

**Where is God? 2: Rooted**  
**Esther 3:15; Ephesians 3:17-19**  
**June 18, 2017**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

This is the second in what will be a four part series out of the Old Testament book of Esther. The interesting thing about the book of Esther is that of the 66 books in the Bible, it is the only one that never mentions God. The persons who are the heroes of this story never call on God, never mention faith as the primary reason for their actions. As a result, some wonder why it is even included in the Bible. But in our own lives aren't there times when God is hard to find? When God seems silent? When we are asking, "Where is God in this?" God must be here but I can't see it. And last week, as we looked at chapters one and two, we discovered that God was not as absent as it seemed. God was working through the people God sent alongside Esther – and because she was open to their guidance, God came through.

Today, as we look at the story found in chapter 3, instead of starting at the beginning of the story, I want to start at the end and work our way back to the beginning. It's like CSI or Law and Order or any number of books or movies which begin with "what happened" and then spend the rest of the story uncovering how, who and why it happened. So, let's begin with end. Verse 15: **The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.** The king is Xerxes, and 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. And now Xerxes has welcomed a man named Haman to his inner circle, and they are sitting down for a drink at the end of the day, but the capital city of Susa is bewildered. The people are in a state of confusion.

There are things we do that sometimes confuse and bewilder the people closest to us. And there are things they do that bewilder us. Haman and Xerxes are seated together, and the entire city is bewildered by what they see. But why? Verse 13: **Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews – young and old, women and children – on a single day.** The king has issued a decree for genocide. All of the Jews in the Persian Empire are to be exterminated on a specific day twelve months from the time the king has issued this decree. And the city is bewildered.

Where does genocide even originate – an intentional effort to eliminate an entire ethnic group? We know it happens. Hitler tried it in the 1940s by killing 6 million Jews, two thirds of all Jews in Europe. I remember walking through the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC soon after it opened – and the events and the human suffering described there were so horrible, I had to turn away. How could anyone do that? And yet it has happened since then, in Cambodia, Rwanda, Sudan, and Syria. Who dreams this up and then convinces people to do it? Verse 8: **Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them."**

So what we have is a story fabricated by a man named Haman that is based on truth, half-truth and lies. And he has come to the king to make his case. He tells the king that there are people in his kingdom who are different. They have different customs and practices and have an allegiance to someone other than the king. "Xerxes, they will not obey you. You can't trust them. You must be afraid of them. But you are the king and you can take care of this problem. You don't have to tolerate differences. You are the king." Tolerance is an interesting thing, because

last week we learned that Xerxes' grandfather, King Cyrus, was very tolerant. Unlike other kings, when Cyrus expanded his kingdom to encompass new territory, he didn't kill other cultures but welcomed them and invited them to help build the Persian Empire. But now Xerxes' closest advisor is saying to Xerxes, "Forget what your grandfather did. Different is bad. Don't tolerate it." In fact, Haman offers to pay Xerxes 10,000 talents to annihilate the Jews. In today's currency, that's nearly \$180 million or nearly \$1500 for every Jew living in the Persian Empire. Why? Why would Haman do this?

**Verse 2: All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor.** Because Haman was the king's closest advisor, everywhere he went every person in the Persian Empire was commanded by the king to kneel down and honor Haman. But Mordecai wouldn't do it. He said NO. And every time Mordecai refused to kneel, Haman was enraged. But instead of killing Mordecai, who at the end of chapter two uncovered a plot to assassinate the king, thus saving the king's life – the king is not going to authorize the execution of the man who saved his life. So Haman comes up with a plan to destroy all of Mordecai's people, all of the Jews.

Do you know about low-hanging fruit? It's what gets our attention and once it has our attention, we cannot focus on anything else. And Haman has fixated on this low-hanging fruit and fabricated a story to feed a lie. But beneath the lie there is a hatred of Mordecai and Haman is enraged. But at the root of all this is a decree – Mordecai will not honor Haman and that's a threat to his power and prestige. The temptation for us is to fixate on the bad fruit, but God is focused on the root.

