

“ESTHER: The Two Kingdoms”

John 15:15-21 • Esther 1:1-12

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • August 9, 2020

What does it take to be successful today? What does it take to get ahead in our world? Maybe you need the right clothes with the right label. Or you need to be from the right family or be educated at the right school. Maybe all you need are the right looks. I remember a number of years ago there was a series of commercials featuring the tennis player Andre Agassi sporting quite the mullet hair style. The famous slogan from that ad campaign was “image is everything.” The ads were for Canon cameras but the slogan went viral and really kind of defined our culture. The world expects, even demands, certain things of us and rewards us with “success” if we do it right. But our culture will also punish us if we go against it.

This morning we are starting a four week series on the Old Testament book of Esther. In your Bible you can find Esther right after Ezra and Nehemiah, although the story takes place between those two books. The reason it comes after Nehemiah instead of between it and Ezra is that in the Jewish Bible Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. One of the things the book of Esther does is give us a glimpse of what it’s like living in a culture that is indifferent or even hostile to your faith. Our world is becoming more like that every day.

Unlike most of the other books of the Bible, the book of Esther is primarily a story. There are no commands from God, no overt theology; just a story of a powerful king and a Jewish peasant girl. But it’s a great story and like all good stories we can learn a lot from it. We don’t have time to read it all together so I want to encourage you to take some time this week to read it yourself. It’s not very long. That means that this sermon series will not be like other series based on books of the Bible where we go through chapter by chapter. Instead this will be more topical as we look at what it means for us today.

The story of Esther takes place in Susa, the capitol of the Persian Empire. Susa was in

modern-day Iran, but as verse 1 tells us, the Persian Empire stretched from Ethiopia in the west to India in the east. It also stretched into modern-day Turkey to the north. At the time this was the largest empire the world had ever known, stretching across parts of three continents – Africa, Europe, and Asia. About a hundred years before this, Jerusalem had been conquered by Babylon and the Jewish royalty and nobility were taken into exile. After the Persian king Cyrus defeated Babylon he issued a decree that the Temple in Jerusalem should be rebuilt. It wasn’t until Darius became king that many of the Jews were able to go and work on rebuilding. That means that the people left in Susa at the time of Esther were not really the most enthusiastic Jews. They struggled with the temptation to assimilate into the Persian culture.

This story really has four main characters: Ahasuerus, the king, also known as King Xerxes, Haman, the Prime Minister and main advisor to the king, Mordecai the Jew, who serves as a guard at the king’s palace, and Esther, who is Mordecai’s young cousin, essentially adopted by him when her parents died. Esther and Mordecai are both portrayed as having good hearts while the king and Haman are portrayed as self-serving and maybe even evil. Haman uses his position to advance his own personal ambitions for wealth and reputation, while Ahasuerus, who is incompetent and easily manipulated, is only interested in personal pleasure.

Ahasuerus has only been king for a couple of years and he wants to invade Greece. So he brings together all of the top governmental and military people from across the empire and he holds a huge celebration to convince them to go to war. The purpose of this celebration is to show off his great wealth. He wants to prove to them that he has the resources to win. And he wants to make sure everyone knows that he has more stuff than anyone else. Today we would call this “conspicuous consumption.”

Read Esther chapter 1, verses 1-12

Notice that this parade of wealth and power went on for 180 days – six months! At the end of the six months he hosts a week-long party at his palace. Three verses are dedicated just to describing the luxury of the party. The furniture is covered in gold and silver. There are luxurious draperies hung in the garden and the floors are mosaics made with marble, mother-of-pearl, and jewels. The cups for drinking the wine are custom made of gold and there are no two alike. There is no limit on the wine or food. The royal edict is that the guests can have whatever they want. At the same time Queen Vashti is hosting a party for all of the women.

Toward the end of this party the king, quite drunk like his guests, decides he wants to show off one more treasure – the queen. He sends seven eunuchs to bring her with her crown. The later tradition of the Rabbis is that she was commanded to come wearing only her crown. That's not actually mentioned in the Scripture but the idea is the same. She was an object to be viewed by all the men present.

This was the world Esther lived in. The Persian culture of the time based a man's worth on how much money and stuff he had and a woman's value was based on how she looked. As Tim Keller puts it, "a man was judged by the size of his wallet, a woman by the size of her dress." I don't know about you but I am so glad we don't live in times like that! The truth is that not much has changed. Nobody produces TV shows called *Lifestyles of the Poor and Average*. We live in a world that rates people based on the car they drive, the clothes they wear, and the house they live in. Looks and money are still how our world ranks people. In fact, maybe it's even worse today. Because of rampant consumerism, everyone is caught in this race. And we are willing to go into debt to appear more worthy or valuable. We live in what one commentator calls the "empire of materialism." He writes, "We live in a society that routinely elevates the trivial. The

empire of materialism in which we live takes stuff desperately seriously."

This is one reason it's important for us to study Esther. We find in this book a stark contrast between the empire of the world, the empire of materialism, that seeks to enslave us, and what the Bible calls the kingdom of God. Scripture, especially the New Testament, portrays a very different purpose of life.

Jesus' primary message was that you could live right now in the kingdom of God. In the gospel of Mark, the first words out of Jesus' mouth are, "The time is fulfilled, and the *kingdom of God* is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Dallas Willard used to say that Heaven is not somewhere you go when you die. If you want to go to Heaven now is the time to do it. His point is that you and I can live in God's kingdom now. The way Willard helps us understand this is to show us what we mean by a kingdom. It's not necessarily a geographical place, although there are certainly those kinds of kingdoms. But he defines a kingdom as the "range of one's effective will." What that means is that a person's kingdom is everywhere that what he says goes. We all have our own kingdoms where what we say goes. Most of us have very, very small kingdoms. Some are larger than others but none of our kingdoms is very large.

So the kingdom of God is wherever God's will is done. That's why Jesus taught us to pray, "thy kingdom come, they will be done." Those aren't separate requests. Wherever God's kingdom comes his will *is* done. We are asking God to make it happen on earth, just like it does in heaven.

So what does it mean to live in the kingdom of God? It means that you arrange your life to bring about what God wants, which is usually contrary to what the world wants. In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 through 7 Jesus shows us what it means to live in the kingdom of God. In Matthew 6 Jesus says, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and

steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

Then starting in verse 21 he summarizes by saying, “Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘

What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

You and I live in the midst of a broken, corrupt empire. But we are citizens of a perfect kingdom. The question for each of us is which kingdom does our life demonstrate to others?

Amen.