

We heard last time that the King's decree was issued on the 13th day of the first month.
In other words, the day before the Passover.

So the conversation between Mordecai and Esther
happened either on the 13th or the 14th day of the first month –
which would also explain why Esther was horrified to hear that her cousin
was in sackcloth and ashes on the Passover!!

So Esther's fast starts on the Passover.

All of history is turned on its head.
The feast celebrating the great victory of God over Egypt
is turned into a fast lamenting the Persian decree against the Jews.

Think about it this way:
under what circumstances would a Christian turn Sunday into a fast day?

It is almost inconceivable!
How could one fast on the day of resurrection!

This is why Esther is so remarkable!
She joins Moses and Jesus as the three people to command a canonical feast.
And for us – who live in the diaspora – the dispersion among the nations,
she shows us what it means to live as elect exiles of the dispersion.

And in our passage tonight, she starts by keep her eyes on the resurrection –
even as she endures the cross...

1. "On the Third Day" – Esther's First Feast (5:1-8)

Why Is Half the Kingdom Not Enough?

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace.

Esther has embraced Mordecai's challenge –
"who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

She knows that by going to see the king,
she is risking her life.

In the Persian court, the King does not like surprises.
You don't just "pop in" to say hi.
And particularly, for a woman in the harem...

she is not there to “hang out” with the king.
Even his wife, Amestris, would be unlikely to stop in.
Xerxes would not order the death of any of the nobility lightly.
But a concubine?

Esther had been proclaimed “Queen” four years earlier –
but as she noted to Mordecai,
the king had not called for her in a month –
his interest was waning –
and her standing was a little shaky.

As a foreigner, she has no real “standing.”
She is a foreign concubine whose place in the harem depends solely
on the goodwill of a man who is notorious
for being enslaved to his temper, his women, and his advisors.

And now she is supposed to go to the mercurial Xerxes and tell him
not to follow the advice of chief counselor.

In Egypt, God had commanded Moses to go to Pharaoh and say,
“Israel is my son, my firstborn. Let my son go that he may serve/worship me!”

Esther has no such command from God.
Esther must go alone into the inner court of the king’s palace –
into the “holy of holies” – you might say –
where death awaits those who enter unbidden!

² *And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.*

The whole scene is couched in language that highlights Esther’s control of the situation.
“She *won* favor” –
This is the language used from chapter 2 –
when three times it had said that Esther won favor –
from the eunuch, from all those who saw her, and from the king.
Once again, here *Esther* is the agent.

Usually, one says that he or she has *found* favor
(all through the OT,
Noah “found” grace in the eyes of the LORD.
Joseph found grace in Pharaoh’s eyes.
Ruth found grace in Boaz’s eyes.)

Indeed, Esther herself will *say* in verse 8,
“If I have found grace in the sight of the king” –

but our author sees clearly what has happened!

Esther is just being polite!
She didn’t “find” favor with Xerxes!
She took it.

In Hebrew, the two words sound somewhat alike:

to find favor is “matsa chen”
to win favor is “nasa’ chen”

But nasa’ means to lift up – to carry – or even to take away!
Esther has carried off Xerxes’ favor!

Dozens of times the scriptures talk about “finding favor” –
only here is the wording switched.
Esther wins – or carries off – the king’s favor.

It wasn’t a fair fight.
He is a slave to his passions – whether his anger or his lust.
And Esther knows him well.

And she remains in control of the narrative for the rest of the Book!

³ *And the king said to her, “What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom.”* ⁴ *And Esther said, “If it please the king, [a] let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king.”*

It is worth noting (as I mentioned in the first sermon on Esther),
that this is the exact midpoint of the book.

If you count all the letters in the book,
chapter 5, verse 7 is the exact midpoint.

Notice what that verse says:
Then Esther answered, “My wish and my request is”

In a world ruled by an arbitrary Xerxes,
Esther has won at least temporary control!

But also as I noted before,
here at the midpoint of the book – Esther says, *Yabo’ Hammelek Wehaman Hayyom –*

(let the king and Haman come today)
the first letter of each word spells YHWH.

Even as Esther takes charge.
Even as she “wins” grace in the eyes of the king –
this is the means that God uses to accomplish the salvation of his people.

