

“MISS PERSIA.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

August 13, 2017, 6:00PM

Scripture Texts: Esther 2:1-18

The Search for Miss Persia, vss. 1-4.

We know from verse 16 that we are now four years after the parties in chapter one and the dethronement of Vashti. In that time Ahasuerus raised an army of nearly 200,000 and a naval fleet and went off to fight Greece. He was humiliated in defeat by a much smaller army and now was back home licking his wounds and feeling lonely.

Again we see Ahasuerus not making any decisions without consulting others. They devise a plan that pleases the king which is no surprise, as he is clearly a man taken in by excess and anything self-indulgent.

Most kings care about political and familial ties and connections, marrying royalty or those who help them politically. Only three qualifications are given, young, never married, beautiful, nothing about character. This is a culture as superficial as ours, all about looks and appearances, no depth or substance. This is truly a shallow man.

We are reminded again that Persian kings were absolute dictators and everyone was their subject to whom he could do whatever he pleased. Persian kings were known for their many wives and concubines. They also took young boys and made them eunuchs to serve in the harems and palaces.

At considerable expense they gather up every beautiful young virgin in all 127 provinces of the kingdom and bring them to the capital of Susa and into the king's harem.

Children's Bibles and children's books that tell the Esther story generally tell it like a beauty contest or a Cinderella story. In the Cinderella story all she had to do was dance with the prince. Clearly this is a much more sordid tale. The life of a concubine is not the stuff of fairy tales and happily ever afterwards. The losers never get to go home.

A Jew Named Mordecai and His Niece Esther, vss. 5-7.

Now there was a Jew in Susa. Here we are given a brief glimpse into the family life of a Jew in captivity in the capital.

After the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and seventy years of captivity, under the new reign of Cyrus of Persia, the Jews had been given permission to return to their homeland. But that was over 40 years ago and obviously many stayed where they had been scattered during exile.

The plight of the Jews is emphasized by the triple use of the term carried away (exiled). These are an alien people far from their roots and homeland. Mordecai would never have known any other life having been born in exile.

He apparently worked in or around the citadel where the palace was, on a hill overlooking Susa. He had risen to some kind of important status as an imperial employee.

Mordecai and Esther are called Jews but called by their Babylonian names, they are caught between two worlds and two worldviews with two identities. Jews living in a Persian culture.

She is no different than many Christians and many teenagers who struggle with their identity, should they go along with the crowd or stand up for their convictions. Will they follow the standards of the Bible or of the culture? Will they do what's right or what everyone else is doing? Will they keep their religion just on Sunday, or every day?

How will they do business, fill out forms, take tests, answer questions, share their faith, stand up for others and against injustice?

Every Christian in this culture will find themselves in a situation like Esther at some point facing the choice between compromise and integrity, accommodating themselves to the culture, when in Roman do as the Romans do; and living consistently and faithfully for Christ and His Gospel.

There is a contrast here with Daniel. Remember when the edict went out that no one could pray to any god, and Daniel went to his room, opened the window and face Jerusalem prayed, just as he always had.

No one can serve two masters, he will hate one and love the other.

Esther's Preparation, vss. 8-14.

Esther stands out from all the other virgins and she gains the favor of the chief of the harem, Hegai, and everyone (vs. 15). Later she will find favor with the king and after that use this favor to the benefit of her people.

We are reminded of the favor Joseph had with Potiphar and later with the prison guard and finally with the Pharaoh. We see the hidden hand of providence in both stories. Greater purposes are at work here.

Esther receives the best care and extra attention, and the best place in the harem.

Rather than telling her to remain faithful and stand up for the one true God, Mordecai commands her to keep her identity, nationality and religious background hidden. We are not told why. It would appear that it didn't matter to the king as he took girls from every province and cared only about their looks.

Why does Mordecai allow this, why doesn't he hide her or defend her or let her identity be known? Are we aware of and afraid of the anti-Semitism that comes out in the next chapter?

