

“ESTHER’S FIRST FEAST.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Esther 5

Esther’s faith, 5:1-2.

If chapter five was a movie the producer would make these first two verses very dramatic. The camera would move slowly, the music would be foreboding, the tension would be building, Esther’s heart would be pounding, her hands would be shaking, beads of sweat forming on her forehead.

She is walking into a life or death situation with no idea which way it will go. Everything is at stake, her life, the life of all the Jews in the empire. Queen Vashti risked her life by refusing to appear before the king, now Esther risks her life by appearing before the same king.

This is not unsubstantiated, there has been uncovered ancient art depicting a Persian king seated on a throne with a long scepter in his right hand and an attendant standing behind the throne with a large ax.

Going before the king really is risky business especially in light of how unpredictably he has acted in the past and how much he acts on a whim. Will the king hold out his scepter or will she be executed before she can even speak? She really is walking by faith and not by sight. The fact that she is doing the right thing in no way guarantees she will get a good result.

Remember the three men being thrown into the furnace in Daniel 3, they said either God would rescue them, or if not, God is still God and still good and He will do what is right to Him.

Esther said, “If I perish, I perish.” Faithfulness is what we are to pursue, the fruit is entirely in God’s hands. Esther has no control over the outcome.

Have you faced this kind of situation? You know the right thing to do, but you tremble because you have no clue which way it will turn out? It could be good or bad. We experience that in relationships, in work situations, in finances.

What in your life is a sign of faith rather than walking by sight? Making a decision to adopt, to go into some ministry, to take a stand at work that may cost you a promotion or even your job, confronting a good friend about a sin, deciding to leave your career to start something new, when to retire or move out of our home.

Esther lives in a world just like ours, where we are called to live holy and blameless lives before God but without any knowledge of what God will do or how He will bless, whether in this life or in the life to come.

Esther's first feast, 5:3-8.

As she stands before the royal throne robed in royalty, holding her breath, the king extends his scepter to her indicating she won favor, which reminds us of chapter 2 and implies the providence of God. God is there.

Esther has favor, but she still needs wisdom, she must proceed carefully.

The same is true for us, just because God opens a door doesn't mean then that we can rush in and do as we please. If God opens a door for us to share the Gospel, we must still consider our words well and judge the situation and opportunity to make the best and wisest use of it.

The king offers Esther anything and everything *up to half his kingdom*.

We understand this to be hyperbole, a manner of speaking that is not meant to be taken literally. Like when we say, "Your wish is my command." If that was taken literally we could be in big trouble. Give me all your money. Let me have your job.

This is a figure of speech indicating a willingness to be generous. The irony is the way this king seems to issue blank checks, his signet ring to Haman to do with whatever he wishes. Half his kingdom to Esther to do with as she pleases.

We expect Esther to make her request but she delays and we are caught off guard. She may be exercising great wisdom and restraint being well aware of what she will really be asking.

She will be asking the king to reverse the irreversible.

She will be asking the king to overrule the most powerful man in the kingdom to whom the king gave his signet ring. She will be pitting herself against his prime minister, his right hand man.

She will be asking the king to give up 10,000 talents of silver, half the revenue of his kingdom.

She will be revealing her true identity as a Jew.

We are given no hints or clues at her motivation for deferring her request until later.

The tension and suspense are heighten and now include the king. It is further heighten when Haman is included in the request of a feast. We are as much in the dark about what is happening and why as the king and Haman.

The king gets it that Esther's request must be more than just a nice meal together, so he asks his same questions again. He wants to know her wish and her request.

Esther requests a second feast.

Esther finally answers and surprises us again by not addressing Haman's edict, but asking for a second feast together.

By accepting the second invitation the king is implicitly committing himself to give whatever she asks. How wise and prudent and careful she is. She has almost assured the answer she desires. She has him hooked without him knowing he is hooked.

We have watched great wisdom in action, now we will see what great folly looks like.

Haman's folly, 5:9-14.

Haman is the poster child for folly. He is clueless about what Esther is up to and completely misinterprets it. He is thrilled at the opportunities he has, eating with the king and queen. He left that feast "joyful and glad of heart."

The last time someone was joyful and merry of heart was the king back in chapter 1 at his huge banquet just before he made a serious misjudgment regarding Queen Vashti. Good food and too much good wine can lead to serious misjudgments and poor decisions.

Being in a place of power and prestige and position is intoxicating. Sitting at the head table, being catered to and served. Being wined and dined by the rich and famous and powerful is heady stuff, very ego satisfying, and very dangerous.

Almost immediately Haman's mood goes from a great high to a deep pit when he sees Mordecai's disrespect. His little ego bubble is popped. Haman's fragile emotional and mental state are evident in how quickly he flies into a rage.

Haman is a case study in how idols infect our hearts and what happens when our idols are challenged.

