

The Providence of Prayer

If you ever have 5- 10 minutes to spare today, while this sermon is still slightly fresh in your mind, may I suggest you pick up your Bible and read the entire short book of Esther. It reads like a great short story and is one of the most unique books in the Bible. One of the reasons it is so unique is because there isn't one reference to God in it, yet it is the foundation for the Jewish holy day, Purim. It is a truly happy celebration and gifts are exchanged.

This day celebrates the time that Queen Esther and Mordecai saved the Jews from a massacre! It's name comes from the Hebrew word Pur - which means 'lots', because the villain in this story - Haman - cast lots to determine on what day he was going to massacre the Jewish people.

As a short overview I have to share a bit of the story around the quote for today. So, as for the character studies - Esther won her place as Queen as the result of a competition and she was portrayed in this book as an obedient, modest, and very beautiful woman, but she was always told by her uncle Mordecai to keep her nationality a secret. Haman was a power hungry man who finagled his way into power over all the king's other advisors, and was enraged that Mordecai wouldn't bow down to worship him when he came by. So he plotted to have Mordecai and the other Jews destroyed, and created gallows to hang Mordecai.

Mordecai was a careful Jewish man who secretly counseled his niece Esther, whom he was responsible for since she was a little girl and her parents had died. He used to hang around the gate to wait for messages and be ready to protect her if need be. One day Mordecai, while he was waiting at the gate, overheard a plot against the King's life and due to his actions' the King's life was spared, and the King was indebted to Mordecai, but kinda sorta forgot about it for a while.

So, Haman cast the lots to find out when he should destroy the Jews in order to punish Mordecai and sets the pogrom into place. Mordecai hears about the plot - he seems to hear about everything hanging around the gate all day. He sends word to Esther, who at first just wants to forget about it, but he convinces her that she wouldn't necessarily be safe inside the palace and besides, he said, "*Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.*" Notice - once again - he didn't say anything like, "Perhaps God has put you in this position for such a time as this" no - not one *mention* of God - but I think we are all aware of the subtle background understanding. *This book is written with such a subtle understanding of the way that God is profoundly active in life's challenges!*

Esther commits herself to take action to save her people - even if it means her death. So what does she do? This woman asks the community to fast and pray and she and her maids would fast and pray, for 3 days. Wow. In the face of violent destruction she becomes physically weak and asks the potential victims to become physically weak. Talk about a non-violent form to resolve conflicts! She weakened her will so that God's will could be more evident.

Those 3 days must have planted some marvelous results because she seemed to arrive at an amazingly, delicately powerful plan. She gently approached the King and when he offered to grant her anything even to half his Kingdom, she said all she wanted was to invite him and Haman to dine. So the men came and she was such a gracious hostess, and *again* the King offered up to half his Kingdom, she says again, that all she wants is the two of them to come to yet another dinner, luring Haman into an incredible sense of self aggrandizement. Somehow, in the night before the next meal the King remembers that his life was in danger once and he owes someone some debt and finds out it was Mordecai. This is about the same time that Haman builds the gallows for Mordecai. After the next meal with Esther is when the hammer falls and the trap is laid for Haman, which is where our scripture for today comes in. Four pages into the sermon and we finally hear the text.

(Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22, courtesy Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

7:1 So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther.

7:2 On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled."

7:3 Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me -- that is my petition -- and the lives of my people -- that is my request.

7:4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king."

7:5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?"

7:6 Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

7:9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that."

7:10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

9:20 Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far,

9:21 enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year,

9:22 as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

What an exciting tale, is it not?! God be praised and joy abound because of the providence of God the Jewish people were not massacred. But **God** did nothing here! It was all the actions of Mordecai and Esther, was it not?

I believe that it was the careful and prayerful awareness and courage of believers who already knew their God, which brought about the actions which caused justice. This is the way righteousness in life really happens. God does not point his finger down from heaven and says in a deep bass voice, "Don't do that!" People who know what love and fairness and integrity are all about cannot close their eyes when they are aware of cruelty and they act in accordance to their best efforts. If they are wise they will be careful and prayerful and cautious and consistent and persistent!

Proverbs 19:9 is, "The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps." We set things in motion and hope that all the cards fall into place when it comes time for the final play, just as Esther did. She had no way of knowing at any point in the execution of her plan if it was going to work – even until the final moment. But she carefully continued in spite of the potential danger. She took action – she prayed, and then was inspired and guided.

Prayer is a form of contemplating justice. And while we are busy taking the actions, we need to be cautiously continuing our prayer for the action to be completed so we can hear God as our steps are being directed. In this book of Esther – where God is not mentioned once, those who know how God works, sees God in each step of the way.

Now is the time, I guess, to repeat that age old sermon illustration where a man is sitting in his living room watching TV when it is announced that everyone living where he is living needs to evacuate now to be saved from a flood. But the man says, "I have faith – the Lord will save me" and he stays where he is. The waters rise and the man is sitting in his second story window as a boat comes by and the man in the boat says, "Jump in!" But the man in the house says, "I have faith – the Lord will save me." He's on the roof of the house and a helicopter comes by. The pilot throws down a latter and says, "Climb on up!" But the man on the roof says, "I have faith – the Lord will save me." So he dies and goes to heaven and he says to God, "Why didn't you save me? I told everyone you would!" To which God responds, "What are you talking about – I warned you on the TV, and then I sent you a boat and a helicopter!"

The real Providence of God is in our prayerful consideration *of the realities in the moment* and how best to peaceably bring about *God's* will. Haman was fighting for his will for his superiority, Esther was contemplating how best to bring about God's love for humanity and was willing to die in the attempt. God is active every day of our lives; we don't always acknowledge the extraordinary subtlety of the nature of the divine. How many of you have shared this experience? You have a problem, and you think, "It can only be solved if this, this, and this happen." So you plug along on this path and suddenly discover the problem has been solved - and it came from over there - an angle I had never thought about before, and solved the problem more completely than what I had imagined. That is when I feel the presence of the divine in a totally awesome way. But then again, you didn't really see God do anything.

So we are encouraged in our sermon scripture to respond to the call for justice, prayerfully consider what gifts we *have* to contribute to the causes we see, and then to take careful action, regardless of whether we are sure we will be successful or not. For God uses our "saltiness" - our unique flavor and contributions to this world in mystical and wonderful ways. And we *could* try to take credit for them in the end, but we know that God directs us in each step we make.