In the days after Christmas in 1997, my family was bewildered. We had traveled to Brentwood, Tennessee so that I could show them where we would be moving in a few months – the church where I would be working, the middle schools they would be attending, the community where we would be living. One evening a few families invited us to a dinner so we could meet a few people in the church. They were gracious and kind, and we had a wonderful meal. And as we arrived back at our hotel, I was exciting by all that awaited us in this move – and my family was bewildered. In fact, they said, we are not moving. I wish I could say I had this figured during the long drive back to Minnesota. I think it took me years to understand what was happening. But I had become fixated on the low hanging fruit. At a low point in my life when I had taken a leave of absence, thinking it was time to find another career, I was approached by a church in Brentwood that at the time had one of the three or four largest children's ministries in our denomination. Children's ministry had been the reason I entered ministry in the first place, and now this very large church wanted me and I jumped on the opportunity. They interviewed me. I accepted. Then I got the bishop's permission to leave Minnesota and the permission of the bishop of Tennessee to go there. And suddenly, I had new meaning and purpose, and I was excited. There was something beneath the thing and beneath that there was the root. At the root, I was so consumed by my own fear and anxiety that my life had lost a purpose and I forgot all about my family.

Have you ever found yourself in a relationship where you were arguing about something or you were focused on something that was done or wasn't done? But the problem wasn't this thing, it was the thing beneath the thing beneath the thing. It was the root – but you were focused on the fruit and not the root.

Or at work, you are in a meeting and the boss comes in and takes over the meeting and starts critiquing everyone in the room. And everyone is bewildered. What's going on? Why is he doing

this? Maybe the person who was supposed to lead the meeting is late or not prepared, so the boss takes over. But beneath that, maybe the boss is under a lot of pressure – everyone is under pressure to perform. And beneath that is the boss' fear that his job is on the line. And at the root? He feels alone and isolated. But everyone ends up focused on the bad fruit and nobody gets to the thing beneath the thing and addresses the root.

Or maybe you have a friend who says something that bewilders you. Where did that come from? But beneath that, there is a story – and beneath that is a story – and at the root is wanting to be noticed and valued. It happens when there is an addiction. You see the person is drunk again – that's the fruit and we fixate on that. But God is focused on the root – all of the things that led to the addiction and until that is addressed the fruit will not change.

People around us end up bewildered because of what we are rooted to. So, what are you attaching to – to what are you rooted? Are there negative messages that you've heard or practices and behaviors that are feeding a story that is producing bad fruit – and bewildering the people around you? In John 15, Jesus says: **I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.** If you are attached to Jesus, he will feed you with what you need to be empowered to bear good fruit, because on our own, it will not happen. Or the apostle Paul is praying to the new Christians in Ephesus: **I pray that you, being rooted and established in love may have power together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.** (Ephesians 3:19) Rooted so you may be filled. And if we are not attaching to the love found in Jesus Christ, we will be rooted to something.

Yesterday, I officiated at a wedding – and my words of advice were the words I give every couple who is getting married. You have to be rooted to the right thing, because I've seen what happens when two people attach to different things or they attach to each other. It's not going to work out – the fruit – it won't be the fruit of happiness. Together, begin by attaching to the root of God's love found in Jesus Christ. Feed on that – together allow that to nourish your relationship.

If only Haman had detached from the negative message that was feeding his hatred of Mordecai and robbing him of life. If only he had attached himself to what was life-giving. There are moments in our lives when we much detach – let go – this will not be my story – this is not who God wants me to be. When the root is clear. When we have attached to what is life-giving, the fruit that is produced will inspire and encourage the people around us. Paul concludes his prayer with these words: *[God] is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within us.* (Ephesians 3:20) What are you attaching to? It is about the roots.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for Week of June 18, 2017**

**Weekly Prayer:** Good and gracious God, we thank you that you are at work in our lives and in our world. When all seems out of control, you are still God of the universe. When life seems chaotic, we find order in you. When evil appears to have the upper hand, your goodness is not threatened. When violence shakes the foundation of our lives, you are the peace and calm that we seek. Lord, be the source deep within us that will guide all of our ways. Amen.

