

The Book of Esther: A Royal Mess
Psalm 124 and Esther 1
July 24, 2016
M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

Welcome to the Book of Esther! After 18 weeks steeped in one of the most famous texts in the New Testament, the Sermon on the Mount, we now embark on a short study of one of the lesser known stories in the Old Testament. For churches and ministers who follow the lectionary, there is only one Sunday reading offered from the book of Esther in the entire three-year lectionary cycle, so if you don't know much about Esther, you won't be alone. In fact, let me ask—how many of you would say you have heard little to no preaching or teaching about this book?

Well, then, let me introduce you to Esther, and this introduction is critical because without it, we won't know how to read this book. One of the first questions we need to ask of any biblical text is, what kind of writing is it? How we answer this question is vital because not all biblical writing is the same, and we don't read them the same. For example, we don't read Mark the same way we read Daniel or Psalms the same as one of the epistles. Gospel, apocalyptic, poetry and letters are all different genres and they have to be read accordingly.

So, what kind of writing is Esther? It is clearly a narrative in that it tells a story. And, it is definitely dramatic. Esther is full of intrigue, suspense, ambiguity, excess and irony. The plot is fast-paced and engaging. The characters are sketched with broad strokes, appearing at times almost as caricatures. Haman is the archetypal villain. The king comes across as a stock figure of ancient court tales. Characters like Vashti and Zeresh make brief but telling appearances while Esther and Mordecai form a more complex duo. Meanwhile, the ever-present eunuchs are agents who keep the drama moving. I've come to the conclusion that approaching Esther as a theatrical stage production is perhaps the best way we can mine the wealth of truth that Esther offers us, so I invite you to sit back, relax and enjoy the show, metaphorically speaking.

Act I, Scene 1: In the first couple of verses we are introduced to one of the main characters of this drama and also its setting. Ahasuerus is the king of Persia who ruled in the late 5th century B.C.E (486-465). You might know him better by his Greek name, Xerxes. Although by the time of his reign, the Jewish exile under the Babylonians had officially ended, only a remnant of the Jews had returned to

Jerusalem and those who had returned remained subjects of the Persian empire, setting the stage for what unfolds in the book of Esther.

One of the recurring themes in Esther is “excess” and we see it in spades in this opening scene. The king’s very name literally means “Mighty Man” and he is said to rule over an astounding—and absurd—127 provinces. He is bigger than life, living up to his super-hero name. He sits not just on his throne, but on his royal throne and not simply in the city of Susa, but in the citadel of Susa, which was likely his winter palace.

This prime piece of real estate is the setting for a lavish banquet—more literally, it is a “drinking party” that the king hosts for all his officials and ministers. The guest list burgeons almost beyond belief to include no less than the entire “army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces.” The feast lasts for 180 days—to which I can only say, “that must have been *some* hangover.” Apparently, it took a full 6 months of royal pomp and circumstance for the king’s wealth and stature to be adequately displayed. Everything about this party is over the top. Ahasuerus cornered the market on “super-size me” long before McDonald’s came up with it.

You’d think that after 180 days of a lavish, never-ending spread of food and wine, both the guests’ appetites and the king’s vanity would be full to the brim, but you’d be wrong. The tables haven’t yet been cleared from this royal gala before Ahasuerus hosts *another* party, this one lasting seven days. If the emphasis of the first banquet is quantity, the focus of the second one is quality. The guest list includes Susa’s residents who are invited to a garden party set in the palace court, with all kinds of luxurious decorations brought out for the occasion. The original language is far more impressive than our English translations. The description in verses 6 & 7 is an unusual Hebrew form, a single long exclamation-like sentence that conveys the story-teller’s wonder and creates a mass of images that overwhelm the senses. The Word Biblical Commentary gives us the flavor with its translation: “Oh, the white and violet hangings of linen and cotton, held by white and purple cords of fine linen on silver rods and alabaster columns; the couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, alabaster, shell-marble, and turquoise! And, oh the drinks that were served...in royal style!” “If you’ve got it, flaunt it” must have been King Ahasuerus’ personal motto.

In verse 8 the playwright, in what seems like a side note, introduces us to King Ahasuerus’ wife, Queen Vashti, and notes that during the king’s seven-day feast, she also has thrown a party, a banquet for the ladies in waiting of the palace.

Unlike the prolific description of the men's affair, we are given no further details about this party.

Act I, Scene 2: It hardly seems necessary for the narrator to tell us that the king's heart is "merry with wine" by the seventh, or make that the 187th day. But, for all his extravagance over the past 6+ months, apparently the one thing Ahasuerus hasn't yet shown off is his wife. He has, it seems, saved the best for last. Vashti is the king's premier trophy that will be the crowning touch of his extravaganza. In the style of excess to which we have become accustomed, he sends not one, but seven eunuchs to fetch her.

There is just one small, *wee* problem. She won't come.

