

Where is God: 4. It's Complicated!

Esther 8:15-17 and 10:3

July 2, 2017

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Every story has an ending and often it's not the ending we expect or ever hope for. Wouldn't it be wonderful if every one of our stories went something like this: he or she was born and then lived happily ever after. Or graduated and lived happily ever after, or married, or got the job, or the new house, or the baby was born and they all lived happily ever after, or at least retired and finally, lived happily ever after. But life is complicated.

For the past month, we've been reading the book of Esther, searching for the existence of God in a book where God is never mentioned. Last week, we saw that God is present. God is working. It gets to a point where there are too many coincidences to say it's not God. God is working in our lives even when we don't realize it, but we have to look below the surface. God is there! And sometimes when we dig deeper, we uncover part of the story that gets in the way of happily ever after. It changes the narrative from what we hoped it would be.

Before I tell the end of the Esther story, I want to recap where we've been. In the 6th century BC, the city of Jerusalem was attacked, the Jews were taken captive and brought to Babylon where they were refugees in exile for 50 years, until King Cyrus as he was expanding his Persian empire, captured Babylon and released the Jews. He let those who wanted to return to Jerusalem and allowed those who wanted to remain in what was now the Persian Empire. The undercurrent of this story is the challenge of ethnic diversity and the rights of Jews in a majority culture of Persians.

This weekend, we celebrate our nation's independence and the 241 years that have followed, but it's a complicated story. On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in which persons held as slaves were set free. And they all lived happily ever after? It's more complicated than that. 150 years later, we still struggle with racial and ethnic diversity and what equality really means, and we all carry assumptions that cause us to look at someone and form an opinion about them before we ever meet them. We live in a nation that is still struggling to fulfill Lincoln's vision for us all. And 50 years after Cyrus freed the Jews, it was complicated. As the book of Esther begins, Xerxes, the grandson of Cyrus, is the king. He is a tyrant. He lets his emotions be his guide and his singular focus is what's best for him. And he has surrounded himself with advisors who are quick to say yes to whatever the king wants in order to preserve their access to power. This is a story about power – who has it and how those with power treat those without power. And the one person who stands up to power and says no to the king is Queen Vashti and she is dismissed. The king's advisors arrange a pageant to find a new queen. Young women from throughout the empire are forced from their homes to be part of the pageant, among them a Jew named Esther. Esther is an orphan, raised by her cousin, Mordecai. And as Esther is brought to the capital city, Mordecai remains close, advising her, encouraging her. One day, Xerxes chooses Esther as the queen.

If only the story ended here maybe we could say everyone lived happily ever after, but the story gets complicated. The king welcomes a new advisor named Haman and orders everyone who sees Haman to bow down and honor him. Mordecai refuses and Haman plans the demise of Mordecai and every Jew living in the Persian Empire. Haman's argument is that differences and diversity are bad, so kill the Jews, and extinguish the minority. But somehow God was working below the surface. In a way that she never imagined, the events in Esther's life have prepared her perfectly for the moment when she stands up and speaks out and the Jews escape the

genocide that was planned. And by the end of Esther chapter 7, Haman is dead, and Mordecai is appointed as the king's closest advisor. If the king signs a new order rescinding the one he was tricked into signing, this story will have a happy ending.

Esther and Mordecai have been spared from the approaching genocide, but the king has not sent the order throughout the empire that will negate the one he'd been tricked into signing. Either the king forgets or maybe he wants to rid his kingdom of the Jews once and for all. In spite of the fact that he now knows that the queen is a Jew. But Esther throws herself at the feet of Xerxes, pleading for the lives of her people, and finally the King orders Mordecai to write a new decree. He gives Mordecai his signet ring, which will approve whatever Mordecai wants – and the decree that is written permits the Jews to do to others whatever is necessary. **In every province and in every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.** (Esther 8:16-17) Suddenly, the minority has the power. The balance of power has shifted, and if the power is on their side, we best get on their side. And here's where it gets complicated. To be honest, I'd rather skip the first half of chapter 9 and move on to the happy ending. It's the festival of Purim, a two-day feast that celebrates what God has accomplished through Esther and Mordecai. This orphaned girl and her adopted father stood up to the most powerful empire of that time and with great courage saved the Jews who were facing genocide. That's a great ending!

