

Clearly the Book of Esther is the most odd book in the Bible, which considering Ezekiel's Visions of wheels within wheels and beasts with four heads each with four faces, and the Revelation to John's description of an Apocalypse, is saying a great deal. I think the authors chose for this to be so Odd because the topic is unnatural, the Genocide of the Jewish people. While Martin Luther and others questioned The Book of Esther being included in the Canon of Holy Scripture, this is a Melodrama historically used in the Jewish Feast of Purim, to describe that for 70 years Israel was in exile in Babylon, which then was conquered by Persia, only to be set free to go home.

Being a Melodrama everything is taken to extremes.

Emphasizing how foolish was the King of Persia, King Ahasuerus, that he did not value prisoners of war, he let Israel go and sent them back to the Promised Land with resources for their rebuilding.

Second, King Ahasuerus almost allowed Israel's enemies to use him to commit genocide of all the Jews in the world;

Third, that as Persians, they did not recognize God, they valued possessions and power rather than relationships and human life.

FINALLY, tucked inside the whole of this story is this kernel of wisdom: "DO NOT THINK YOU WILL BE SAFE BY BEING LOCKED AWAY IN SAFETY, GOD MAY HAVE CREATED YOU FOR JUST SUCH A TIME."

The foundations of our faith in God are recorded in the Bible as being sacred WORD of God, so there is importance in our knowing the content of Books like Esther, after which there are also elements in this passage that I believe are worth our thought and consideration.

Demonstrating just how foolish the Babylonians and Persians are in valuing possessions rather than human life or relationship to God, the Book of Esther begins with the King having a 7 day drunken feast for all the wealthiest people in the land. The highlight, being that the King desired to show everyone his most prized possession, his wife's beauty by having her paraded wearing her jewelry and nothing else! She refused, which raises a crisis: What if all women refuse requests of their husbands?

In order to find a new Queen, the King holds a beauty pageant, and the most beautiful woman in 127 Provinces is found to be Esther. Entering her in the contest, her Uncle Mordecai tells Esther to not let anyone know: she is Jewish. While Mordecai is respected as wise and faithful to the king, even protecting the king from a plot to assassinate him; the Grand Vizier named Haman is jealous of Mordecai. Showing just how silly all this is, Haman wants everyone in the kingdom to bow before him, and Mordecai refuses to bow before anyone but God, Therefore, Haman desires to have Mordecai and all people like Mordecai exterminated. Making matters worse, Haman convinces King Ahasuerus to go along with his plan, by offering a contract of money to the King to make the genocide occur.

Knowing that Haman is planning a genocide of Mordecai and all the Jews, Mordecai puts on sackcloth and ashes and goes to the City Gates, to be witnessed as begging for salvation, which is where this passage this morning comes. Sackcloth and ashes are a specific response. Sackcloth and ashes are the uniform of REPENTANCE. But what does Mordecai have to repent of doing? Mordecai is guilty of the sin of assimilation, SYSTEMIC RACISM, hiding his faith and the faith of his niece Esther. Mordecai never wanted to call attention to himself. Sackcloth and Ashes screams for all to witness: SHAME ON ME.

When you see someone behave abnormally, what is your first response? They look dirty, unwashed, weeping and despondent, what do you do? For the Beauty Pageant winner Esther, she assumes Mordecai needs help to not be embarrassed, so sends him food and clothing. But that misses his point. There are folks who are smarter than we give them credit for. Mordecai is not wearing sackcloth

because he has no other clothes. He wants and needs attention from the Culture and from GOD! Esther sends him clothing to cover her embarrassment, that as she had been taught: he not call attention to their faith or circumstance.

Rarely do we even mention "Salvation" in the world today. Salvation is not a simple thing..

SALVATION IS ABOUT life and death, and more, this is extermination of a culture, a race of humanity.

Up until this point in this outrageous story what were people's motivations?

The King DESIRED other's envy.

The men were AFRAID their wives would refuse them.

Haman was JEALOUS of Mordecai.

Haman wanted POWER by everyone bowing before him, and was willing to kill to make an example of Mordecai.

Mordecai put on sackcloth and ashes because he and all Jews were going to be sacrificed to death. If it had been for Mordecai only, he might not have made a fuss, but for all Jews everywhere being exterminated, he would beg to a greater power for HIS PEOPLE TO BE SAVED.

The problem of Conflict is that you cannot fight back. Standing up or retaliating only raises the stakes. You cannot escalate the tension, the only means of lowering Conflict is to allow others to demonstrate how important whatever it is to them. So Mordecai does not argue with Haman, he does not fight back, instead he reduces himself to the clothes of a sinner begging for salvation begging for help.

The real power of this Book, perhaps one of the most important challenges in all the Old Testament, comes in Mordecai's challenge to Esther: "Think not that in a King's Palace you will escape more than anyone else. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Perhaps at any struggle in our lives, these are the words we need to consider.

Years ago, I sat in on a class from the Department of Labor on the topic of "Power."

What is Power?

Is Power: Authority, Money, Prestige, Success, Safety, Influence?

The speaker came back, naming that real power is having connection to those who can make a difference. When there is a problem can you mobilize other people who can bring about change? Do you have access to those who can change circumstance?

For several years, Valley Presbyterian Church had discussed whether we could broadcast our worship services and how we could involve and empower persons who spend part of every year in multiple locations. COVID forced that transition.

HOWEVER, what we have discovered in this time is that while Livestreaming Worship and Zoom Meetings "works" (other than last week) in order to get decisions made, what we trade-off for this convenience is our relationships.

There is a difference in answers, and being in the communion of our actions and ministry as the Church.

Esther risks going to the King uninvited, to beg of him a favor, which because of her relationship with the King, her ACCESS to POWER, she is granted. Asking what her favor is, Esther begs that the King will come to her apartment for dinner the next night, bringing Haman for her to beg a favor concerning both. Both the King and Haman are flattered to be invited to come to her apartment for dinner, and flattered

that the most beautiful woman in all the kingdom would ask a favor from them.

At dinner they ask why she has invited them, what she wanted. Esther replies that what she needs is for them to return the next night to ask her favor.

The second night, after dinner, Esther describes that Haman has planned for the genocide of she and all her people! The King goes out to the garden to think about this. While he is gone, Haman attempts to ask her forgiveness, but clumsily falls on top of Esther just as the King enters her apartment. Seeing Esther being assaulted, the King has Haman put to death, and makes Mordecai his new Vizier, who orders cancellation of the genocide.

The Book of Esther is a silly, outrageous story, told in a silly outrageous way, making all of us question our DESIRES for SAFETY and SECURITY as Israel had had even as Prisoners of War for 70 years in Exile; our DESIRES FOR POWER, to have more possessions, even for greater beauty than anyone else; What it will take for us to recognize WHAT WE HAVE DONE TO ASSIMILATE INTO OUR CULTURE... What does SALVATION mean today, Salvation from what?