

Like You Mean It...
Esther 9:20-10:3
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
November 25, 2007
Pastor Dave Carver

In Leviticus chapter 23...Let me interrupt myself and say that for a good part of this week, I was trying to come up with a snappy way to grab your attention at the beginning of this sermon, and the best I could come up with was "In Leviticus chapter 23..." Tells you what kind of a week it's been for me, huh?

Anyway, in Leviticus chapter 23 the people of God are commanded by God, through Moses, to observe seven feasts throughout the course of the year. They are getting ready to enter into the promised land and God says, "You want to be my people? I'll tell you how to be my people. Remember these days and keep them holy." And then God goes on to lay out seven Holy Days on which people are commanded to feast. Many of these days, you know: Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost (or "the Feast of Weeks"), The Feast of the Trumpets, Yom Kippur (or "The Day of Atonement"), and Sukkoth (or "the Feast of Tabernacles"). Why does God give the Jews these feasts? So that they remember who they are. So that they remember what is important – they take days and remember the Passover, remember the flight from Egypt into the desert; remember the provision of God in the midst of their journey. God wants them to remember that they lived in tents in the desert and to remember that they are forgiven by His grace. Why does God give them the commandment to have these feast days? So that on the feast days, they will tell their children the stories and their children will remember who they are.

As we conclude our readings from the Book of Esther, we notice that there's another feast mentioned here – the feast of Purim. Now, way back on October 7, I told you that I was going to ask this question. I'm sure you all know the answer. What does the word "Purim" mean? It comes from the word "Pur", which means "lot" or "dice". Why would the feast described in Esther be called Purim, or "Dice Day"? Because back at the beginning of the book, when Haman decided that he wanted to try to wipe out all of the people of God, he threw the dice (or cast the lots) to determine which day would be the best for a genocide.

This may be a lot to ask on the weekend after Thanksgiving, but work with me here. What's the difference between the feasts I described in Leviticus 23 and the Feast of Purim as it's described here in Esther? God commanded the Jews to observe the first seven; Purim was their own idea. The feast of Purim was the response of a joyous and grateful people who discovered that God had delivered them from the hands of those who had sought their destruction.

I think that's a huge distinction: the celebration of this feast is a spontaneous reaction to the ways that they had seen God at work in their lives and in their community. "Because *this* has happened," the Jews say, "we need to celebrate!"

OK, now it's time for another tricky question. What, exactly, are they celebrating? What is the "this" in the preceding paragraph? Let me tell you what it is not. Purim is not a celebration of a military victory. Think about the holidays that commemorate some sort of military victory – they are all on the day of the battle, right? World War One ended at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, and now we celebrate Veterans Day on the eleventh. The Germans surrendered to the Soviets early in the morning on May 9, 1945 (Moscow time), and so the Russians celebrate "Victory Day" each May 9. The French Revolutionaries captured one of Louis XVI's prisons on July 14, and that day is now known as "Bastille Day". On May 5th, 1862, the Mexican Army defeated the French at the Battle of Puebla, and of course that date is known as "Cinco de Mayo". OK, Dave, we get it. You're good at history. But here's my point: when a people celebrates a military victory, they do it on the anniversary of the victory itself.

But Purim is celebrated on the day after the battles were raging in Persia. You'll remember that the date that Haman chose for the slaughter was the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, but the celebration is on the fourteenth day (except in the capital, where the Jews were given two days to defend themselves, and the celebration is therefore on the fifteenth day of Adar). The celebration is not that our team won the battle. The celebration is that the day of death has come and gone and we are still alive! In a celebration of military victory, we tend to point to ourselves and say, "Well, we were just stronger or smarter than the enemy." But Purim says, "Holy smokes! Can you believe it? God keeps his promises, even when we fail! The King issued an order for the people of God to be destroyed...but we survived!"

That is a huge distinction – the celebration is not about who wins – it's about God keeping his promises. To give you a window as to what that looks like in our day, think about the fact that the Nazi guards were under orders to kill any Jew who was found to have a copy of the book of Esther in the prison camps. Why? Because the story of Esther is the story of how irrelevant despotic orders can be when God is Lord of all. We celebrate, not because of how mighty and powerful we are, but because of the fact that by God's grace, we are here at all!

So what happens in the celebration of Purim? It's all here in Esther 9 and 10. There are three main facets to the celebration. First, we simply remember. On Purim (generally in March), Jews get together and they read the book of Esther. It is a loud and energetic reading. Many people bring a *gragger* – like this – to worship with them. As the worship leader reads the name of Mordecai, people cheer. As the name of Haman is pronounced, people shake the *gragger* as a way of saying "We don't even want to hear the name! He's nothing! He's no one!" Purim is a day for remembering what happened.

