

“THE FEAST OF PURIM.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

January 21, 2018, 6:00 PM

Scripture Texts: Esther 9:18-32

Introduction.

How many of us have trouble remembering things? And how many of us can testify it seems to get worse as we get older? But it isn't just an age thing. We are all prone to forget some things, events and experiences from our past.

In school we are taught so many things and teachers know that there are tricks to getting things to stick in our heads. These memory aids are called mnemonic devices, things that help us remember.

Roy G Biv

Every Good Boy Does Fine (lines of treble)

FACE (spaces of treble)

HOMES for the names of the Great Lakes

Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally, order of operations in pre-algebra.

Thirty days hath September, April, June, and November; All the rest have thirty-one,

Or the knuckle mnemonic.

I before E except after C or when sounding like A in neighbor and weigh.

A pints a pound the world around (so a gallon is eight pounds).

In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

We learn songs for our ABCs or books of the Bible or Presidents or countries of the world.

A consistent theme in Scripture is the importance of pausing to remember God's goodness, God's deliverance, God's work on our behalf.

Repeatedly God called His people to pile up memorial stones to remember and to pass on to the next generations what God had done.

Remembering is important and God created ways in the OT and the NT for us to remember important events in our spiritual history.

There are several annual Jewish feasts commanded by God all of which celebrate miraculous events surrounding the people of God.

Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost are all memory events, meant to help us remember and reflect and rejoice over who God is, what He does, and how active He is in our lives and in our deliverance and salvation.

Any remembrance of God's intervention and deliverance should be celebratory, not just to remember but to focus on the significance and meaning.

So Purim is a powerful and important memory device given to the Jews to remember their deliverance for the wicked plot of Haman. After turning the tables, now they spread the tables.

The Letter of Mordecai, vss. 20-28.

The pace of the book of Esther shifts dramatically now. The action is over, the tension is resolved. Now it's time to party.

The day after the plot that was intended to destroy all the Jews, has become a day for feasting and celebrating for all Jews.

The purpose of Mordecai's letter was twofold, to record and to command.

First, he wrote down what happened so the details would not be lost. We forget, memories fade, details get blurry. This why I commend journals and writing down grace notes and God-sightings, training our minds to see God at work in the details of our lives.

Mordecai was in the best position to write down what Haman did and what he intended and how the reversals came about through what Esther did and what King Ahasuerus did.

Mordecai summarizes the history in verses 24-25.

Haman the Agagite, an enemy of all the Jews had plotted to destroy all the Jews and by casting the pur (the lot; rolling the dice) he set the date to destroy and kill and annihilate all God's people. But King Ahasuerus when made aware intervened and Haman and his sons were impaled on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai.

Mordecai decreed and established the 14th and 15th days of Adar as the two days each year for celebrating.

The Letter of Esther, vss. 29-32.

The purpose of Esther's letter was to confirm Mordecai's letter. She too wrote an official letter to all the Jews scattered throughout the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire.

Her official title is used and her Jewish ancestry is given.

This may be an example of Numbers 35:30 where matters must be established by two witnesses.

In addition to the feasting, gladness and sharing of gifts, Esther adds a note of fasting and lamentation. So some Jews fast on Adar 13.

There is an important truth in this. They can only truly enter into the joy of the feasting if they first remember what they were delivered from and how close they came to destruction.

The Gospel is only good news to those who truly remember how great our sin is and how serious our offense against a holy God and how terrible a hell awaited us. Then the Gospel is exceedingly great news.

I am reminded of our Heidelberg Catechism that begins with misery before mercy, guilt before grace, death before deliverance, sin before salvation.

The Purpose of Purim.

Purim is the plural of pur, a Persian word for lots or dice. Purim only occurs in this chapter of the Bible.

Purim is different from all the other feasts in the OT. It was not commanded by God, but by political authorities, Mordecai and Esther, not spiritual authorities like priests or prophets.

This feast seems more horizontal than vertical. There is no mention of God, no mention of passing on to the children what God has done. And it focuses on the Jews getting the victory rather than God gaining the victory.

Esther 9:22 as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday;

The purpose of Purim is to remember and to reflect on God's deliverance and how He has given relief and rest to His people.

If you have ever experienced some great trauma or fear or great pain then you may be familiar with the euphoria that can come over you if you are given relief from that trauma or fear or pain.

There is a euphoria that comes from relieve after great fear or trauma or pain.

The euphoria after a kidney stone passes.

The euphoria after the birth of a child, holding a human person in our arms.

The euphoria after the all clear message went out after the false alert in Hawaii.

The Jews were supposed to be killed and destroyed and they are alive. Defeat has turned to victory.

Psalm 30:11 You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;
you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness,

We saw it last Sunday evening in the restaurant of our hotel. The Minnesota Vikings were winning and then losing and then winning and then losing. There was only 10 seconds left, it

looked utterly hopeless, there was a cloud of depression over the whole city and then on the last play a touchdown and victory. The whole place erupted in ecstatic celebration.

After an emotional come from behind victory in the last second when your team wins, you don't just say, "Oh, good. I'm glad." It is cause for celebration.