⁵ *Then the king said, “Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked.” So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared.*

It was well known that a Persian king was bound to fulfill any request made at a feast.

In other words, Xerxes knew going into this, that Esther wanted something.

She wouldn’t have risked her life to come to the throne room “just for fun”!

There is something that she wants.

And – for the present – he is inclined to humor her!

By coming to her little feast, he has obliged himself to fulfill her request.

So now, “as they were drinking wine” (a key moment as we have seen throughout Esther)
he asks.

⁶ *And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, “What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.”*^{b]}

When he says “even to the half of my kingdom”

he is not actually offering to give her half the kingdom.

He is saying, in effect, any request that does not compromise my kingship will be granted

Well now, there’s the rub!

Because her request may very well compromise his kingship!

She will be asking him to overturn the decree sponsored by Haman,

the fellow who just bankrolled Xerxes wishlist of building projects!

If he loses the influential and powerful Haman,

(after already losing an expensive war against Greece),

she might very well be asking for *more* than half the kingdom!

And this reveals to us the curiosity of Esther’s approach.

In some respects, she has set herself up for failure.

The only people present are the King and Haman.

(Sure, there are servants present – but they don’t count).

Esther is going up against the two most powerful men in Persia –

Alone.

If she had revealed Haman's plot in the throne room,
there would have been a multitude of counselors present.
Maybe there would have been some who would side with her?!

If she had asked for the king alone to come,
she could have persuaded him informally –
shown him the danger of Haman's plot!

But no, she asks for the King *and Haman* to come to her feast.
She will deal openly and clearly with Haman and the King.

And now, at the very center of the book, at the right time, the king asks what she wants!
And she says –
This was so much fun, let's do it again tomorrow!

⁷ Then Esther answered, “My wish and my request is: ⁸ If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king ^[E] to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said.”

Some think that she chickened out.
But by now, Esther is firmly in control of the story.
She sees that the king is not ready.

She also understands her power.
She “won” his favor the first time in the bedroom.
She knows that he loves food and wine and women.

She knows how to tantalize him –
how to lead him on.

She started the day facing death –
either her own death or at least the death of her people!
Now she has the king of kings – the great King of Persia –
eating out of her hand!

Of course, she has no idea whether he will be ready tomorrow!
What will happen tomorrow to convince the king to do what she asks?
That's not her job.
She has invoked the name of her God –
remember “YHWH” – let the king and Haman come today!

Remember this.
It is not *your job* to change people's hearts.
You are not the Holy Spirit.

But it *is your job* to walk faithfully – to do and to say and to love
as God has called you.

Esther walks wisely and faithfully – both in her daring to approach the king,
and in her recognition that now is *not* the time to speak!

How often would this continue?

How many nights would she keep repeating “tomorrow”?
Until she sees that the time is right.

So far, in our narrative, everything has been going the wrong direction.

Esther became queen of the harem –
but then there was a second gathering of virgins...
Mordecai was advanced in the king’s service –
but then Haman was promoted...

and now it looks like the Jews are going to be destroyed...

And so the narrative turns our focus to Haman:

2. “That Day” – When the Honor of the King Is Not Sufficient (5:9-14)

a. Mordecai’s Disrespect (v9)

⁹ And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king’s gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai.

Haman is a faithful disciple of Ahasuerus.

He also is driven by anger, women, and advisors.
And, like Xerxes, he is quick to feel the sting of being “disrespected.”

So after the exalted privilege of dining with the King and Queen,
when he saw Mordecai in the king’s gate –
that Mordecai neither rose nor trembled before him...

Respect is important.

Paul says in Romans 13:7,
“Pay to all what is owed to them:
taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed;
respect to whom respect is owed; honor to whom honor is owed.”
Respect and honor should be given to those who are in positions of authority.

But if you mistreat those under your care, you insult God himself.
As Proverbs 14:31 puts it,

“Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,
but he who is generous to the needy honors him.”

Why doesn’t Mordecai bow?
Why doesn’t he at least rise in Haman’s presence?

Mordecai’s intransigence was what brought the decree of death upon the Jews!
But Mordecai cannot bring himself to honor Haman – the Agagite –
the one who represents (and embodies) all that is opposed to God.

