

“ESTHER: When God is Absent”

1 Peter 1:3-16 • Esther 3:8-15

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • August 16, 2020

Why me? How could God allow this to happen? Where *IS* God? Have you ever asked or thought those questions? Of course you have. We all have at some point. Sometimes we are confident that we see God at work in our lives and in our world and everything seems great. But sometimes it just seems like God is absent. September 11, 2001 seemed like one of those days. How could God allow that? Why would He allow this Coronavirus pandemic to infect and take the life of so many?

When we read the Bible God seems so obviously present. For example, in the Old Testament, whenever his people get into trouble God usually showed up in a big way. He appeared to Moses in a burning bush. He sent the ten plagues in Egypt. He parted the Red Sea. In the New Testament we find Jesus miraculously feeding the 5,000. And we see not only Jesus but also his disciples healing people and even raising some from the dead. And we think, where is God today?

Most of us have never experienced God working in one of these big ways. Thank God? The thing is that when things are going well in our lives we don't even look for God. It's only when things are bad that we ask God to show up. You ask him to heal someone we love and she gets worse. You ask him to help in your financial situation and nothing changes. And you think that either he doesn't hear you or he doesn't care.

I think this is the most important reason for us to study Esther. This may be the most true-to-life example of how God usually *is* present in our lives. Hopefully you found some time to read the story of Esther this past week. If you did, one of the things you may not have noticed is that God is never mentioned in the entire book. There is no mention of prayer or Scripture. God is conspicuously absent from the story of Esther. This is not an oversight on the part of the author. It's not like he just forgot to mention

God. The absence of God in the story is a literary device to point us to the unseen presence of God, which can also point us to the unseen presence of God in our own lives.

Last week we looked at the very beginning of the story. The king holds a festival to show off his wealth and power and it takes six months to accomplish it. At the end of the festival he holds a banquet where he ends up drunk and starts bragging about how beautiful the queen is. He sends to have her come show off to the guests. And she refuses. This makes King Ahasuerus so mad that he has Queen Vashti thrown out. She is no longer the queen.

So to replace her some of the men present suggest having a contest to find the best looking woman in the entire empire to replace her. Apparently that's all that mattered. This contest is not optional, especially for those living in the capital, but we find that Esther goes willingly. Her cousin Mordecai, who essentially adopted her when her parents died, tells her to keep her Jewishness secret, which she does. Ultimately Esther is the king's favorite and she becomes the new queen.

At some point her cousin Mordecai overhears a plot to assassinate the king. He reports what he has heard and the would-be assassins are caught. Mordecai has saved the king's life. Around this time Haman, one of King Ahasuerus' ministers, is promoted to basically prime minister. Haman, however, hates Mordecai, who won't bow down to him. So Haman develops a plan to wipe out all the Jews just to get Mordecai. This makes the Jews quite upset, obviously, and so Mordecai tells Esther that she will have to act to save their people. This is where we get a glimpse of God working behind the scenes. Mordecai says, "who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

One night the king can't sleep so he has his scribe read to him from the official record book.

By the way, if you find that you can't sleep just call the church office and we will send over some committee minutes for you to read. Anyway, the scribe reads the account of how Mordecai saved his life and King Ahasuerus asks what they did to honor Mordecai. Nothing. So he decides to have Haman publicly honor what Mordecai had done. This of course just makes Haman even angrier and so at his wife's suggestion Haman builds gallows so he can hang Mordecai.

In an effort to save the Jews, Esther invites the king and Haman to a dinner. The king is so pleased by this banquet that he tells Esther that she can ask for whatever she wants from him. So she asks that they come back the next night for another dinner. This one is even better and the king tells Esther, "just tell me what you would like and it's yours." Esther says, "I want to save the lives of my people." As a result the story comes out about Haman and his plan to have the Jews wiped out, and about the gallows he built to hang Mordecai. The king is so angry that he has Haman hung on those same gallows. He then allows Esther and Mordecai to issue a royal edict allowing the Jews to defend themselves, which they do successfully.

The lesson from the book of Esther is that God is at work even when we don't see him, even when we don't recognize it. The truth is that God always fulfills his covenant promises and he does it through his providence. One author put it this way: "When we speak of God's providence, we mean that God, in some invisible and inscrutable way, governs all creatures, actions, and circumstances through the normal and the ordinary course of life, without the intervention of the miraculous."

When Haman was able to have the king issue the decree to annihilate the Jews, it seemed like their future was hopeless. The order was for the entire Persian Empire and there were no Jews living outside the empire. But the Jews are saved, not by a big miracle but by God working through seemingly insignificant events. Think of all the things that had to go exactly right. The king had to get drunk and brag about Queen Vashti's

beauty. Vashti had to refuse to appear when she was called. Esther had to win an international beauty pageant. Mordecai had to overhear the plot to assassinate the king and the king had to forget to honor Mordecai for it. And then the king had to have insomnia and the scribe had to read that one section about Mordecai.

When you look at each of these events by itself, none of them seem very important. But if any one of them hadn't happened the Jews would not have been saved. If the king had honored Mordecai right away instead of waiting, if he hadn't had trouble sleeping, there would have been a different outcome. Were these all just coincidences? No. It was God working to arrange the ordinary events of life in order to bring about his will.

Tim Keller says, "When you see one of the ten plagues, you *know* that's God. When King Ahasuerus gets drunk and starts bragging you don't say, "Wow. There's God at work." Too often you and I miss seeing God at work in our lives because it seems so ordinary. That's why it's important to spend time reflecting on where the Holy Spirit may be working in your life every day.

George Washington was very good about recognizing how God was protecting and guiding him. In 1755, Washington was the aid of General Braddock in the French and Indian War. Following their defeat near Pittsburgh, Washington wrote a letter to his brother where he said, "By the all-powerful dispensations of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability or expectation, for I had four bullets through my coat, and two horses shot under me, yet escaped unhurt, although death was leveling my companions on every side of me." Washington was aware that God was working. He often wrote or spoke about God's providence. That doesn't mean that nothing bad ever happened to him. He had experienced plenty of tragedy. But he could see and trust that God had a plan and was working to bring it about.

God is at work in your life right now. Maybe you are going through a difficult, dark time and just can't see God in it. Or maybe things are great and you haven't tried to see God at work. Maybe you're like the man who was late for a meeting downtown and couldn't find a parking spot. As he got desperate he said, "God it's me. If you will just help me get a parking spot I promise to be in church every Sunday and to tithe and to completely change my life." Sure enough, as he rounded the corner, almost too late, a spot was available right by the front door. The man

looked up to heaven and said, "Never mind God. I found one."

God is at work in your life in so many ways. Take time to notice and to praise and thank him for it. Trust that God is working to bring about your complete salvation, regardless of the circumstances you face. Because when you fully trust Jesus, no matter what, then the difficulties of life will actually serve to make you more like Christ, who knows what it means to suffer. And that's the goal of the Christian life – to be like Jesus.

Amen.