## Monday, June 19

### Scripture: Esther 2:17-23

The king loved Esther more than all the other women; she had won his love and his favor more than all the others. He placed the royal crown on her head and made her ruler in place of Vashti. The king held a magnificent, lavish feast, "the feast of Esther," for all his officials and courtiers. He declared a public holiday for the provinces and gave out gifts with royal generosity. When they gathered the young women to the second women's house, Mordecai was working for the king at the King's Gate. Esther still wasn't telling anyone her family background and race, just as Mordecai had ordered her. She continued to do what Mordecai said, just as she did when she was in his care.

At that time, as Mordecai continued to work at the King's Gate, two royal eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, became angry with King Ahasuerus. They were among the guards protecting the doorway to the king, but they secretly planned to kill him. When Mordecai got wind of it, he reported it to Queen Esther. She spoke to the king about it, saying the information came from Mordecai. The matter was investigated and found to be true, so the two men were impaled on pointed poles. A report about the event was written in the royal record with the king present.

**Observation:** Esther becomes queen, and Mordecai, being in the right place at the right time, discovers a plot against the king and intervenes to save the king's life. For a second time, Mordecai directs Esther to hide her ancestry. The reason for this secrecy emphasizes the connection between Esther and Mordecai. Their relationship is primary as we will learn later in this story.

**Application:** Mordecai performs a good deed without the thought of reward. Esther and Mordecai simply do what is right and then go on about their business. Often in our world today, a reward is expected for doing the right thing. Could doing right be its own reward? Has the thought of a reward (even if it amounts to only a verbal thank you) influenced your actions?

**Prayer:** Gracious God, you have given me this day. My life is a precious gift. In all I do today, help me to live in grateful response to your unmerited gift of love and grace. Amen.

## Tuesday, June 20

### Scripture: Esther 3:1-6

Sometime later, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, Hammedatha the Agagite's son, by promoting him above all the officials who worked with him. All the royal workers at the King's Gate would kneel and bow facedown to Haman because the king had so ordered. But Mordecai didn't kneel or bow down. So the royal workers at the King's Gate said to Mordecai, "Why don't you obey the king's order?" Day after day they questioned him, but he paid no attention to them. So they let Haman know about it just to see whether or not Mordecai's words would hold true. (He had told them that he was a Jew.) When Haman himself saw that Mordecai didn't kneel or bow down to him, he became very angry. But he decided not to kill only Mordecai, for people had told him Mordecai's race. Instead, he planned to wipe out all the Jews, Mordecai's people, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

**Observation:** After Mordecai and Esther saved the king's life, one might expect they would be set for life. But another four years have passed, and another foreigner named Haman has been promoted. Like Vashti who said no in chapter one, now it is Mordecai who says no. He will not bow down to Haman. Haman is deeply offended, but his reaction is horrifying.

**Application:** These verses call attention to racial hostility. Racial hostility allows a personal quarrel to become a national crisis. Haman's overreaction points out the absurdity of the oppression of people based on race or ethnic group and yet it exists today as it has throughout history. What is it that makes every human being valuable?

**Prayer:** Eternal God, loving parent of every one of us, help us to see as you see and to treat each person as one that you love. Let me see any prejudice within me and give me the courage to stand with all my brothers and sisters. Amen.

### **Wednesday, June 21**

#### **Scripture: Esther 3:7-11**

In the first month (that is, the month of Nisan) in the twelfth year of the rule of King Ahasuerus, servants threw pur, namely, dice, in front of Haman to find the best day for his plan. They tried every day and every month, and the dice chose the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (that is, the month of Adar). Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "A certain group of people exist in pockets among the other peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of everyone else, and they refuse to obey the king's laws. There's no good reason for the king to put up with them any longer. If the king wishes, let a written order be sent out to destroy them, and I will hand over ten thousand kikkars of silver to those in charge of the king's business. The silver can go into the king's treasuries." The king removed his royal ring from his finger and handed it to Haman, Hammedatha the Agagite's son, enemy of the Jews. The king said to Haman, "Both the money and the people are under your power. Do as you like with them."