His idol is public recognition and respect. When his idol is fed it gives him joy, when his idol is challenged it sends him into a rage. That is a good way to discover your idol. What gives you great joy, and what causes you anger? What pushes your buttons in too good a way and in too bad a way? Your strongest emotions, good and bad, are the clue to finding your biggest idols.

What gives you the biggest feelings of satisfaction, of feeling really good about yourself? And what cause you to be angry way out of proportion to the cause? That's the idol being threatened.

Jesus knows our hearts better than anyone. What is the one thing Jesus would see in us that He would ask us to give up so we could better follow Him?

Haman manages to keep a lid on his wrath until he can get home and get his friends and wife together. Just as we saw Esther's wisdom through her words, now we see Haman's folly through his words. His bruised ego needed to recite how great and important he is.

He boasts of his glory and wealth and power and fame. Certainly his close friends and wife know all of this, that he is the second most important and powerful man in the entire empire. And furthermore:

Esther 5:12 "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."

Blah, blah, blah, ya-da, ya-da, ya-da, me, me, me, I, I, I. Do you hear the hubris, the self-centeredness, the ego? Pride is such an ugly sin.

Proverbs 13:16 ... a fool flaunts his folly.

Proverbs 16:18 Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

The folly of a fool. He has more than anyone else in all the empire, but as is often the case, it is the one thing that we don't have that has a hook in our hearts and reveals our character. Haman has no satisfaction, that Jew Mordecai's disrespect clouds everything else.

Haman is in need of some serious spiritual counseling. He needs help dealing with his anger issue. What would you say to Haman? How could you help him? What would a good counselor say to Haman?

Help him connect the dots. "Haman, what gives you the greatest joy and pleasure, what makes you feel good more than anything else? Haman, what triggers the most anger, what really gets your goat?"

"Your idol is public respect and recognition. Getting significance from what others think, say and do. Caring about the opinion of man, putting too much stock in successes and achievements.

"You need to repent and turn to God to find your significance in Christ, in what can't be touched or changed or effected by people. Die to yourself and start living for others and loving others."

That's the kind of counsel that could have saved Haman's soul. But instead he sought the counsel of those who would feed his ego-idol and say what he wanted to hear.

His wife comes up with a plan. Build a 75 foot high gallows, higher than the king's palace. High enough not just to execute Mordecai but to publicly humiliate him for his humiliation of Haman.

Revenge the size of his ego-idol. A supersized meal to feed his wounded idol. The only way to kill idols is to starve them to death, mortify the flesh, not cater to it and give it more of what it wants.

The chapter ends on an ominous note, "he had the gallows made."

As we come to the end of the chapter tension remains. Esther's one-day delay looks to cost Mordecai's life. He may not live to see the matter resolved.

The chapter opened with Esther's life hanging in the balance and now the chapter closes with Mordecai's life hanging in the balance. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

The chapter opened with great hope when Esther is allowed to approach the king, but now we are back to despair. It looked like God had shown up, but now we aren't so sure. We thought we were seeing God's hand but now it looks like Haman has the upper-hand.

Esther and Haman spend the night thinking their plans are good, that everything will work out as they have planned. Neither knows the plans of the other.

Behind all of this is the mysterious hand of God. He is nudging each person. The king to show favor and accept Esther's invitation. Esther to go slow and feed Haman's ego. Mordecai to drive Haman into an insane rage. His wife to give him terrible counsel to build a gallows and seek the king's permission in the morning.

Proverbs 21:1 The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

God is getting everything ready. And each one is acting exactly according to their own interests and inclinations and temperament and sin. They have total freedom and God has total control. God is at work in the best of intentions and in the worst of motives.

John 13:7 Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand."

God holds all the cards and He will play them at just the right time.

Implications and application.

On the third day.

There is an ancient Jewish commentary that declares “Israel is never left in dire distress more than three days.”

On the third day of Abraham’s journey to sacrifice Isaac, God delivered Isaac.

On the third day of Jacob’s escape from Laban, God told Laban in a dream not to harm Jacob.

On the third day Jonah was delivered from the great fish.

On the third day Esther appeared before the king and he extended the scepter to save her life.

The prophet Hosea says:

Hosea 6:2 After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

The ancient Jewish tradition was deliverance would come after three days.

God’s people were delivered from death and destruction on the third day when the king extended the scepter and with it grace and mercy. The extending of the scepter foreshadowed and set in motion the deliverance of the Jews.

Centuries later Martin Luther in a sermon associated the king’s scepter with the Gospel of Jesus Christ

The Persian king whose word was irrevocable law, the law of the Medes and the Persians, extends the gold scepter and grants her life.

The king of heaven in whose hands is the power of life and death extends the cross of Jesus Christ to the world on the third day that all who reach out by faith to touch the cross-shaped scepter and come into His presence will not die.

We don’t come into God’s presence with fear and trembling, not knowing how He will treat us. We can come without anxiety and in complete confidence. Our God has an open door policy. Because the ax has fallen on Christ, the scepter is always held out to us.

Thanks be to God that He is our king