It is also a day of Food and Feasting. People eat a lot, and they bring gifts of food to their loved ones. Why? Because in many ways, food is life. When we eat our fill on Purim, we are celebrating with our bodies – the bodies

that our enemies sought to destroy, but which were spared by God! Like Thanksgiving, Purim is a feast that is built around the idea that eating together is an important part of the story.

And the third directive for Purim is that God's people are to care for the poor. Do you remember in the story of Esther – so much of the action revolved around not just the Jews, but the other marginalized people of the time? Eunuchs and maids and servants were all a part of the ways that God acted in and through history, and so the celebration of Purim cannot be only about those of us who are already in the room; it must also include acts of generosity and service to the poor and the needy. Because we are still alive, because we are grateful for the gift of life, we bless other people. Our Thanksgiving has meaning because we share what we have and who we are with others – it's not a day that is dedicated to us.

So that's about it for the book of Esther. What are the large lessons from this little volume? Before we leave Esther securely nestled between the pages of Nehemiah and Job, ready to lie undisturbed for who knows how long, let's consider some of what we have noticed these past few weeks.

First, we need to emphasize again the fact that God often appears to be silent. Esther, particularly the Haddassah (not yet even called Esther) we meet early in the book, is a woman who doesn't have any good choices and no clear leading from the Lord. She doesn't have a Bible to read, and she can't get a word from God. As we mentioned, the word "God" doesn't even appear in the book of Esther.

As someone whose prayers often begin with, "Well, what the heck am I supposed to do NOW?", I find this encouraging. Even when I am not certain of which way to go, I know that I can move forward without waiting to be especially led. Like Esther, there are times and places in which I find myself and I have to simply say, "Well, I don't know what is the absolute best thing to do. I'm going to pray about it, and then I'll try this..." Esther is living proof that God's people can make wise decisions even without being hit by lightening bolts or special prophecy.

Another key lesson from this story is that God works in and through history – sometimes in surprising and mundane ways. After all, think about some of the turning points of the story: A Persian queen, Vashti, embarrasses her husband, who then selects a Jewish girl as her replacement...Mordecai happens to overhear a conversation between two murderous guards...Ahasuerus gets insomnia the same night that Haman hatches a plot to murder Mordecai. Do you see? At any given time, we might call these coincidences. But taken as a whole, we understand the truth that God is working behind the scenes. God is writing the story using ordinary events like chance conversations and sleepless nights.

So that leads me to our thrust for today: namely, if God does guide us,

even when we cannot always sense his presence, and if God does rule in and through history, then aren't our lives to be filled with gratitude and thanksgiving? And shouldn't that gratitude and thanksgiving be not only pleasing to us, but a blessing to someone else?

In churches all around the world, today is observed as "Christ the King" Sunday. This is the day when we celebrate the fact that the Jesus for whom we yearned and waited way back in Advent, the Man of God who taught and loved and served and suffered until Lent, the Christ who rose again from the dead on Easter morning, the Lord who sent his church out into the world at Pentecost and beyond...that this One is going to return in human history as the King of creation. Jesus has come, and will come again. And in between time, we live as his people. So reading the end of Esther makes sense today because we confess that we don't always feel God's presence and we aren't always sure where we are going, but we trust that God is guiding history towards a blessed and ultimate goal.

But not only is today "Christ the King" Sunday around the world, it's the day when we at Crafton Heights dedicate our estimates of giving for the year to come. Every member of the congregation has received one of these cards that will give you a chance to make a promise. You didn't get a budget with that card. Why? Because you're not giving to a budget. You are giving to the Lord of life. I am not filling this card out because CHUP needs a few of my dollars. I'm returning this card to my family of faith because I am glad that I'm alive! I am awed that God speaks! I am thrilled to think that I belong to a people who have hope and joy.

I believe that the Apostle Paul was speaking to this same sort of gratitude when he wrote to his friends in Corinth. In chapter 8, he speaks of a group of Christians in Macedonia who had encountered severe trials and adversity, but who then found that their time of difficulty became a seedbed for generosity and joy. They experienced stress, and when they lived through the stress, were so happy that they were able to become generous and hospitable people. In our reading from chapter 9, he states the truth that God is always the first and best giver; we simply respond to the movement of God in our lives and in our world.

So today, I want to invite you to be a part of the grateful, faithful people of God. Join Esther and Mordecai, Paul and the Corinthians and Macedonians, and your brother or sister in the seat next to you by being a person of generosity and joyful sharing. Not because God needs your hundred bucks. Not because this church is going to go under if you don't give. Bring your gifts to God because you are glad to be alive. Bring your gifts to God because you are thankful that he has brought you through it so far. Bring your gifts to God because you know that God is good. All week long, you've been saying to people, "Happy Thanksgiving" as you rush around and try to find time to cook the bird and invite Aunt Harriet and complain about the stuffing and do the dishes. Now, say "Happy Thanksgiving" like you mean it – by acting towards the world that God loves in the same way that God has acted towards you. Say it like you

mean it – by being a person of generosity and grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.