

The Invisible Hand of God

Excerpts from the Book of Esther
Psalm 124

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One of the advantages of using the lectionary as the means of selecting scripture texts for preaching on Sunday morning is that over a three-year period, every book of the Bible is included. There are some books of the Bible, such as the book of Esther, that only come up one Sunday during the three-year cycle of the lectionary. And while it is good that every book receives at least some attention in the lectionary, one pitfall for the books that only occupy one week is that it is difficult if not impossible to treat fully the material of the book on one Sunday. Some of the books of the Bible contain only one chapter, like Philemon or Jude or Obadiah, so it's possible to address their material on one Sunday. But for a book like Esther, which contains 10 chapters, it is impossible to gain insight into the whole book with only a few verses. And so instead of focusing on the two small passages from Esther that the Lectionary sets aside for this morning, I would like to recount the story of the book, and highlight some of its more salient implications for our faith today.

The story of this little-known Old Testament book provides the explanation and history behind the Jewish celebration of the feast of Purim. The book of Esther is set in the Persian city of Susa. Ancient Persia occupied what is now modern-day Iran. The people of Israel had been taken from Jerusalem and sent into exile. It is thought that the events of Esther take place some time some time in the mid-fifth century B.C. The king of Persia at the time is named Xerxes.

Esther is a young Jewish woman, living in exile with her uncle Mordecai, who has adopted her as his stepdaughter. In the wake of a royal scandal that resulted in the Persian queen being deposed, a search is made for a suitable young maiden who will serve as the next queen. It says in chapter 2, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa... Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen..."¹ Through a series of happenstances, Esther gains the king's favor and she is chosen to be queen, though the king is unaware of her Jewish heritage.

Meanwhile, Esther's uncle Mordecai hears of a plot to assassinate the king. According to the account, "Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were hanged on a gallows."² In the aftermath the king conducts a shake-down of his court, and he appoints a man named Haman to be his second-in-command.

Haman is an arrogant man, and he demands that all the king's subjects show their respect by bowing to him. Mordecai, though, refuses to bow to Haman. When Haman is not accorded the respect from Mordecai that Haman believes is his due, Haman sets in motion a plot to eliminate all the Jews throughout the kingdom. Haman convinces King Xerxes that the Jews are a treasonous people and a threat to the national security. In the third chapter of Esther Haman deceives Xerxes into issuing an edict calling for the slaughter of all Jews throughout the kingdom:

¹ Esther 2:2-4

² Esther 2:22-23

He said, "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business."³

The king then orders the edict.

As the day of terror approaches, Haman also orders that a public gallows be built, on which he plans to have Mordecai executed.

Mordecai hears of the edict, and he convinces Esther to use her influence to expose Haman's evil intent and to save the Jewish people from annihilation. In his conversation with Esther, Mordecai appeals to divine providence as having put her in the position to influence a decision that will save her people: "And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this."⁴ Esther agrees to see the king, only after making Mordecai promise that he will have the Jews fast for three days, interceding for Esther; for Esther would have to risk her life to go and see the king uninvited.

Esther convinces King Xerxes to host a dinner to which Haman is invited. During that dinner Esther pleads with Xerxes to reverse his edict against the Jews, revealing her own identity as a Jew, and exposing Haman for the evil man that he is. Instead of Mordecai hanging from the gallows, it is Haman himself who is executed, while Mordecai is appointed to the position of second-in-command over the kingdom. The Jews are spared from slaughter, and there is great rejoicing throughout the kingdom. It is a fairy-tale ending.

One of the most notable features of the book of Esther is that there is no mention of God. Not once in the Hebrew text will you find a reference to God. That was a subject of some embarrassment to later editors of the book, who tried to insert references to God in the later Greek translations of the book. But the book as it was first written contains no mention of God.

So what do you do when there is no mention of God? In an increasingly non-religious world as is ours today, where God is largely ignored, how can we still operate as faithful people of God? How can we still find God when God is seemingly absent? I would like to share three insights from the book of Esther to help us live as the people of God even when others would assume God to be absent.

