

This morning we will begin a series of sermon on the OT book of Esther. The book tells a story that is mostly set in the court of the Persian king Ahasuerus whose reign was from 486 – 464 BC. It is included in the Bible because it is about how the Jewish people were threatened with genocide and how God through Esther and her uncle Mordecai saved his people from that disaster. It takes place in Persia where many Jewish people were living because of the exile.

One of the interesting things about the book of that God is never mentioned. It concerns the Jewish people – so God’s people - but God is not explicitly mentioned in the story. There have been those who have questioned whether this book should be part of Scripture, but it has become part of Scripture in the same mysterious way that the other books were added to Scripture – by being recognized as inspired by God through a gradual process so that it was included with earlier books which had been recognized as Scripture. By the time of Jesus, the OT was complete and it included the book of Esther.

Even though God is not mentioned, he is the most important character in the story. There are various ways that the author makes the point that this or that happened because God was directing the events. The story is meant to be understood in the light of whatever Scriptures the Jews had at that point. And in that it is similar to our lives and experience. God’s involvement in our lives is also hidden. We know about God and his involvement in our lives by thinking of our lives in the light of Scripture, but we do not see God. He does not show himself in obvious ways. There is a hiddenness about God’s involvement in our lives and we can only discern him and his actions by faith - by viewing our lives in the light of Scripture.

The first verse introduces us to King Ahasuerus king of Persia. He was king of a massive empire – “from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces.” This is one powerful king. And the first verses are making that point. He is a mighty ruler and very wealthy. He “gave a feast for all his officials and servants.” Verse 4 says “he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days.” This feast was for officials from all around the empire – nobles and governors of the provinces.” Then when that feast was over he gave another feast for the locals, “a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king’s palace.” The extreme opulence is described. Verse 6, “There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones.”

There was lots of drinking. Golden vessels and “the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king.” Verse 8 says that “There was no compulsion.” Apparently at some of these parties, the guests had to drink whenever the king drank, but at this party they could drink according to their own desires.

So these verses paint a picture of wealth, ostentation, self-indulgence, and power. King Ahasuerus is showing off. This is conspicuous consumption. These parties are about displaying his wealth and his power.

Now here already the author of this story is showing this king in a negative light. He is a pagan king. He reflects the ways of the world. His values are the values of the world. Think of how the book of Ecclesiastes describes Solomon living the life of self-indulgence in chapter 2. Solomon says in 2:10 “[W]hatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure....” But what was his conclusion? 2:2 “[B]ehold all was vanity and a striving after the wind....” The Bible consistently teaches the emptiness and futility of self-indulgence and self-aggrandizement. It teaches the value of humility and moderation and self-control. God gives us much to enjoy, but it is to be enjoyed with restraint and we are to seek the glory of God rather than our own glory. So within the first few verses of the book of Esther, we are presented with a picture of godless self-aggrandizement and self-indulgence.

This sets the stage for the story that chapter 1 tells. King Ahasuerus is feeling no pain. His heart was merry with wine. He is enjoying showing off his wealth and power. And in his drunkenness he decides that he wants to show off his Queen. He sends seven eunuchs to bring Queen Vashti into his party. She had been throwing her own party for the women. It seems that the men and the women were having separate parties. The king decides he wants his beautiful queen to parade before his drunken guests so they could enjoy her beauty. Verse 11 says that he order his seven eunuchs “to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at.”

This is a picture of how the world often treats women. This book was written for Jewish people who were living in exile – they were living surrounded by paganism and worldliness. This description of King Ahasuerus summoning his Queen to come and parade herself before his drinking buddies so that they could ogle her is not here as an example of how men ought to treat women. Even though it is described without commentary it is a description of what the Bible everywhere condemns. It is a description of how the world often treats women.

Not always, of course. In our world, there are many who condemn the treatment of women as objects for men’s sexual gratification. But at the same time there is a vast market for pornography and prostitution and there are many relationships including marriages where a woman’s significance is little more than to be object of sexual pleasure for her man.

The biblical perspective is very different. Both men and women are made in the image of God. That means they are to be valued as persons rather than sexual objects. The place for sex is in the context of a loving marriage between a man and a women where it is about giving rather than taking. The seventh commandment is about keeping sex within a loving marriage where it is about love rather than exploitation. The greatest model for this is the love of Christ for his church by which he gave himself for her. The way Christ treats the church is the ultimate model for how husbands are to treat their wives.

So when we read of King Ahasuerus sending for his Queen so she can parade herself before his drinking buddies, we are meant to disapprove. This is how the godless often treat women. The people of God are

called to value women as precious persons and not as sex objects. And the consumption of pornography is no different from what King Ahasuerus is trying to do here.

Queen Vashti refuses. Verse 12. “But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command delivered by the eunuchs.”

