

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Esther 7

When we left off last week, King Xerxes had granted Esther permission to enter the throne room and make her request. She didn't ask for anything specific at the time. She invited the King and Haman to a banquet. During the banquet, she did not make the request to save herself and the Jewish people from the devastation that Haman had planned. At the banquet, the king asked Esther for her request, promising anything, including half the kingdom. Once again, Esther hesitated and invited the King and Haman to a second banquet.

Haman was exuberant and proud, having attended a banquet with the King and Queen. He boasted to his friends and wife, but on the way home, he came across Mordecai who, again, would not bow or kneel before Haman. Haman was again filled with rage and hatred. He shared his outrage with his friends and wife, who suggested he construct a 75-foot pole on which to impale Mordecai, but he needed the king's permission, which he would ask for in the morning, before the second banquet.

In the chapter preceding today's reading, we are told that it was a long night, and the king couldn't sleep. He could have asked for the company of one of his other wives or a concubine, or musicians, but instead, by chance, ordered a servant to read to him from the "Book of Chronicles". The book was not a dry historical narrative; the information was recorded

in verse and epic poems, including names of those who saved the king and deserved recognition and honour. These names were on special rolls to make sure they were properly rewarded. The king listened to the story of how Mordecai saved the king's life, which was part of the second chapter of the story. Xerxes realized he had not rewarded Mordecai, and decided to reward him without delay.

The king sent for Haman and asked for his advice on how to reward an honoured man. The king had no idea of Haman plotting murder, as he asked *him* how to pay homage to an unnamed man, not revealing the honouree's name. Haman assumed the king wanted to honour him, so he went into great detail suggesting an extravagant honour. He wanted Xerxes to declare him an equal, or even an heir.

He would wear the king's robes and ride the king's horse, receiving great honour and respect. Haman planned the accolades for himself, but that great man was Mordecai! The king wanted Mordecai honoured before Esther's feast. Even then, the king was unaware of Haman's decree. All the rewards Haman wanted would go to Mordecai. Mordecai was given the king's robes and rode a decorated horse. Haman had to walk with Mordecai, parading him and proclaiming his good deeds. Afterwards, Mordecai returned to the gate to stay close to Esther.

Haman returned home and recounted the event to his wife and friends. He was in no mood to party, but the king's eunuch arrived to escort him to the banquet.

This was a banquet of wine, *lots* of wine, as were many of the celebrations. Haman acted as a witness and not as part of the celebration. The king again asked Esther for her request, and again offered half the kingdom. Esther was not interested in wealth or land, nor half the kingdom.

Esther then made the request for *her* life and that of *her* people. The king did not see the connection between his wife and some unnamed people Haman wanted destroyed. In time, however, the king finally realized that Esther was a Jew! She pointed out to the king the loss of revenue if the Jews were killed. Esther revealed the nature of her request, true religion, and that Haman had dreamed up the plan, and that she, too, was under the same sentence as her Jewish family.

Slavery was common at the time. Up to 50% of the population were slaves. They were mostly illiterate, working in farming and household duties. The minority of well-educate slaves were engaged in clerical work. Slaves had no rights. They were bought, sold and branded, or forced to become eunuchs or concubines.

The king was oblivious to what was happening to the empire. He did not understand the magnitude of Haman's blood lust against the Jews. Esther quoted the edict to the king; slowly, the king understood. He became enraged and demanded to know who the wicked person was who conceived this plan for ethnic cleansing. Esther pointed to Haman, and the king was livid – Haman had tricked the king. Esther's words distressed the king, though, after all, Haman was his friend and advisor.

Nevertheless, Haman was charged with violating the queen and sentenced to death. It was a convenient way to get rid of him. The king was informed that there was an impalement pole in Haman's courtyard, erected for Mordecai, which could now be used for Haman.

At the end of the book, a new holiday is established, *Purim*, which is still celebrated today. It is a time of revelry, celebrating the fact that, in the face of genocidal hatred, the opposite had happened, and the Jews survived.

Life together is celebrated as a joyous gift, snatched unbelievably from the gates of death and hell. A people who faced the possibility of "not being" are emphatically alive. Community is not explained in historical terms; it is not analyzed in sociological terms; it is *enjoyed* in the language and rituals of food and laughter at a festival.

The fact is that, as decimated and dispersed as Jewish communities were, they were not swallowed up in the ocean of pagan power, culture and religion. They survived by grace, the *empire* did not.

The Assyrians and Pharaohs are no more. The Babylonian and Persian empires are no more. Czarist Russia and the Third Reich are stuff of history. The Jews have survived, and sheer historical fact testifies to God's faithfulness to God's people. That divine faithfulness, hidden though it may be, is what undergirds the story of Esther, and continues to inspire faith in those who read it - Jew and Christian alike!

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of justice, you sent your servant Esther into a life of privilege so that those without would be taken care of. In our privilege, show us how to advocate for those who have less, so that your world might be peaceful and just. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. **Amen.**