**Observation:** These verses provide the context for the origin of the Festival of Purim which will be introduced in chapter 4. A "pur" is a stone or dice thrown to determine the day when the genocide will begin. Haman is intent on killing Mordecai and all the Jews. He offers king Xerxes an enormous sum (the equivalent of 375 tons of silver). Haman's motive is the destruction of an ethnic group. Xerxes' motive is financial gain.

**Application:** There is a tendency to look at others and see our differences without recognizing what we share. When differences are emphasized, too often such difference are seen as a threat and not the richness of the great tapestry of the human family. When have you noticed differences in family origin, race and ethnicity but then discovered the value of such differences?

**Prayer:** Lord God, draw me close to you so that my motives are always a reflection of your compassion, generosity and love. Amen.

### **Thursday, June 22**

#### **Scripture: Esther 3:12-15**

So in the first month, on the thirteenth day, royal scribes were summoned to write down everything that Haman ordered. The orders were for the king's rulers and the governors in charge of each province, as well as for the officials of each people. 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. Fast runners were to take the order to all the provinces of the king. The order commanded people to wipe out, kill, and destroy all the Jews, both young and old, even women and little children. This was to happen on a single day—the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (that is, the month of Adar). They were also to seize their property. A copy of the order was to become law in each province and to be posted in

public for all peoples to read. The people were to be ready for this day to do as the order commanded. Driven by the king's order, the runners left Susa just as the law became public in the fortified part of Susa. While the king and Haman sat down to have a drink, the city of Susa was in total shock.

**Observation:** The king sends his edict through the Persian Empire that an entire ethnic group be annihilated on a specific day. This is now the law of the land. Verse 15 provides different reactions to the law. The king and Haman sit down to a banquet, but the people in the city of Susa are confused. Does this mean they will be reluctant to carry out the decree? Is there hope for the Jews?

**Application:** Haman has power, but how is that power utilized? Xerxes supposedly has even greater power but seems powerless in the presence of Haman's influence. When has the influence of others been a force for good or harm in your life? When have you come alongside other with wise counsel?

**Prayer:** Holy God, I need your direction. Help me claim the space that I need to listen to your voice so that I am not drawn away from your will for my life. Amen.

**Friday, June 23**

**Scripture: John 15:1-8**

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. He removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything. If you don't remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.

**Observation:** Within Jewish tradition, the vine was a picture of Israel, but now Jesus is saying that he is the true vine. In other words, Jesus is the true Israel. He is the one on whom God's purposes rest. And his followers are members of God's true people if they belong to him and remain connected to the vine. There is an interdependence – without the vine, there are no branches and without the branches, there is no vine.

**Application:** What are you attaching to? Jesus is saying that true life is possible only when you are connected to the vine. There are many other things in life to which we can become rooted. Perhaps you have done so, only to discover it did not offer the life you thought it did. What are you attaching to?

**Prayer:** Merciful and loving Lord, you are the vine. In you and you alone is the eternal source of life. I am tempted to connect to all sorts of things that hold empty promises of life. Forgive me for wandering from you. Help me to follow you and remain connected to the life and hope that you offer. Amen.

**Saturday, June 24**

**Scripture: Ephesians 3:16-21**

I ask that he will strengthen you in your inner selves from the riches of his glory through the Spirit. I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith. As a result of having strong roots in love, I ask that you'll have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, together with all believers. I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God. Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by his power at work within us; glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and always. Amen.

**Observation:** Paul prays for the young Christians to whom he is writing. It may, in fact, be the most important thing that Paul can do and we can do for each other. That is, to pray. Paul prays that the young Christians will put down roots into the all-loving, all-powerful God revealed in Jesus Christ and then have that love as the rock-solid foundation for every aspect of life.

**Application:** Again, what are you attaching to? Think of what God might do in you and through you as an individual and as part of the community of followers. Then double that or triple that, because God is able to do far more than all you could ask or imagine. God is willing and able – and waiting for you and me to be rooted.

**Prayer:** Good and gracious God, we thank you that you are at work in my life and the world, even when it is hard for me to see. When all seems out of control, you are still God of the universe. Lord, be the source deep within me that will guide all of my ways. Amen.