

"WALK THRU THE BIBLE: ESTHER."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for Sermon: Esther 1:1-3, 11-12, 19; 2:15-17; 4:13-16; 7:3-6, 10

Introduction to Esther.

Everyone loves a good story, and Esther is an exceptionally great story. It is great literature. It has all the ingredients a great story needs.

We have a pronounced conflict between good and evil, we have a brave, beautiful heroine, some carousing at the royal court, palace and harem intrigues, a Cinderella motif (an orphan girl marries the emperor), a really fine villain with a cape and a waxed mustache, helpless victims rescued just in the nick of time, profound reversals of fortune, great pride going before a great fall, open battle, and poetic justice. What more could you possibly ask for? DW

Esther shares with Daniel the interesting distinction of taking place entirely outside of the Promised Land.

Esther shares with the Song of Solomon, the interesting distinction of never mentioning God's name.

There are no miracles, no divine interventions. There are no prophetic or Messianic promises. Prayer is never mentioned, nor any of the central elements of Israelite worship. There is no mention of the temple, of Jerusalem or the Torah/Law. There is no mention of dietary laws or injunctions against intermarriage with non-Jews. The book almost seems like a secular story.

“Where is God in all of this? What is God doing? Is He absent or is He present? If He is present, then why does suffering and evil seem to be winning the day? Why is God so hidden?”

God is there but He remains off stage, out of sight, directing and orchestrating but not showing Himself. This book is like an unsigned painting that makes us search for clues.

As some say, while the name of God is never mentioned, the finger of God is everywhere present. We are not seeking for God in a place where He is absent, He is clearly there.

In our Bibles Esther is the last of the historical books. But the events of the story take place between the events of Ezra and Nehemiah during the reign of the Persian king Ahasuerus (or Xerxes I) from 486 to 464.

History tells us King Ahasuerus ruled over the greatest empire on the face of the earth at that time stretching from Egypt to India.

He had a vast army and a navy of fabulous size. He was a force to be reckoned with, a savage military leader, and a tyrant as an emperor.

Let me kill two birds with one stone and summarize the story in a way that also reveals the great theme of the story. It just so happens.

It just so happens Queen Vashti stands up to the king at risk to her royal position.

It just so happens a young beautiful Jewish girl, Esther, is drawn into the king’s harem.

It just so happens of all the girls, Esther finds favor in the eyes of the king. It just so happens her cousin who was raising her, Mordecai overhears an assassination plot.

It just so happens his name is recorded in the king’s book of memorable deeds, but is overlooked for a reward.

It just so happens the pride of the king's number two official, Haman is wounded, leading him to be enraged over Mordecai's refusal to bow to him.

It just so happens in Haman's plot the lot cast for the day to destroy the Jews falls almost a year later giving plenty of time to prepare.

It just so happens Queen Esther, fearing what might happen, finds favor from the king again to approach him for a favor.

It just so happens after building gallows, Haman can wait no longer for revenge and seeks the king's permission early in the morning.

But it just so happens that during that night the king couldn't sleep and asked for the king's book of memorable deeds be brought and read to him.

It just so happens the reader opens to the page about Mordecai's good deed, and after hearing that Mordecai was never rewarded, it just so happens that Haman comes into the court.

It just so happens the king omits Mordecai's name when he asks Haman how the king could honor someone.

It just so happens Haman's pride makes him think the king wants to honor him so comes up with an elaborate plan, which leads Haman to the humiliation of having to honor Mordecai with everything he said that he thought would be for him.

It so happens Haman is brought to Esther's banquet where she exposes him in the plot to kill her people. When the king leaves in anger, it just so happens when Haman throws himself on the queen to beg for mercy, the king comes back in and sees what looks to him like an assault.

It just so happens a court official points out Haman has a newly built gallows, so Haman is executed on the gallows he built for Mordecai.

It so happens Mordecai is put in Haman's place and is able to reverse the decree to kill the Jews.

One or two or even three it just so happened might not be such a big deal, but the cumulative effect of all of these points to a sovereign, divine source that is leading in a purposeful direction.

The book is full of reversals, ironies, happenstances, twists, humor and hatred. Through it all the hand of God is directing all the events and all the players according to His will.

The sacred writer's point is that behind Ahasuerus's vulgar brutality, and Vashti's brave character and Esther's beauty elevating her to queen, all of this and all the rest are under the sovereign guidance of a hidden divine hand, leading to the salvation of an entire race of people.

In the immortal words of Mordecai to Esther: "Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14)?

Who knows? God knows. And we know because we have seen the end of the story. She came to the kingdom, through whatever humiliation and defilement she may have experienced, to save God's people.

Perhaps more than any other book (with the exception of Ruth and Job) we learn that God can be trusted even when He cannot be seen.

On the surface the world seems chaotic, senseless, unjust, fatalistic, but beneath it all God is working all things to accomplish His good purposes.

How are we to interpret the hand of God in our lives and the surprising providential coincidences?