I remember in elementary school, celebrating Columbus Day each year. We'd sing about the way Christopher Columbus left Spain with three ships and sailed the ocean blue in 1492. Thinking he would find a passage to the East Indies, instead he discovered America. And that's what we would celebrate each year. But dig deeper and what happened to the people who already living in America? It didn't turn out so well for them. It's complicated.

And in the 9th chapter of Esther, the stage is set. One order has been sent by Haman ordering the Persians to kill of all Jews. An entire kingdom now mobilizing to fulfill that command. And now another order is sent. This one by Mordecai, the Jew, granting Jews the right to kill and annihilate and take the property of anyone who might attack them. The balance of power has shifted, and the battle begins. We can't help but feel the sting of moral ambiguity when the good guys turn on the bad guys and act like the bad guys. Let's be honest: we all are flawed, and those flaws tend to reveal themselves when we find ourselves like Esther and Mordecai do in a position of power. Lord Acton, the English historian, said: **"Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."**

When Xerxes hears reports of the battle in the streets of the capital, he says to Esther, "500 killed. Way to go. Esther, whatever you want, I'll grant it." And Esther asks for the bloodshed to continue another day. She wants the 10 sons of Haman to be publicly executed and the battle to extend beyond the city. She wants more bloodshed. And 75,000 are killed. Dig deep enough and this appears to be an ethnic cleansing. For hundreds of year there had been hatred between the Amalekites and the Jews and when King Saul had the opportunity to eliminate the Amalekites he didn't do it. And it turns out that Haman is a descendent of the Amalekites and now Esther is able to accomplish what Saul failed to do 500 years earlier. And it would be fair to ask, "Where is God in this?" Because there is no mention of God. Does God condemn the killing of Jews but permit the killing of those who are a threat to the Jews? It would be too easy to dismiss the killings and just say it was a very different time. It is difficult to reconcile these events with the Christian notion of love and forgiveness.

500 years later, Jesus gave this teaching to those who would follow him: **You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.** (Matthew 5:43-45) Wouldn't Jesus say they are all God's children?

Years ago, Amanda and I were at a high school football game. It wasn't in this community, but as we cheered for the team from the school our children attended, an adult sitting behind us stood up and shouted words of encouragement and then said to the team, “God loves you best.” I don't know if she really believed that or was consumed by the emotion of a football game, but she said it. Does God love some more than others? Is God working for some and not for others? And though I've never said aloud what the woman behind us shouted, I must confess to times when I've hoped they were true. Surely, God loves me more than someone who doesn't acknowledge God, doesn't pay attention to God, or doesn't pray to the same God that I do. I want to believe there's some perk, some advantage. But then Jesus says, **God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even the pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.** (Matthew 5:45-48)

It's not what I get from being a follower of Jesus, it's giving – a lifetime of giving. It's dedicating my life with all my flaws, knowing God can accept me as I am and invite me to follow and in the process of following, I am changed. I begin to see each person as a person loved by God.

We can see this happening here. It's at the core of our #blessthebusiness ministry. We take our ministry of love and acceptance into the community blessing a business each month. Frankly, we've met a skeptical community that thinks the only reason we would come to them is that we want something in return – a discount maybe or a donation - when all we want to do is love. Many people do not look at a church and see love, but that's what we want our message to be. It's at the core of the Tapestry ministry initiated by women in this congregation bridging the differences between Christian and Muslim women and showing love. It's at the core of our newest ministry formed to welcome a refugee family to our Twin Cities community. We all share one common identity – created by God who loves us all. To be an expression of God's love, that's the happy ever after story this world needs most.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of July 2, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Your love, O God, knows no bounds. We are neighbor and stranger; friend and foe; young and old. Where we have been divided, your love has the power to make us one. Grant us the assurance that your love is real and for all the world. Draw us close and prepare us for your next great work of love, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Monday July 3

