mass conversion going on? Did thousands and thousands of Persians see what was happening and then embrace the true faith?

Probably not. Most of them didn't know what had happened in the palace – all they had were two letters. The first, from a dead man, trying to motivate the population to do whatever it could to wipe out the Jews. The second, from the current number two, authorizing any Jew who was attacked to destroy, slay, annihilate, and plunder anyone who might attack them. This is probably a case of the "smart money" being on the Jews, and folks are looking to save their own skin here.

But more than that, do you see how everything has changed? Black is white, in is out, fear is joy, power is humility. Everything is just rosy now, right?

Well, it is for Ahasuerus. He's got his individual little problem solved. The man who had wanted his job is now dead, and he's got a trustworthy number two in Mordecai. But for Esther, Mordecai, and the other Jews, things are not just fine. Chapter eight doesn't resolve the tension – in fact, it heightens it in some regard. Why? Because the 13th day of the 12th month is still in the future. Trouble is still brewing.

I'd like to suggest that there are at least two applications that we as believers in Jesus can take from this part of Esther's story.

First, I want to point out the fact that many of us know what it felt like to be Esther or Mordecai at this point in the story. As I've said, for them, the great battle is looming ahead. Everyone in the kingdom knows that people like Esther and Mordecai are "fair game". Jews are literally "in season" on the 13th day of the 12th month. And that is cause for significant alarm and fear.

However, there is also cause for profound hope and celebration. After all, the author of the death sentence is himself dead. It would appear as though God has every intention of keeping his end of the covenant, even though the people of God had failed to keep their end. While individual Jews felt some level of fear and uncertainty, there is at this point in the story a strong sense that the children of God are going to get through this. Do you see what I mean?

And likewise, several of us in this room know what it's like to be looking at a future in which some sort of a struggle looms large. You, or someone you love, is facing a profound physical illness. Maybe you are in the midst of some real pressure from someone at work or at school, and your life is just miserable there. Or maybe it's closer to home – you fear that your marriage is rocky or you are afraid that you are losing your child's heart or affections or loyalties.

The word of encouragement for us in this chapter is that we can walk into the days of struggle and trial knowing that we are not alone and that we are not adrift. I can guarantee that you are going to face some sort of obstacle or trial in the days to come. I can promise you that you will be tested and pressed and drained. But I can also assure you that you need not be afraid of that testing and that you will not be overwhelmed by that trial – because we know the end of the story – and at the end of the story, God keeps his promises. At the end of the story, hope is stronger than fear and life is eternal.

And while the word of encouragement in this scripture ought to be strong for us, there is also a word of challenge. We do well to note how quickly things change for the characters in this story. We do well to remember that “the great reversal” may not be simply a one-shot occurrence in a far-away land a long time ago.

In fact, it seems worth noting that just as the idea of God's presence and God's promises are central not only to this passage from Esther, but the entire scriptures, so, too, is the fact that the life of faith is often a life that is measured by reversals and surprises. The twists of the plot in Esther are hints of what we see in Jesus – that life in Christ is often upside-down and unpredictable.

Do you remember the beatitudes, where Jesus pronounced blessings upon the poor and the grief-stricken; where Jesus indicated that meekness was strength and mercy was powerful and the persecuted were blessed?

You see, beloved, here is what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid that it's pretty easy for people like us – people who are used to being pretty well off, thank you very much – to read a story like Esther and smile and say, “Well, you never know...” and then go back to our business as though that's a word for someone else who doesn't know God quite as well as we do. Because it's pretty easy for me to say, “You know, of course I realize that material wealth is not a direct indication of God's spiritual blessing, and I put no stock in the things of this present world...” and then I fold up my laptop and get in my car and drive to my home and turn up my thermostat and watch the game on my color TV. Because, after all, I'm not

rich. I'm not on top. I'm just one of the guys. I'm getting by, but I'm not living large.

But deep down I want to believe that I have my house and my garden and my wife and my child and my job and my stuff because I deserve it. And if I follow that line of thinking far enough, then maybe I get to thinking that I am, in fact, better than the guy who doesn't have a house or a garden or a wife or a child or a job or stuff that's as good as mine.

Esther chapter 8 is a reminder to me that life is not measured by the outside. That I have to be really, really careful about who is wearing the fancy clothes and the king's ring. Esther chapter 8 is a reminder that the life of faith is a call to value the marginalized and to defend the defenseless and to help the weak.

The Jews were being hunted down, and the man of God (Mordecai, in this instance) made such an impassioned plea that even people who were not Jewish said, "Hey, I'm with you."

Can I say that to my neighbors who are feeling overwhelmed by the trials of their lives?

Many of you know that I have a small boat. It's a 16.5 foot Sylvan fishing boat with a 60 horsepower motor on it. I love it. But you might not know that in the Commonwealth of PA, people who want to drive a boat are supposed to take a class – a sort of nautical "driver's ed", if you will. Let me tell you how the information from the boating code helps me to be a better Christian:

When two boats are at sea, or on the river or lake, one of them has the "right of way". The craft with the right of way is called the "privileged" vessel, and the craft that must yield the right of way is called the "burdened" vessel. That makes sense, right? You are "privileged" to keep going the way you were going, and he is "burdened" because he has to work around you, right?

But here's the kicker: almost always, crafts like mine that have big old engines or power plants are "burdened", while canoes and sailboats are "privileged". That is, the boat with the greater power has to work around the boat with the least power.

That's how it is on the rivers. But that's not often how it is in real life, is it? Almost always the person with the most power gets to call the shots. But there's something about the Gospel that indicates that we do well to honor those who are powerless. To treat the weaker as those who are "privileged".

See? You thought I was out there wasting time fishing. I'm having theological revelations, I tell you.

Blessed are those who are poor in spirit...or grieving...or weak. Blessed are those who are hunted down...or at risk...or hungry. Mordecai, and Esther, and more importantly Jesus, stood with those who were vulnerable. Will I?

Amen.