Now if we consider Queen Vashti’s refusal in the light of the rest of this chapter, we see that the biggest point of it in the story is to demonstrate that the king is a fool and that he is not as powerful as he thinks he is. The point of it in the story is to poke fun at the king. The king is showing off. Verse 4 says that “he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and the pomp of his greatness for many days.” In his drunkenness he makes a very foolish demand of his Queen. And she refuses. That was a great embarrassment for him. Her refusal makes the king very angry. “At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.”

We are meant to enjoy his discomfort. We are meant to see that he is not as powerful as he thinks he is. And the story as it unfolds is going to make that point in an even more powerful way because it will show how God is in control of things rather than the king. But at this point we are meant to enjoy the king’s embarrassment as Queen Vashti refuses his request showing that he is not as powerful as he thinks he is.

And it is this event which sets in motion the rest of the story which shows us how God uses the king’s power to accomplish his own purpose of delivering his people.

The reaction of the king and his advisors to Queen Vashti’s refusal to be eye candy for the king’s friends is meant to be comical. The king asks his closest advisors, “According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?”

An advisor named Memucan speaks. He expresses his concern that the queen’s refusal to obey the king will inspire all women to “look at their husband’s with contempt.” He is afraid that Queen’s Vashti’s defiance will spread throughout the realm – that there will be a feminist uprising - and all women will refuse to honor and obey their husbands. And so he urges the king to pass a number of laws of the Persians and the Medes – unchangeable laws to deal with this crisis. First that Vashti be replaced with a better queen who will obey her husband. And second he recommends that the king decree that “all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.” And we are told that “This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.”

This is clearly ridiculous. A foolish command of the king to his queen to parade herself as a sex object before the room full of drunken men leads to an unchangeable law over a vast empire that all women give honor to their husbands. The context makes it clear that this is something very different from the biblical command for women to submit to the loving leadership of their husbands. These are not godly people in this story. They

represent the oppression of women and not the godly honoring leadership/submission dynamic that godly husbands and wives are to embody.

There is no question that the women have often been mistreated throughout history. Women have often been mistreated in by Christian men as well. It has often been very common for even Christian men to abuse their God-given authority over their wives. And if we think of the decree that King Ahasuerus made in this chapter in response to his Queen's refusal to parade herself as a sexual object before drunken men, it is clear that what this decree was seeking was not loving submission to loving leadership, but rather the right of husbands to treat their wives as slaves to cater to their every whim.

That is certainly not what the Bible teaches as the godly relationship between husbands and wives. Genesis 1 teaches that both husband and wife are equally made in the image of God. It teaches that God made women to be helpers fit for their husbands. But that does not mean slaves. It is a picture of working together as equals with different roles. The rest of the OT does not give a much instruction about the relationship between husbands and wives, but one theme that is very important is the theme of God as the husband and his people as his wife. God is the ultimate example of loving authority and the way that he loved his people is the model for how husbands are to love their lives. And what is implicit in the OT becomes explicit in the NT where husbands are told to love their lives as Christ loved the church.

The decree of King Ahasuerus that all the women of his realm were to honor their husbands was not a reflection of the biblical teaching concerning the relationship between husbands and wives. It was a worldly exploitive understanding of the relationship between husbands and wives as seen in the kind of demand that King Ahasuerus made of Queen Vashti. It is an example of the abuse of women which has been such a common reality throughout history and still today. And reading this story in the light of the rest of Scripture reminds us of the "Christ-reflecting" way that husbands are to lead their wives.

But the point of this whole episode in the story is not so much about the relationship between husbands and wives as the unpredictability and foolishness of King Ahasuerus in his exercise of power. He is an incredibly powerful man and yet he is shown to be selfish, juvenile, and foolish in the way that he used his power. His demand that his Queen parade herself before his friends was immature and foolish, and his response to Queen Vashti's refusal was completely inappropriate and pointless. It publicized Vashti's defiance through the whole empire. It publicized Ahasuerus' foolishness. It was unenforceable and would accomplish nothing useful. The main point of the whole episode in the story is to demonstrate that the King with almost unlimited power was a selfish fool.

And God is going to work through the arrogance and foolishness of this man to deliver his people, the Jews, from extermination. The story as a whole is how God preserves his people from being wiped out. Already way back then, the Jewish people were hated by many non-Jewish people and this story is about how a plot to wipe them out is foiled by God using the foolishness of King Ahasuerus.

But the main point that has been made so far in the story is that King Ahasuerus is a very powerful king who is fanatical about his own glory and a fool who is given to impulsively make laws which according to the practice of the Persians and the Medes could not be repealed as verse 19 tells us. This practice becomes an important factor in the story as it unfolds.