Scripture: Esther 8:1-14

That same day King Ahasuerus gave Queen Esther what Haman the enemy of the Jews owned. Mordecai himself came before the king because Esther had told the king that he was family to her. The king took off his royal ring, the one he had removed from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. Esther put Mordecai in charge of what Haman had owned. Esther again spoke before the king. She bowed at his feet, wept, and begged him to treat her kindly. She wanted him to overturn the evil plot of Haman the Agagite—his secret plan directed against the Jews. The king

held out the gold scepter to Esther, and she got up and stood before him. She said, "If the king wishes, and if I please him—that is, if the idea seems right to the king, and if he still sees me as a good person—then have people write something to call back the order—the order that put into effect the plan of Haman, Hammedatha the Agagite's son, that he wrote to destroy the Jews in all the royal provinces. How can I bear to watch the terrible evil about to sweep over my people? And how can I bear to watch others destroy my own family?"

King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Look, I've given Esther everything Haman owned. And Haman himself my servants have impaled on the pole because he planned to attack the Jews. So you yourselves write to the Jews whatever you like in the name of the king and seal the letters with the king's royal ring. Anything written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's royal ring can't be called back." So that was when the royal scribes were summoned—on the twenty-third day of the third month (that is, the month of Sivan). They wrote exactly what Mordecai ordered to the Jews, rulers, governors, and officials of the provinces from India to Cush—one hundred twenty-seven in all. They wrote in the alphabet of each province and in the language of each people. They wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed the order with the king's royal ring. He sent letters with riders mounted on royal horses bred from mares known to run fast. The order allowed Jews in each town to join together and defend their lives. The Jews were free to wipe out, kill, and destroy every army of any people and province that attacked them, along with their women and children. They could also take and keep anything their attackers owned. The one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus on which they could do so was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (that is, the month of Adar). A copy of the writing was to become law in each province and be on public display for all its peoples to read. The Jews were to be ready on this day to get back at their enemies. The riders mounted on royal horses left Susa, spurred on by the king's order, and the law also became public in the fortified part of Susa.

Observation: Esther is given the estate of the man who tried to destroy the Jews. She quickly passes to it her adopted father, Mordecai, whom the king has just appointed as his right hand man to replace Haman. The one thing the king forgets is the one thing that matters: He has not granted Esther's request, the one she has requested three times. Esther and Mordecai are receiving rewards, but their lives are still in danger.

Application: "All's well that ends well." Or so it seems, but then the person with the power and authority (King Xerxes) is not paying attention. Esther throws herself on the king's mercy to show him the seriousness of the situation. Have you ever had to throw yourself on someone's mercy in order to open their eyes to a situation of injustice?

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the grace and mercy that you extend to all. There are injustices in this world. Not everyone is loved and respected as you intend. Help me to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with you each day. Amen.

Tuesday, July 4

Scripture: Esther 8:15-9:10

Mordecai went out from the king's presence in a blue and white royal robe wearing a large gold crown and a white and red-purple coat. The city of Susa greeted him with shouts of joy. For the Jews it was a day of light, happiness, joy, and honor. In every province and in every town—wherever the king's order and his law arrived—for the Jews it was a day of happiness and joy. For them it meant feasts and a holiday. Many people in the land became Jews themselves, out of fear of the Jews.

It was on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (that is, the month of Adar) that the king's order and his law were to be enforced. On the very day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to overpower them, the tables were turned against them. The Jews overpowered their enemies instead. The Jews joined together in their towns in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to defend themselves against those who tried to harm them. No one was able to stand in their way because everyone was afraid of the Jews. All the leaders of the provinces, rulers, governors, and those in charge of the king's business helped the Jews because they were afraid of Mordecai. Because Mordecai was very important in the palace, news about him was sweeping through the provinces. Indeed, Mordecai was becoming more and more important every day. The Jews put down all their enemies with sword blows, killing, and destruction. They did whatever they wanted with those who hated them. In the fortified part of Susa, the Jews killed five hundred people. They also killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, and Vaizatha. These were the ten sons of Haman, Hammedatha's son, the enemy of the Jews. But the Jews didn't lay a hand on anything their enemies owned.