Perhaps you're like me and you're dying to know what on earth possessed Vashti to defy the king. The thing is, we're not told. The story keeps the spotlight focused on Ahasuerus and on his reaction. The point to which this whole scene has been building is this: despite the king's enormous wealth and power, he cannot control his own wife. One woman pulls the rug out from under the most powerful man in the world, and she does so while the whole world is watching.

Queen Vashti's refusal is a humiliation that is both public and absolute, and we can't be at all surprised by the result. Xerxes flies into a rage—literally, the Hebrew says his anger "flames forth." In another moment of excess, seven sages are summoned to help him deal with this emergency. In what is to be the first of several such incidents in the book, a personal or domestic dispute mushrooms into a political crisis. No less than seven special prosecutors are required to arraign the recalcitrant queen and counsel the king on damage control.

It is interesting that the question the king poses to the sages is, "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command [of the king]?" It seems odd that Ahasuerus does not know the laws of his own empire well enough to negotiate this fairly straightforward infraction. But, this exchange is dramatically positioned to highlight one of the stories themes: again and again power verses powerlessness comes to the fore. The king, thought to be the possessor of absolute power, displays instead his political impotence.

One of the royal counselors, Memucan, now emerges from stage right and delivers one of the longest direct speeches in the narrative. In a brilliant stroke of psychology, he interprets Vashti's defiance as a crime against every man in the empire, deftly deflecting the focus from the king. Suddenly, Ahasuerus is no

longer the only husband who is humiliated; every man in the kingdom is potentially vulnerable. But, one has to wonder if Memucan's nervous prediction of copycat crimes in every household might also reflect deep-seated insecurity.

In any event, the scale of Memucan's suggestion is consistent with the pattern of excess we've already witnessed. This time the excess is not in terms of possessions or power but of action. One woman defies her husband, and suddenly there is a national crisis with a new law being rushed through the legislature. Furthermore, the new law is not limited to one defiant woman, but is instead extended to every woman in the empire. Women are to honor their husbands! Every man is to be the master of his own household! How the legislators expected to enforce this sweeping command strains credulity. Excess abounds everywhere.

Irony is in plentiful supply as well. As a public relations strategy, Memucan's approach leaves a lot to be desired. Instead of confining the damage, the decree actually publicizes the king's humiliation. Memucan worries that "there will be no end of contempt and wrath" when the women of Persia and Media hear of the queen's behavior. But, the passage and publication of the king's decree guarantees that they will hear of it, and in their own languages, no less! Perhaps one "lesson learned" is that drunken parties often produce ridiculous behavior.

For all of this scene's irony, humor and excess, there is a dark side to the king's edict that foreshadows other more serious edicts to come. This will not be the last time that an excess of pride and anger result in something that is oppressive. Even though this first edict is conceived in absurdity, it is born in cruelty. Women all over the Persian Empire will suffer for the arrogant extremes of Ahasuerus and his advisors. While it is easy to laugh at Ahasuerus as a comic, bumbling buffoon, it is also true that he is a dangerous man. Even if he doesn't intend to do wicked and destructive things, he does them nevertheless. It is a caution we would do well to heed, which brings me to address how the story of Esther speaks to our own times and our own lives. Each week throughout this series the sermon will include several "reflection questions," questions designed to invite us to reflect on our lives and on how God is speaking to us through Esther.

The first question this morning begins at the end of the text. Like Xerxes, what impulsive, ill-conceived things do we say or do, especially when done in anger and pride, that have consequences that are far more long-lasting and hurtful than we intend?

A second question this drama poses to us, I think, concerns the matter of wealth. Read from a first-world, superpower context, steeped in a culture that admires the “lifestyle of the rich and famous,” it might be hard not to at least grudgingly appreciate Ahasuerus’s success. We read the descriptions of life in his lavish court and secretly want what he has. We need to hear and heed scripture’s consistent cautions about wealth and power detached from moral discernment. The psalmist, for example, pleads, “Turn my heart to your decrees, [O God], and not to selfish gain. Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways.” (119:36-37) The Jews who originally heard this scroll would have understood the call to assess the injustice and moral implications of a system that created so great a gulf between rich and poor—2500 years later, does that sound familiar?

Finally, perhaps you noticed here in chapter one that God is not mentioned by name. In fact, Esther is the only book in the Bible in which God’s name is never mentioned. But, that does not mean God is absent, as we will begin to see next week. This brings me to a question that we will consider throughout this sermon series. How do we discern God’s action and leading in our lives, especially in those times when God seems absent or silent? Where is God and what is God doing? How do we see our lives, our story as part of the bigger drama that is God’s story?

Act I ends with the king rushing to reach the post office before it closes. Within the space of a few verses the high and mighty Ahasuerus has been feted and toasted and hailed, then defied, manipulated and roundly humiliated. While this much is obvious to his advisors, his citizens, and now to us, the onlookers of this drama, the king seems largely out of touch with reality. It is a characteristic that will surface again soon. Stay tuned.