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Sermon

Faithful God – Courageous People

Esther

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Most families will have a storeroom of stories that bind them together. Most of them are fun, some of them serious and scary. Sometimes they tell of such important events that they are forever emblazoned on the family's memory.

Our reading from the OT today tells a story about a foolish and drunken King a wicked and selfish politician, a wise and honest Uncle, and a courageous Queen. It has all the hallmarks of a page-turning thriller.

The fascinating thing about the book is that throughout the whole story, God is never mentioned by name. Yet after reading through the whole story I was left with the clear message that God was behind all that had happened. It is an impressive piece of writing that honors the God of Israel without ever mentioning His name!

The story happens in the time after the exile. Some of the people of God have returned to the Promised Land. Others have chosen to stay, and this story is about them.

The king of the land decides to put on a banquet for his leaders and officials which lasts for 180 days. When that was completed, he puts on another banquet this time for all the people present in the city. This lasted for at more than a week.

All of this was to show off his wealth and power.

Towards the end of the time, he commands his wife Vashti, who has been putting on a banquet of her own, to appear before him. She refuses to come, resulting in her banishment from the Kings presence.

Over time, a new queen is appointed: Our heroine Esther.

The scene changes and a new character is brought to view. Mordecai, Esther's uncle, who is in a position that enables him to overhear a plot to assassinate the King. He tells Esther who alerts the King, and the plot is foiled. The whole incident was written up in the official court history, but Mordecai's part in saving the King is forgotten.

Enter the villain of the story! Haman is an arrogant man who becomes the second in command in the Kingdom. Only the King himself is higher than Haman. So, Haman commands everyone to bow down to him. Mordecai refuses to do so. He will only bow down to the God of Israel.

Haman is furious and puts in place a plot to kill all the Jews in the Kingdom. With lies half-truths and deception he tricks the King into giving him the royal seal which enables Haman to pass the law signing the death warrant of all the Jews in the Kingdom.

Mordecai hears of this and is devastated. Esther sees Mordecai outside the palace gates in sack cloth and ashes and invites him to come in. He refuses but through one of her servants Mordecai lets her know of the plot and asks her to go into the Kings presence without an invitation, an offence punishable by death. Only if the King holds out his golden scepter would she be spared that fate.

In discussion with Mordecai one of the more well-known sayings in our language is spoken. Mordecai says that it may just be possible that she was placed in her position for "such a time as this". Esther agrees and asks Mordecai to get all the Jews he could contact to hold a three day fast for her.

Esther takes her life in her hands and visits the King.

The golden scepter is held out towards her. Then with great care she puts into action her plan, the result is that the plot is foiled, and Mordecai replaces Haman.

To this day the book of Esther is read, and the victory celebrated with great joy by Jewish people all over the world. As the story is read, the children are instructed to boo loudly whenever Haman's name is read and to cheer loudly and stamp their feet when Mordecai or Esther are mentioned. It is a noisy, fun celebration.

What impressed me in reading Esther again was the fact that God's name is never mentioned in the book and yet is so clearly there in the background of the story that it wasn't until it was pointed out to me in a commentary I was reading that I realized it was so.

Many times in our lives God will be at work and we won't realize it until afterwards. I had no idea that attending a yacht club dance and prize giving would lead to a total change in my life. I was there to talk boats and drink beer with my favorite uncle. My aunt and God had other ideas. My aunt asked me if I would like to ask a girl there to dance. She then introduced me to her and the following week I asked her to a dance.

Jenny was fun to be with a fund of hilarious stories about her work. Sometime that evening the conversation enabled Jenny to talk about her relationship with God. I have no idea to this day how that happened. What I do know is that I was fascinated because I had never heard anyone talk about God as a personal friend before. We talked until the wee small hours and sometime later I went to church with her.

A month later Jenny informed me that there was nothing romantic for her in our relationship and that perhaps we shouldn't see as much of each other as we had been. Needless to say, I was disappointed and got into my car and simply drove around town aimlessly. At a certain point (and I could take you to the spot in Christchurch) I said to God with a complete lack of humility, "OK God, I'll try you out." Without understanding the symbolism, I turned my car through 180 degrees and drove home. Within a year I was called into the ministry and joined the Church Army and hence come before you today with the Gospel.

Who prompted my aunt? Was she there, for such a time as this? Who made sure that Jenny was at that prize giving? Was that for such a time as this? Why did she say Yes to my invitation? How come I was able to say yes to a God I barely knew anything about? Only by looking back can I see the hand of God leading me every step of the way. Did all that happen because God had planned for such a time as this?

God is not named in Esther's story, but His presence and "fingerprints" are all over it. Esther is granted an audience by the King, but in behind that is every Jew in the city fasting for her in her dangerous mission.

Notice also all of the unnamed people who fasted. How did they know that they were involved in one of the great examples of God's deliverance that would be celebrated thousands of years later? Were they there for such a time as this?

We as a Church pray for lots of things. Sometimes we see and hear of dramatic results and praise God for them. At other times we are simply obedient to the word of God and all the promises it contains and yet see little or nothing. Only when we get to be with the Lord face to face will we see how as St Paul puts it,

“.....everything works out for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose.”
(Romans 8:28)

And when the going gets tough, when tragedy strikes, when disappointments come even then we will be able whisper through our tears, “I Trust You in such a time as this.”

Great demonstrations of God’s victory are to be celebrated. We are to be people of joy and celebration. For we are people who have seen the greatest victory of all. We have been privileged to know that when a young man in his thirties died on a cross over two thousand years ago that the whole world was witnessing the greatest demonstration of love it had ever or would ever see. We are the people who by God’s grace to us have come to know without seeing, the empty tomb and the ever-present Jesus with us from now and into eternity.

And so, we celebrate and rejoice in all He has done in our individual lives and in our life as one of the many communities of Jesus the Christ. Even when we don’t know that God is at work, we celebrate; even when there are tears in our eyes we celebrate; even when there are life threatening challenges, we celebrate; especially when there is something good happening. We celebrate.

“For nothing, NOTHING, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (“Romans 8:38-39.”)

One of the things I remember most about that time so long ago when I turned to the Lord, is waking up the next morning and saying, “God, are you still there?” and finding out to my delight that He was and that He has never gone away. I don’t always sense His presence that closely. But I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that He is there.

It is mind blowing to think of all the people God had to have in place so that I could come to a knowledge of Him. I am not worthy of it, yet despite that He demonstrated once again His love and grace to one more unworthy sinner.

Are you aware that God has placed you where you are, “For such a time as this”? He has you know.