

After taking a short break to call on the extended relatives up the street last week, we are continuing with our fall sermon series on the book of Esther. If you weren't with us when this series was introduced, we've been talking about the larger than life story of Esther, it's burlesque nature, its pendulum swinging changes. In the first chapter we meet King Ahasuerus who ends up having a 187-day drinking binge of a party, at the end of which he summons his wife, Queen Vashti to make an appearance and she turns him down.

And we talked about how quickly the people of his inner circle, his sages, responded to him being upset about Vashti saying no to him. They convinced him to sign a sweeping law that said all wives in the kingdom must obey their husbands.

And then in the second chapter, week two of our series, the king has sobered up, is missing Vashti and the sages get to work again and summon a number of young women to form a harem for the king to choose a new queen. And after months of elaborate beauty treatments and the right foods, each of the girls goes before the king and he ends up choosing Esther to be his queen.

We learn that Esther is a Jewish girl, being raised by her uncle Mordecai, after her parents died and Mordecai tells her not to tell the king that she's Jewish, to conceal her identity. And then he plants himself near the palace to keep watch on her. There Mordecai overhears of a plot among the king's men, to kill the king and he tells Esther to tell the king, which she does. But she tells him in Mordecai's name. So, at this point both Esther and the king have proven loyal and useful to King Ahasuerus.

And here we are this morning set up to start chapter three, thinking the king is alive, Esther is queen, Mordecai is found a place to sit near the palace gates and all is well but alas...we finally meet Haman who is what is known in literature as the antagonist in this story.

The text doesn't tell us how or why Haman has been promoted to be so close to the king, but he has become very important and all of the king's servants and those sitting by the gates would bow down anytime he came near. And as we just read, Mordecai chooses not to.

Remember that first week when we talked about how genealogy would come into play when we met the antagonist? We learned in chapter two that Mordecai was a Benjamite, descended from Kish, who was the father of Saul who was the first king of Israel. Well, Haman is the son of Hammadatha, an Agagite. Agag was the king of Amalek in the time of Saul and the sworn and bitter enemies of the Israelites at that time were the Amalekites. So, it's kind of like one is a Hatfield and one is a McCoy only

way worse, WAY worse. And Hatfield folk simply don't stand and bow with a McCoy comes around, no matter how fancy of a position he or she might be in.

It's interesting to me how much genealogy and heritage really do matter, even today. I was sharing with Diana on Thursday when we were in the office that a gentleman living in Victoria, BC, who was raised in Winnipeg, reached out to me by email because he is looking for a great uncle of his who he has traced to Vashon and was told he might have been the pastor of this church when this church was combined with what is now the Methodist church long before either church formed a charter with their annual conference or our presbytery. He and I have been emailing back and forth as I try and help him piece the story together. And I am drawn to how it matters to him and his family to get this part of their story better understood.

Where we come from matters, it gives us some of our identity. I suspect many of us have had the experience of piecing together family history in order to understand who we are a bit more, who we look like, where we might have gotten certain traits or characteristics, how we ended up in a certain part of the country.

In the time that the book of Esther would have been written, Mordecai would have understood himself through the stories of what he had been told about his past, where his people, the Jewish people, had come from and what all they had been through in their times of exile. The Jewish people lived with the knowledge of who they were, partly in their historical context. So, when Haman comes along in the narrative of this story, he's not just representing power over Mordecai as any guy at the palace gate but power that had historically been exercised over the Jewish people as a whole. And his choice not to bow isn't just about him, it's about who he is. If you look back in vv. 3-4, "Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, 'Why do you disobey the king's command?' When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would avail; for he had told them that he was a Jew." Esther had been told to keep it secret but now with Haman, he owns it, Haman, a known Agagite.

Haman becomes infuriated, this Jew will not bow to him, will not show submission to him. And after filling with rage, the text even says he thought it was beneath him to lay hands on Mordecai alone. Eugene Peterson translates that verse by saying, "Haman hated to waste his fury on just one Jew."

The bitterness between the Jewish people and their historical enemies is alive and well and playing out in these two men and Haman is ready to extinguish all the Jews from the kingdom, just kill every single one of them. The audience to whom this story would have first been told would have seen this as a serious and mortal showdown.

The text goes on...on the first month in the twelfth year of the King Ahasuerus, they cast lots, the text says they cast "pur." The Jewish festival of Purim, which we talked about at the beginning of this series, is named for this. Purim is the pluralized Hebrew word for pur, for lots. The festival celebrates the deliverance from the lot that Haman cast about which day they would to be eliminated. To this day, Jews around the world read this story every year on Purim. This plot development is huge, he's moved on in his rage to cast lots for the date of their destruction.