One of the songs they sing at their feast says: "All the world was struck with amazement, when Haman's Pur became our Purim."

Purim was a day of feasting and celebrating. Deliverance from death was cause for worship, for rejoicing, for giving praise to whom praise is due.

After crossing the Red Sea, the people sang to God (Exodus 15).

After the victories at Jericho and Ai the people renewed the covenant (Joshua 8).

Many of the Psalms worship God with praise and thanks for His deliverance.

The seals are opened in Revelation 5.

This book was especially precious to the Jews during the holocaust. So much so that the Nazis would kill on the spot any Jew who had in their possession a copy of Esther. Incarcerated Jews would write out copies from memory. It gave them assurance and hope and peace knowing that in the end their enemies would not triumph. Hitler would not annihilate the Jews.

No generation of Jews can so closely identify with the book of Esther as the post-holocaust Jews today. One-third of all the Jews in the world were murdered last century.

Implications and application.

Remembering for the Jews and for Christians is always theological, it always involves reflecting of who God is and how God is actively involved in our lives and how He cares for us and carries us. Remembering involves seeking to grasp the richness and the goodness of God.

"Celebrations are useful if lessons are learned from it. Monuments and anniversaries give perspective to our fast paced lives. When we reflect on God's grace in this way to us, it increases our faith in Him (Psalm 136). It prevents us being swept along in a rootless and insignificant existence. However, it is good for our families to celebrate the past grace of God to us" (Ferguson, p. 66).

For this reason, remembering should always lead to action, to a response, otherwise our remembering is fruitless. Remembering great news is cause for worship, cause for rejoicing, cause for celebrating, cause for breaking our normal routine.

Good news must be celebrated. Birthdays, baptisms, graduations, weddings, anniversaries, retirements, special occasions.

I heard the Vander Woude's celebrating Lane's 8th birthday yesterday in the loft. There was food and family, singing and laughter, gifts and games. Such as there should be when we celebrate God's gift of life.

When God does great things and acts on our behalf, that is cause for celebrating and rejoicing. It is always good and right to celebrate God's goodness.

Feasting and drinking, joy and gladness are pleasing to God, He affirms it again and again in Scripture. Our God is a joyful God, our God is a God who turns weeping into rejoicing, mourning into joy; tears to laughter.

These special occasions in our lives call for celebrating, but do we remember to acknowledge God and His goodness and grace. On birthdays do we remember to thank the Lord and giver of life? Do we give thanks to whom thanks is most due?

Are we living horizontally or vertically?

God is our Pur.

Proverbs 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

Psalm 16:5-6 The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.
6 The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

God holds our pur, He casts it, He determines our lot, our life, our portion.
From Him we receive all that He has for us, no more, no less. He is our inheritance.

Are we living horizontally or vertically?

Easter is our Purim.

People sometimes ask if Christians should keep the feasts of the OT. God gave the sacrifices and the feasts in the OT to point to Christ, so once we have Christ we have the fulfillment of the sacrifices and the feasts.

They are shadows, Christ is the light. The finished work of Christ on the cross fulfilled the OT. Christ is superior to Moses and to the temple and to the sacrifices.

If it is appropriate for Jews to celebrate the great reversal in Esther, how much more is it right that we celebrate the greatest reversal of all history? How much more should we be on our knees in thanksgiving to our great and glorious God?

Easter is when we remember that God pulled off the greatest reversal in the history of the world, when the darkest day in history was turned into the brightest and most glorious day of all.

God can take the darkest moments and turn them around and use them for good.
When everything seems out of control, God is in control.
When it seems like God has abandoned them and forsaken them, that is when He is most present.

God opened the grave, emptied the tomb, raised the dead, defeated death and sin and Satan.

The day that Satan sought to destroy God's Son was the day God reversed everything and sent relief to His people from all sin and evil. Jesus conquered sin and death and hell, and set His people free.

Colossians 2:15 He [God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him [Christ].

As Easter is our Purim, so every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection, a celebration of the great reversal. So there should be a note of celebration and thanksgiving and gladness and joy.

The Lord's Table is the Christian's feast.

At it we remember God's relief from our enemies. We celebrate that our sins are forgiven, that we fear death no more because it is conquered. We remember God's faithfulness to His promises and how He loves and cares for and protects His children.

In the book of Esther God's name is never mentioned. But we don't have to see Him to know that He is everywhere present. Though we don't see Him, yet we believe Him.

I Peter 1:8-9 Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, 9 obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Don't make hasty judgments in the middle of the story. Don't judge God based on the middle of the story. We don't have to understand the path to know where it ends. God knows and has written the end. The end is certain. God is powerful to keep all His promises.

The disciples forgot about Purim, they judged the story based on their present circumstances. Jesus' death took them down into despair and hopelessness and fear. They thought the middle was the end, but it was only the middle.

Our peace and rest is different. Purim celebrated a relief and peace from their enemies, but fickle Ahasuerus is still on the throne and kingdoms rise and fall. The peace and rest this world offers is fragile and short-lived. Our peace and rest is different, it is secure and lasting because it is in Christ.

Some days the Haman's of the world seem to be prevailing, but not for long.

This is why remembering is so important. And are we living horizontally or vertically?