Observation: Just when it seems that this story has come to an appropriate end, there is a sudden reversal of fortunes. The enemies of the Jews had hoped to gain power over them, but instead the Jews gain power over their foes. This is not a neat and tidy ending but one that is complicated and even unsettling. Just like real life...

Application: Suddenly, the Jews are to be feared. Is that because people see how their fortunes have changed and there appears to be a material advantage to being a Jew? Thus, I want what they have so I will become one of them. Or are the people in power to be feared? This part of the Esther story also invites us to consider how you use the power that you have?

Prayer: Lord God, I admit that I would rather have power or at least be on the right side of the powerful. Wherever I am in life, help me to see that my ultimate power rests in you. On this Independence Day, I pray for all in positions of leadership. Help them and help me to use all that I am and all that I have to serve you first. Amen.

Wednesday, July 5

Scripture: Esther 9:11-19

That same day, a report concerning the number killed in the fortified part of Susa reached the king. So the king said to Queen Esther in the fortified part of Susa, "The Jews have killed five hundred people as well as the ten sons of Haman. What have they done in the rest of the royal provinces? What do you wish now? I'll give it to you. What is your desire? I'll do it this time too." Esther answered, "If the king wishes, let the Jews who are in Susa also have tomorrow to do what the law allows for today. And let them also impale the ten sons of Haman on pointed poles." The king ordered that this be done, and the law became public in Susa. They impaled the ten sons of Haman just as she said. The Jews in Susa joined together again, this time on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar. In Susa, they killed three hundred people, but they didn't lay a hand on anything the people owned. The Jews out in the royal provinces also joined together to defend their lives. They put to rest the troubles with their enemies and killed those who hated them. The total was seventy-five thousand dead, but the Jews didn't lay a hand on anything their enemies owned. They acted on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar. Then on the fourteenth day they rested, making it a day of feasts and rejoicing. (The Jews in Susa joined together for self-defense on the thirteenth and fourteenth days of the month. But they rested on the fifteenth day of the month and made it a day of feasts and joyous events.) That is why Jews

who live in villages make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar a day of rejoicing and feasts, a holiday. It is a day on which they send gifts of food to each other.

Observation: This section of the Esther story has a bloodthirsty tone. Was the killing of so many necessary for the safety of the Jews? It is important to remember such violence is a product of a society and a worldview that accepted such violence motivated by ethnic or religious causes. The enemies of the Jews must be eliminated. Even though Esther and Mordecai keep the Jews safe, we know that will not always be the case.

Application: Is this revenge or is it self-defense? The book of Esther may be purposely unclear so that you are forced to consider your own motives. How do you react to real and perceived threats – not just physical threats but threats to your plans and hopes and dreams?

Prayer: Gracious God, as the writer of Psalm 28 proclaims, you are my strength and my shield. Draw me close and keep me mindful of your purposes. When I feel threatened by others, give me the wisdom to know how to respond and the courage to show restraint and respect. Amen.