As a result, she has to compromise her religion. Jewish identity had many signs or markers, Sabbath keeping, kosher food laws, laws against marrying outside the faith, no sex before marriage. Esther breaks them all. She doesn't deny her faith, she just hides it.

It would seem she has embraced the values of the culture, and in fact excels in them above everyone else.

Esther's Promotion, vss. 15-18.

Each girl is given whatever she wants for her night with the king, presumably clothes, jewelry, perfumes, oils, whatever. She has one chance, one night to hang all her hopes on, with the competition and odds stacked against her.

When her night is over she goes to a different harem for the king's concubines where she lives out a rather pointless existence in secluded luxury. She might never see her home or family again and die in anonymity, forbidden to ever become someone's wife and or a mother. If any children were conceived they wouldn't be legitimate heirs to the throne.

The story is told in a way to highlight the odds Esther is up against, that she would be chosen from so many. A bit like winning the lottery, if indeed it is winning.

She is one among many, yet she stands out and is distinguished from all the rest. Superlatives are piled up.

Esther 2:17 The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

She is exactly what this godless, pagan king is looking for in a wife and more. And he gives another great lavish feast. On top of that he grants a remission of taxes and gives many royal gifts. This is a very happy king, and when the king is happy everyone is happy.

As Vashti had refused to come to a party wearing the crown, now Esther comes to a party wearing her's. Ahasuerus is up to his old form here with another week-long feast for all his officials from all the provinces.

Implications and Application.

Persia and America.

Lest we think this culture and these foreign and pagan ways are long ago and far away, little has changed. Through the magic of the internet every man can have his own virtual harem collecting images of women. Some posted willingly, others coerced by some boyfriend or stranger.

Our world is just as devoid of any Biblical understanding of love and marriage and sex as Persia. Our culture is just as obsessed with beauty and sex as King Ahasuerus.

What Ahasuerus did was degrading, abusing and exploiting his power for his own selfish desires. Intimacy was reduced to lust. There is nothing here of husbands and wives loving each other exclusively until death, nothing of honoring the marriage bed and keeping it pure.

Romans 1:21-26 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ...

24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ... 26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.

God is handing our culture over to degrading and dishonorable passions and lust. It is creeping closer and closer to our homes and families and reaching younger and younger. It is just a few clicks away for anyone possessing a computer or smart phone or iPad.

Disobedience and its consequences.

Sin and disobedience have consequence, sometimes consequences that are far reaching.

Every one of our lives are deeply scarred and effected by the sin of Adam. And closer to home all of our lives are scarred by the sins of our parents and grandparents. We all carry in us a father wound.

How did Esther end up in this compromising situation? Because of the sins and disobedience of her great grandparents and beyond. The Jewish people had rebelled and disobeyed and committed idolatry against their God and broken the covenant so many times that God finally made good on His promise that if they did that He would exile them out of the Promised Land.

The destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem were not just the work of a superior foreign army, they were the judgment of God on His own people.

When the 70 years were over and the people were allowed to return, some stayed. One of the dangers or consequences of sin and staying in it is we get comfortable there, or we make excuse for it or our consciences become calloused to the point we don't see what's wrong with it any more.

Susa seemed better than Jerusalem. If Mordecai and Esther had returned she wouldn't have been compromised in this way. She got to be queen, but at what cost?

Compromise and grace.

Over the centuries many attempts have been made to cover up or make excuses for Esther's immoral actions.

Some emphasize her piety, some say she was coerced and had no choice, she is a victim of rape. But she could have spoken up and faced the consequences like Daniel. Daniel chose to put God first and suffer the result. Joseph resisted the advances of Potipher's wife and went to prison for it.

The truth is Esther was a Jewish girl who concealed her identity and compromised her religious convictions and slept with a pagan king. She compromised herself. She violated Scriptures prohibitions of intermarriage. She did have a choice. She could have resisted even if it cost her life.

Mordecai and Esther agreed to a plan, without considering God in the plan at all.