They are heartening and humbling on the one hand, but need to be reflected on with a certain amount of caution.

The right reaction to them is not to assume that God is on our side and will continue to give us whatever we desire on a silver platter.

Rather we should always be in awe that the sovereign Lord of the universe should condescend to hear and answer our prayers, often in ways beyond what we could ask or imagine despite our own sin and shortcomings and unworthiness.

We can never presume on God, His ways are not our ways.

Christological Significance.

Esther as the redeemer of her people.

There is a pattern in Esther of God's deliverance of which Christ is the ultimate embodiment.

A royal figure personally takes up the plight of her people, faces a life-threatening situation on their behalf and because of her faithfulness saves her people. The result is victory and joy as evil and death are triumphed over. Esther will end with a great feast of the Jews, Purim.

In the same way, Jesus is a royal figure, the King of kings, who comes to the aid of His sinful and fallen people, puts His life on the line and even gives up His life on our behalf, and because of His victory gains our salvation and our joy. He destroys the enemy and defeats evil and death that is meant for us. And in the end there is a great feast, the Lord's Supper here on earth, and the marriage supper of the Lamb in heaven.

Just as the Jews faced death because of one man (Haman) so all humanity faces death because of the act of one man (Adam). But, just as all God's people were saved through the faithful act of Esther, so all God's people are saved through the faithful act of Christ (see Romans 5:12-19).

What a picture of God's grace set on display in the OT, giving hope for an even greater display yet to be revealed. Esther points us to the person and work of Jesus.

This theme of redemption through the great reversal of destiny is not just the theme of Esther, it is the theme of the Bible. It's first announced in Genesis 3:15 that the seed of woman would crush the seed of the serpent.

The cross of Jesus stands at the center of history as the pinnacle and pivot point on which all of history turns. The resurrection is the ultimate reversal (peripety). In the face of certain and deserved death, we receive life.

God is the God of salvation. Salvation belongs to the Lord. God put Esther and Mordecai in just the right place at just the right time to bring about His salvation of the Jews.

And so it is that in the fullness of time, at just the right time and in just the right place, God sent His Son to take on our flesh to bring about our salvation.

Jesus completely removes the threat of death, overcomes the evil adversary and in fact turns the tables in a great reversal, so Satan is doomed by the one he sought to kill.

How did God bring redemption to you? How did God providential guide and control and influence events and circumstances and time and place and family of origin and birth? What reversals did He bring about in your ancestry or in your journey? God's will is worked out in the day by day unfolding of normal, routine, ordinary events.

Contemporary Relevance. Practical Application.

Many people find Esther the closest book to their own experience. Most of us have never experienced a dramatic miracle or vision. No fiery furnaces or lion's dens or belly of a whale. Most of our lives seem pretty

ordinary and God seems mostly silent or absent. We go on about our daily lives as if God were not really involved.

The world seems to run along according to the laws of nature and science and politics. We live in a world where everything is pretty much explained apart from God. Nothing supernatural.

Even Christians end up living like functional or practical atheists or at least deists. God is up there somewhere, but pretty much keeps to Himself, like an absentee landlord.

Esther is a gift to us to remind us that even when God seems most silent and most absent, He is present and at work. Esther reminds us to trust God even when, especially when He is not seen.

This is a practical picture of what the providence of God looks like in real life. God is ruling and overruling, guiding every *coincidence*. God is the God of all coincidences.

This book encourages all of us to look for and watch for evidence of God's work and guiding in our lives and in our family and church. Grace sightings.

This is what makes Esther so true to life, we think we are in control when we really aren't.

Esther had no vision, no prophetic word, no angelic visitor, no word from God to guide her, she had to make decisions and take risks, just like us. We all face difficult ethical and spiritual questions in a pagan world hostile to our faith convictions. We see only dimly, our motives at best are mixed.

Christ shows us how when God seems most absent, it is then that He is most present. It is true in Esther, it is true on the cross and it is true in our lives today.

Jesus is the personal embodiment of God and the revelation of God's hidden presence in our world and in our lives. Present now in us and the church by His Holy Spirit.

In Esther they believed God's presence by faith, so we perceive God present by faith with the testimony of the past as our confidence.

Jesus said, "Surely I am with you even to the end of the age" and then He left. Even when He is conspicuously absent, He is omnipotently present.

Esther will challenge our faith and strengthen our faith.

To what have you been appointed for such a time as this? What has God raised you up and called you to do for His glory and for His people? For whom might you be an agent of deliverance?

Is God guiding history? Is God guiding our story? Esther will ask us to consider every aspect of our daily lives and ask, is God present or absent, is God involved or does He not care?

What would life be like if God was not in control, if God was not influencing things for His glory and for our good?

Does God seem absent from your life, does He seem silent to your prayers?

How do you make sense of God's perceived absence?

Esther will ask us to reflect on whether or not we see ourselves as God's covenant children, is God our God and are we His children? Esther will help us to see God in the shadows and will call us to live faithfully by faith and not by sight.

Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.