Thursday, July 6

Scripture: Esther 9:20-32

Mordecai wrote these things down and sent letters to all the Jews in all the provinces, both near and far, of King Ahasuerus. He made it a rule that Jews keep the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar as special days each and every year. They are the days on which the Jews finally put to rest the troubles with their enemies. The month is the one when everything turned around for them from sadness to joy, and from sad, loud crying to a holiday. They are to make them days of feasts and joyous events, days to send food gifts to each other and money gifts to the poor. The Jews agreed to continue what they had already begun to do—just what Mordecai had written to them. Indeed, Haman, Hammedatha the Agagite's son, the enemy of all the Jews, had planned to destroy the Jews. He had servants throw pur (that is, the dice) to find the best month and day to trouble greatly and destroy them. But when Esther came before the king, his written order said: The wicked plan that Haman made against the Jews should turn back on him instead. So they impaled him and his sons on pointed poles. That is why people call these days Purim, by using the ancient word pur. It all fit with what this letter said, with what they saw happen, and with what they themselves went through. The Jews agreed that they, their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, as well as all non-Jews who become Jews, should always keep these two days. They agreed to follow the written rules—and at the proper time too—every year. So forever every family, province, and town remembers to keep these days. These days of Purim won't die out among the Jews. They will remember to keep them forever. Queen Esther daughter of Abihail, along with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with her full royal power to show that this second letter about Purim was correct. Letters conveying good wishes and words of friendship were sent to all the Jews throughout the one hundred twenty-seven provinces in the kingdom of Ahasuerus. Their aim was to make sure that the Jews kept these days of Purim at the proper time, following the rule that Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had made. The rule fit well with what they themselves had agreed to do forever and with other things they did—like fasting and lamenting. Esther's order made these features of Purim part of the law, so it was written down.

Observation: The book of Esther begins with a banquet and now concludes with a very different banquet. The first banquet celebrated the king's riches and occasioned violence against the queen. The final banquet is very different. The "pur" that had gone against the Jews

(the lot that was cast to determine the date of genocide) became the “pur” that marked relief from their enemies. Thus, the celebration is known as Purim.

Application: This has been the story of Esther, a role model for her time and ours. An orphaned child, adopted by her cousin, taken from her home for the pleasure of the king, she offers a strength of character that propels her to a position of power. She is also a member of a minority community within a foreign empire and becomes the one who stands up and speak out. How do you see her as a model for faithful living in our world today?

Prayer: Lord God, you are the Giver of life. You have given me abilities and have strategically placed me where I can serve you. Help to stand up and be your message of love each day. Amen.

Friday, July 7

Scripture: Esther 10:1-3

King Ahasuerus taxed the entire kingdom, including the islands of the Mediterranean. Now some may want to know about all the king's mighty, great deeds. They may also want a full report about how important Mordecai became after the king honored him. Are they not written in the official records of the kings of Media and Persia? Certainly, Mordecai the Jew was second only to King Ahasuerus in importance. The Jews also admired him greatly, and his many brothers and sisters were proud of him. He always wanted to do good things for his Jewish people and to speak up for all his family whenever they needed help.

Observation: The book concludes with a postscript about Mordecai. His greatness is affirmed, but mostly because of how he used his power. He uses his greatness for the benefit of his fellow Jews, which, according to the message of the book, is how power is supposed to be used.

Application: A definition of greatness: “[Mordecai] always wanted to do good things for his Jewish people and to speak up for all his family whenever they needed help.” Jesus would say to his disciples: “Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant.” Greatness is not what we get but what we give.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the examples found in scripture of greatness. Help me to humbly seek to serve that your love may flow through me into this world of need. Amen.

Saturday, July 8

Scripture: Matthew 5:43-48

“You have heard that it was said, You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don't even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.

Observation: The words “love your neighbor and hate your enemy” are not found in the Old Testament, but the words must have been a common expression in the first century. The words

express an attitude present even today. It is easy to love those who love me. I don't need Jesus to help me do that. But to "love your enemies and pray for those who harass you," I need Jesus in me to be able to rise to this level of relating to the world around me. Oh, what a witness this would be!

Application: What a radical proclamation of love found in this teaching of Jesus to his followers! Jesus will show with his life that true love is strong and transformative. It is also not what the world expects. These verses go far beyond what we have read this week from Esther, chapter 9. Does love still work as a force for good in a world where violence is prevalent?

Prayer: Your love, O God, knows no bounds. Your love has the power to make us one. Grant me the assurance that your love is real and for all the world. Draw me close and prepare me for your next great work of love. Amen.