Notice that Haman declares the day and is already well into planning when in v. 8 he finally decides to tell the king.

As we've discussed Ahasuerus isn't necessarily the strongest leader, in fact he's pretty weak and he's easily manipulated and managed. Remember, what happened with Vashti and all the women of the land and then he sobers up and misses her, so they rush to find him a new queen. All along we see him being handled by this inner circle of leaders and Haman knows that's how it works and he's taking advantage of that.

He makes his case. There are "certain people," Jewish people to be exact, scattered and separated among the peoples of your kingdom. Their laws are different...it's not appropriate for you to even tolerate them.

You can see Haman crafting a plot, coming alongside this weaker personality and saying...it's not even appropriate for you, as king of this great land, to have them here...don't you think? And the king is just falling for it. Mordecai has just saved his life from a previous plot from within his own people and the king knows that, but he's just surrendering to the storyline Haman is giving him.

Haman continues to make his case and the poor king, who clearly doesn't even know what's going on around him most of the time, finally takes off his signet ring and says, "Oh okay, here you go, do what you need to do."

A signet ring is the equivalent of you or me giving someone our signature, birthdate, mother's maiden name and social security number. Normally the decrees would be brought to the king for him to use on them himself, not just given to someone else. He's just given Haman to password to his bank account.

The king secretaries are quickly summoned, Haman gets busy stamping decrees in the name of the king and it is sent out through all the citadel of Susa and the scene ends with Haman, having set this ruthless plan in motion, just sitting down to have a drink with the gullible and easily manipulated king that he just played beautifully. Just take that image in for a minute.

I think one thing that is important to hold on to in this particular part of the story is the importance of who you know yourself to be. Mordecai knows he's Jewish and he had kept quiet about it, likely to keep Esther safe, until Haman came along. But he knows something about the people Haman descended from. So, he names who he is, he claims who he is.

We talked last week at the Methodist church about the power in naming, that we claim identity and power when we name something, when we name our truths. We take back our power, our God given power, when we name it. And this is one of those places in this story where even though, God isn't mentioned, Mordecai's identity as one of God's chosen people is foundational for him. And God's name is all over this part of the story. He knows who he is as a recipient of the covenant made with Abraham. When others bow to Haman, and oppressor and enemy of the Jews, Mordecai's identity will not allow him to.

At the same time that Mordecai names and owns his power and identity, the king gives his away. The king gives his power away to a nicely packaged and persuasive sales pitch. He not only consents to the plan but surrenders his signature to all that Haman has planned for the Jews.

One man's strength and the other man's weakness play out in their willingness to either name and claim their power or surrender it completely. And look where surrendering power can lead. And Haman preys on the weakness of the one to gain an advantage over the other. And, as you'll see next week when Bruce preaches, even though Mordecai is devastated he still keeps paying attention and being mindful of where God might be at work.

One of the themes throughout this story is about the use and stewardship of power and the unlikely heroine at the center of it all who doesn't even grasp the power she has until her uncle brings it to her attention.

It's left me thinking a lot lately about the definitions of identity and power that you and I have. Who do we know ourselves to be? At theology pub later this month, we're going to be talking about what it is that we believe. If you are in an elevator for a two to three minute ride and someone asks you what it is that you believe, what would you say?

I think for us, as people of faith, that's the basis for answering who we know ourselves to be, what we believe about God and God's call on our lives is foundational to who we know ourselves to be. Mordecai knew who he was and that's what gave him his power. And I suspect that's the true source of power for you and me as well.

Do we know who we are, do we know WHOSE we are and if so, what does that say about the power granted to us? When we are given opportunities to speak up for God's truth and justice, do we shy away from it because of what it could cost us, or do we refuse to bow down to the idol of avoidance and the fear of being uncomfortable? Or do we surrender our power at the expense of our sisters and brothers by giving our voice, our signet ring, away? We can't forget who we are, even when we feel scattered and separated.

Next Sunday, while I'm in North Carolina, Bruce will be with you to see what comes next in this story of God at work. And maybe therein is the takeaway...God is at work; God is already at work in not only in this story but in each of ours and of ours together. We just have to remember who we are; we have to name and claim who we are together, we have to get comfortable owning our truth when we are asked, "just what DO you believe."

That's the power given to us, to lovingly and consistently live into our identity as God's own not so easily give it away.