But here the focus is more on Haman’s reaction.
He is beside himself with anger!
But for the moment, he restrains himself:

b. Haman’s Wrath (v10-13)

¹⁰ Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh. ¹¹ And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. ¹² Then Haman said, “Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. ¹³ Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king’s gate.”

This is Haman “restrained” – boasting at his stuff and his status –
recounting the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons,
all his promotions and honors from the king...

And then the ironies begin:
“Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared.”

Ah, but Haman, do you know whose cousin “Queen Esther” is?!

And I’m supposed to go back for another feast tomorrow...
But all this is worth nothing to me – so long as I see Mordecai the Jew
sitting at the king’s gate!

While Mordecai and Esther are working for the good of their people –
and thus the good of all humanity –
Haman is only concerned for himself, his honor, his status.

And while he has everything he could ever want –
there is one thing lacking!

Mordecai is still alive.

And I have to wait 11 months for him to die!!

It is noteworthy that once again a woman takes the lead in giving counsel –
this time, Haman's wife, Zeresh.

c. Zeresh's Counsel (v14)

¹⁴ *Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, “Let a gallows^[d] fifty cubits^[e] high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast.” This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.*

All his friends are said to join in consenting to this course of action –
but Zeresh is the only one named.

Don't wait until the feast tomorrow!
Go to the king in the morning!

Notice that neither Haman nor his wife
are concerned about the whole “no one goes to the king” idea!
Haman is exempt from such concerns.

But if you want to have a good time at the banquet tomorrow –
go to the king and have Mordecai executed first!

You may have noticed that Esther went to the king on the third day.
And now on the third day a gallows is built.
You should be seeing a sort of prefiguring of the cross.
But of course, in Esther, it will be the bad guy who is hung on the gallows –
in Jesus it will be the good guy.

In Jesus the cross comes *first* – then the three days!

But also notice another irony.
Xerxes had followed the advice of his counselors in chapter 1 –
and issued a decree that every man was to be master of his own house!
But now Haman is following his wife's advice.
(You can see who wears the pants in his family!)

But that night,

3. “That Night” – When the Honor of the King Is Sufficient (6:1-14)
a. Mordecai's Lack of Honor (v1-3)

6 On that night the king could not sleep. And he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king.

There's nothing more soporific than reading a chronicle of the king's memorable deeds!
But it doesn't work.
He remains awake – and pretty clearly doesn't remember much about his own life!

² And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana[¶] and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.
³ And the king said, "What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" The king's young men who attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him."

Now... what are the odds of this happening?
Here's a king who has a harem full of women –
he can't sleep – no, don't call for a woman
(maybe chalk that up to Esther –
she has him intrigued –
but he's not going to call for her,
there is some game afoot, but he doesn't know what it is).
So he calls for a reading of the chronicles.

The Chronicles of Ahasuerus are a testimony to the importance of the written word.
How good is your memory?
How well will you remember the important things of the past?
If no one ever wrote down what Mordecai had done
then the Jews would have been slaughtered.
(And that's why the book of Esther is written –
so that the Jews will remember their salvation!)

And on that night, they happened to read the section about Mordecai!

On the night when Haman arrives before dawn, ready with his own plot!!

So just as our insomniac king is wondering what honor to bestow on Mordecai,
his favorite counselor arrives – ready to ask for Mordecai's head!

b. Haman's Counsel (v4-11)

⁴ And the king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows[¶] that he had prepared for him. ⁵ And the king's young men told him, "Haman is there, standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in."

Ah! Haman is here!
Excellent!
He is my favorite counselor!

But before Haman can say a word

(after all, one does not simply burst in to the King of Kings
and demand favors on the spot!)

⁶ So Haman came in, and the king said to him, “What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?” And Haman said to himself, “Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?”

Ah yes, Haman is so full of himself
that he cannot imagine that the king would delight to honor anyone else!
You're so vain, you think that this song is about you!

I suspect most of us are more like Haman than we would like to admit.
We live our lives as though we were the central character in the play.

Esther was that way – until three days ago.
Three days ago, Esther realized that she was *not* the central character in the play.
Ironically, that was the moment when Esther *became* the central character!

When she became willing to die so that her people might live –
when she denied herself, took up her cross, and followed Jesus –
she became joined to the central character in history,
the one whose cross became the crux of all history!