The first lesson from Esther is to realize that just because God is not named does not mean that God is not at work. The theology of the book of Esther hinges on the simple question Mordecai poses to Esther. Mordecai has approached Esther to implore her to use her influence with the king to foil the plot by Haman. Practically speaking, Esther is the only realistic hope to save the Jews from slaughter. As Mordecai entreats Esther to action on behalf of all Jews in Persia, he asks this question in the fourth chapter: "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"⁵

It is an acknowledgment that things don't just happen by coincidence. Mordecai recognizes that Esther, a young Jewish woman, has been made queen for a greater purpose than the pleasure of the king. Mordecai recognizes that Esther has been made queen in order to be in a position to deliver the Jews from annihilation.

For such a time as this... You see, just because God is not named doesn't mean that God is not at work. The truth is, in his providence God is always at work. God is sovereign over all the world. God doesn't have to forcefully intervene with lightning or fire from heaven or drama in order to be operative in our lives.

³ Esther 3:8-10

⁴ Esther 4:14

⁵ Esther 4:14

The truth is, God is always involved in our lives. Nothing happens by coincidence. It is all a part of the providence of God.

For such a time as this... There is for every one of us a divinely appointed purpose. None of us is here as a result of random, accidental events. The book of Esther reminds us to discern what greater purpose there is to our being, to our position in life, to our own particular spheres of influence. It is a call for us to recognize that, using the words of the Psalm, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

Our help is in the name of the Lord. That will always be true, no matter whether or not God's name is spoken. You don't have to utter the name of God for that to be true.

The second lesson I take from the book of Esther is that, even though God may seem silent, that doesn't absolve us from our responsibility to act with righteousness and justice, even when that means civil disobedience. Both Mordecai and Esther engage in what we might call holy disobedience. Mordecai does so by refusing to bow to Haman. And Esther does so by approaching the king despite the fact that she does not have permission to do so. Both Mordecai and Esther engage in risky, disobedient action because righteousness and justice demand that they do. If Mordecai bows to Haman, he would be acknowledging that Haman is more worthy of reverence than the king. And if Esther does not approach the king, then she would be abandoning God's people.

You see, even in a world that largely ignores God—maybe even especially in a world that largely ignores God—we have the responsibility to do stand up for what is right. Ours is a God who champions the cause of the poor, and so should we. Ours is a God who is an ally of the insignificant, and so should we be. Ours is a God who protects the weak and speaks for the voiceless, and seeks justice for the oppressed—and so should we.

In a world that turns a blind eye to the poor, or does not pay attention to the insignificant, or that does not care for the weak or speak for the voiceless or seek justice for the oppressed, the people of God must do the right thing and take a stand for the good.

Even if it means bucking the authorities.

Finally, the book of Esther shows us that, even when the hand of God is invisible we should not doubt the goodness and faithfulness of God. For in the end the story is not about how a couple of people used cunning and guile to save the Jewish people, but how God used two of God's humble servants to save his people. It is a reminder that, even if the hand of God seems invisible, it is not, for God is always at work to redeem his people and fulfill his promises. God had long ago promised Abraham that God would make him into a great nation and use that nation to redeem the world; God was not about to allow a sinister plot by an evil man named Haman interfere with the fulfillment of that promise. God had long ago promised a Messiah to come and redeem the Jews; years of captivity and opposition from other nations did nothing to negate that promise.

God may have been largely silent during the period of exile. But that did not in any way imply that God would fail to fulfill his promises and his purpose of redemption. Even in the silence God is at work for the good of his people.

Good and evil people alike come and go, but God's word never changes. God's promise is always the same. God's purpose of redemption will not be interrupted. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God shall stand forever.⁶

And so just as the people erupted with joy and gladness that they were saved from the hand of evil, so should we be spurred to gratitude when we recognize God's hand at work (whether it is through dramatic acts or simply behind the scenes). The hand of God may be invisible to the human eye. But the

⁶ Isaiah 40:8

hand of God is never idle. It is always at work, for the good of those who love him, who are called according to the purpose.

Even when the hand of God is invisible, the saying is sure and worthy of our complete embrace:
Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.