Now this book was written for the Jews living in exile. The Jewish people had been punished by God for their sin and rebellion against him and they had been conquered by a number of their enemies and taken into exile. The result was Jewish people living in places like Persia living under kings like King Ahasuerus. Some of the Jews had been allowed to return to their own land by this time, but many of them were still scattered among the nations. And during the time described in the book of Esther, many of them were living under the reign of Ahasuerus. So the picture is of the Jewish people – God’s covenant people – living under the rule of a godless, self-seeking, and foolish king. They were a minority living under the kind of government described in chapter 1 of Esther.

And that made their situation precarious from a human perspective. To live under the rule of such an egotistical and foolish ruler puts everyone in the realm in a precarious position, but especially the people of God who tend to be hated and persecuted by the world.

And this has often been the situation in which God’s people have lived – ruled by worldly governments driven by ungodly values. That is not to say that all governments are all bad. We experience many blessings through our government. But where the majority of the rulers are unbelievers and therefore motivated by worldly values, the situation of God’s people will be precarious from a human perspective. We see that in the many places where Christians are being persecuted by their governments. And we see it in our own country where there is an increasing clash between the worldly values of our most of leaders and the principles of God’s Word. The bill concerning conversion therapy is an example as well as the whole LGBT aggressiveness that is behind it.

The situation that Esther 1 describes is one in which God’s people are vulnerable to persecution because of a government which was driven by godless values and principles. And that is where the people of God often find themselves. We see this in the prevalence of persecution in the NT and in the history of the church and in the present experience of a vast number of believers. Think of what Jesus said to his disciples shortly before he was crucified, John 15:19, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

The point is that chapter 1 of Esther describes a godless and foolish king and the author is describing the political situation in which the Jewish people lived – a political situation which would soon produce an edict calling for their extermination. And that has very often been the context in which God’s people lived their lives. But the story is going to go on to tell us how God worked in that situation, using the foolishness of this king to deliver his people.

Now this description of King Ahasuerus and his great wealth and power and the self-seeking and foolish way that he used it, invites us to consider God's reign by way of contrast. King Ahasuerus had almost unlimited power and authority. God truly has unlimited power and authority. King Ahasuerus had unbelievable wealth. God is the owner of all wealth. King Ahasuerus used his power and wealth in selfish and foolish ways. God uses his power and authority and wealth in good and righteous ways. The almost unlimited power of Ahasuerus was frightening and dangerous because it was wielded by a wicked man. God's unlimited power and supreme authority gives us comfort and security because God is perfectly good and righteous in all that he does.

Jesus came to establish God's kingdom – that is he came to bring about God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. He came to establish God's rule on earth by overcoming sin and evil and their representatives on earth. In the pursuit of that goal, Jesus came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. Jesus suffered and died to deliver his people from Satan's tyranny and transfer them into his kingdom. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. And that authority is exercised for good ends – never selfishly – never foolishly.

The contrast helps us to appreciate the fact that God reigns over all. It means that the highest authority and the greatest power in the universe is good rather than evil. Very often the highest authority among men is evil and even at best it is a mixture of good and evil. But over all human authority is divine authority. Over all earthly rulers is God with his absolute authority and unlimited power. And the absolute authority and unlimited power is always exercised in righteousness and wisdom and justice.

This is quite an emphasis in God's promises of salvation. God promises that he is going to make the world right again. He promises that he is going to renew the world in righteousness. And many of those promises have to do with ruling in righteousness. Many of those promises have to do with a righteous and just king who will rule with absolute authority in righteousness. The biblical hope for salvation and the defeat of evil, involves the salvation of individuals, but much of the biblical hope is expressed in promises of a righteous ruler. Think of the promise from Isaiah 9 which we tend to hear at Christmas time. Isaiah 9:6 "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder...." Verse 7 "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end on the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore..."

This, of course, refers to Jesus. When the angel announced to Mary that she was going to give birth to Jesus, he said, Luke 1:32 "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." This Son of David is reigning in heaven right now. His place, since his ascension, is at the right hand of God. And his rule could not be further from the rule of King Ahasuerus.

This is an important part of our hope. One of the great causes of suffering in the world is unjust government. And even the better forms of government cause harm as well as good because of corruption and selfishness

and godlessness and foolishness. One of the great ways of expressing the Christian hope is in terms of a righteous king. One of the great ways of expressing the Christian hope is in terms of truly good government.

That government begins how already because Christ is on the throne of God and he is reigning in righteousness and holiness. His reign is not yet visible to all. It is known by faith in God's word. And we know that he is directing all the events of the world for the coming of his kingdom and the blessing of his people. But there is a time coming when he will be revealed in all his power and glory. And those who have followed him will enjoy flourishing under his righteous reign forever.

The first chapter of Esther describes a self-seeking and foolish king. But he is a contrast to the good and righteous king who rules over all. The biblical hope is centered on that king – the King of Israel and King Jesus, the Son of David. The greatest possible blessing is to be ruled by that king.