Esther does not stand out as a moral role model, the way Joseph, Ruth or Daniel do. The author makes no attempt to cast her in a positive or negative light. Her virtue is veiled.

We are reminded again that Scripture is not filled with stories of spiritual giants who do great acts for God. Scripture is the story of God doing great things through sinners. Noah got drunk, Abraham lied, Jacob deceived, Moses got angry, David committed adultery and murder, Peter betrayed Jesus.

All through Scripture are the stories of sin and failure and how God providentially and powerfully used them all for His glory and for His redemptive purposes. Esther is guilty of compromise, yet God took that and used it to save her people.

We must be careful from so easily pointing the finger at Esther and Mordecai for their compromises. We face the same temptations in a culture increasingly hostile to our faith.

How often in the face of terrible temptations or possible suffering have we backed down, or turned the other way, or reminded silent? How often have we followed the ease path, gone with the flow, with the spirit of the age? How often have we compromised a standard, hid who we are, done what we know is wrong?

We have compromised even when our lives weren't depending on it like some in the world. We just did it to avoid some uncomfortable situation or not be thought poorly of. Everyone one of us is guilty as charged, we are all Esther. Not one of us is left who can cast the first stone.

Some might think I am painting Esther in too bad of a light, but let's face it none of us are as good as we want others to think.

But. But what is the good news of the Gospel? God takes imperfect, broken sinful humans like us and redeems us and our actions and uses us and them for His greater good purposes.

Regardless of our motives or intentions or sinful choices, God sovereignly and lovingly rules and over rules. God works through even the most sinful of actions and imperfect people to accomplish his perfect purposes.

Regardless of how spiritual or secular, how godly or pagan the circumstances or events God is not hindered. God is as much at work in North Korea as in the Vatican or Grand Rapids. He is as much at work in the Oval Office as He is in your office.

God is never shocked or surprised by what mankind thinks up or does. Nor are His purposes or plans hindered by moral failures.

It doesn't excuse what we have done, we are still held responsible and have to face and deal with the consequences, but God is able to take moral failure and compromise and weave it into His redemptive purposes.

As Joni Erikson Tada says, "God permits what He hates to accomplish what He loves."

There is an old Portuguese proverb, "God writes straight with crooked lines."

Satan makes a mess of someone's life as if to defy God and say "Let's see you make something good out of this" and God does.

Sin and compromise are not too big for God. God's providence and God's grace are bigger and more powerful than our worst sin and our worse mistakes and our worst compromises.

Some of us are carrying around overwhelming guilt and shame and regret for things we have said and done. Sexual sin, lust, greed, abuse, compromise, abortion, lying, stealing, divorce, anger, bitterness. Some may think they are hopeless, beyond redemption, usefulness to God.

God's grace is bigger than one night, one action, one accident, one mistake, or a lifetime of them. God's grace is greater than Esther's sexual immorality and He can turn it for good in His sovereign plan. Sin doesn't disqualify us from being used by God.

Here we are 2,500 years later reading her story and we see the big picture, what she couldn't see or know. Here we are learning from her life and benefiting from her story.

All we bring to God are crooked lines and He takes them and writes something straight.

How to live in Persia.

1. Remember who you are and whose you are.

Peter starts his first letter, "To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion." He addresses his fellow believers as exiles, as if that's their official name.

We are citizens of a new kingdom and we have a new King. Love Jesus more than the world or anything the world offers. We are aliens and sojourners in a foreign land.

2. Live in the world but not of the world.

A ship in the water is a good thing, but when the water gets in the ship that is a bad thing. We aren't called to separate ourselves like monks, but to be salt and light in the world. Just don't let your salt lose its taste or hide your light under a basket.

Recognize the enemy and the pagan worldview of our world, how it is tearing down the Word of God. Be discerning and learn when to resist and say on and flee temptation.

3. Keep your eye on your true home, on the prize of heaven.

Hebrews 11:16 They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

God is not ashamed to be called our God. Don't be ashamed to call Him your God, and don't be afraid to live as aliens for His glory.