When you realize that your life is only a small part in the fabric of history –
when you realize that you are not your own, but belong body and soul,
in life and in death, to your faithful Savior, Jesus Christ –
then you wind up with a significance that cannot be measured in stuff or status!

But Haman remains fixated on stuff and status:

⁷ And Haman said to the king, “For the man whom the king delights to honor, ⁸ let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown^[h] is set. ⁹ And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king’s most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: ‘Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.’”

You can tell that this is Haman's dream!
For most of us, we'd probably prefer a cash reward – or something more practical!
But for one of the wealthiest men in Persia,
he already has *everything*.
He has *bankrolled* the king –
so all that's left is the pageantry of royalty.

He dreams of being the king!
He knows that won't happen –
but he would like to experience it for a day!

And Xerxes loves it.
Of course!
What a fine way to honor someone!
A noble herald proclaiming the King's edict!
It's cheap, it's easy – and who better to carry it out than the fellow who thought it up!!

¹⁰ Then the king said to Haman, “Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned.”
¹¹ So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.”

One commentator notes well that the royal robes here
“are, for Mordecai, garments of celebration, communication, and proclamation –
but still superficial ones, for despite the satisfaction...of Haman's humiliation,
Mordecai is still facing impending death.
But for Haman, these royal robes might as well be sackcloth: his honor is in tatters.”
(Wells, 66)

Can you even imagine what passed through Haman's mind and heart
as he carried out the king's decree?

I was going to ask the king to have Mordecai killed –
but instead I spend the first half of the day marching around the city *on foot* –
leading Mordecai through the square of the city proclaiming,
“thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor”!

And I had to make it look good!
I couldn't use a sarcastic tone – no, that would not work at all!
I had to act like I meant it!

But when his march of shame was over,

c. Zeresh's Warning (v12-13)
¹² Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate.

Can you even imagine what was passing through Mordecai's mind and heart?
Our text gives us no clue.
But one moment, Mordecai is sitting at the king's gate,
and the next moment, Haman shows up.

And we are told that *Haman* dressed Mordecai in the robes.

I'm sure we would love to think of Haman gritting his teeth and grumbling...

Inwardly, no doubt, he was.

But as a courtier of the King – he would be skilled in etiquette.

He cannot betray himself now!

Mordecai would doubtless be told that the king wished to honor him

for saving the king's life –

and so the king had commanded Haman to parade him through the city.

Of course, there were many in the city

who knew that Haman was behind the decree against the Jews.

And there were many who knew that Mordecai was a Jew.

And since all of this is happening in the square of the city,

where everyone knew each other –

no doubt there were many who would say –

“Isn’t that Haman honoring Mordecai?”

“He hates Mordecai!”

“Mordecai never bowed to him – and now Haman is honoring Mordecai!”

This was a complete and total humiliation for Haman:

But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered.

Early that morning, he had described a royal coronation –

but instead, he has attended his own funeral! (Wells, 67)

¹³ *And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, “If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him.”*

Again Zeresh takes center stage (together with his friends – his “wise men” – his counselors), and she says,

Yeah, I don’t think you’re going to make it out of this one!

There is a double meaning in the way that she says it.

The first meaning is probably the one she intended –

If Mordecai is a Jew – and you have tried to annihilate the Jews –

then your schemes are in big trouble!

But behind that is the meaning of our author:

Don’t mess with the Jews!

But before they can say any more,

Conclusion: An Ominous Arrival (v14)

¹⁴ While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared.

Yeah, that's an ominous moment.

There's nothing particularly ominous about the king's eunuchs arriving.

They would have arrived the evening before as well –

it was a sign of honor, to be escorted to the palace by the king's eunuchs!

Haman would not have noticed the omen.

Because he does not know that Esther is Mordecai's cousin.

I love the way that Samuel Wells puts it here:

"In Christian eyes Mordecai's reward and Haman's humiliation constitute the events of a rather differently shaped Holy Saturday. Esther has laid down her life for her people, and she and her people are about to find resurrection and deliverance. This is the day in between the one and the other. Like Holy Saturday, a great amount has already been done and the final sacrifice has already been made. Yet like Holy Saturday, if events were to stop here, salvation would not have come. It is a pause that looks back and looks forward. But in the playful, exaggerated, slightly absurd world of Esther, this pause is not a silent one. It is a frolic of ridicule and reversal."

(Wells 67).