

# McCabe United Methodist Church

“The Thing About Rivals”

Esther Series: Once Upon a Time Like This...

Sermon on sel. verses of Esther 5-7 and Romans 8:27-28 (1/24 & 1/25/15)

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I have to tell you something right out of the gate as I begin sermon number three in our five-part series on the Old Testament book of Esther: I have been anxiously waiting for *this* particular message. Today's story from chapters five through seven of Esther is a story about an evil man who got what he had coming to him. Fun, right?

See, I am a Christian pastor and my Lord and Savior once said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” I *never* get to preach about delighting in the downfall of an enemy. To do so would be unfaithful to the message of Jesus Christ. But, guess what, people? Today I get to preach about delighting in the downfall of enemies – and I am so excited! We *all* get to delight in the downfall of our enemies.

Today. Just. For. *Today*. Got that? Only today.

So today is all about rivals. It's about enemies.

And, I don't care who your particular rivals or enemies are – co-workers, the person who stole the heart of your romantic partner, a politician or political commentator you despise, a neighbor, a friend who seems to have their life together in a way you just don't, another parent at your child's school...the terrorists who violated our country and who continue to put the lives of others at risk – I don't care who your particular rivals or enemies are, if you have them, today's story from Esther is for you. //

Now. Our Lord and Savior did, indeed, tell us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. But *today* we get to take delight in the downfall of our enemies. Tomorrow we will ask Jesus for forgiveness.

As we explore the book of Esther, it is critically important for us to keep in mind that Esther and her relative Mordecai are Jews living away from Israel, as part of a religious and cultural minority group within the Persian Empire.

The story of the book of Esther is a story that truly celebrates the underdog...and, since Jewish people have so often been the underdog throughout their history as a people, this story is both powerful and precious to them.

In fact, this story is so important to them that they have a holiday every year dedicated specifically to this book of Scripture: the holiday of Purim. We'll be learning more about Purim next week, but we have to talk about it some this week because of the specific character we're really focusing on today – the character of Haman. Let's get into the story.

Imagine we're in the city of Susa – the Capital City of Persia. The king, Xerxes, banished his Queen because she publicly disobeyed him. King Xerxes then held a competition to see who his next queen should be. Young women were gathered up from throughout the Persian Empire and, from within the mass of young women, the king picked his favorite.

Esther had been gathered up to “compete,” and, as it turned out, *she* was King Xerxes' favorite and *she* became the new Queen of Persia. Good news! And, to make the good news even better, while Esther was at the palace “competing” for the crown, Mordecai – her relative and adoptive father – was appointed to become part of the palace guard.

Not long after Esther and Mordecai joined palace life, Mordecai learned that two of King Xerxes' servants were plotting to kill the king: Mordecai told Esther, who told the king, and the servants were hanged for treason.

Well...the plot twists further when the character Haman is introduced. Like the true villain in many a story, Haman doesn't show up right at the very beginning: in this ten-chapter book of Scripture, Haman shows up at the start of chapter three.

King Xerxes appointed Haman to be his top advisor. And, since Haman was descended from a powerful, ancient king, Xerxes made a rule that everyone in the palace guard had to bow down to honor Haman whenever he approached. All of the guards complied – except Mordecai.

As a Jew, Mordecai was not to bow down to anyone or anything other than God Almighty, so he refused to bow down to honor Haman. Haman got so mad about this that he developed a plan to have *all of the Jews* in Persia killed. Haman went to King Xerxes complaining that the Jews refused to assimilate into Persian culture and that Persia would be better off without them. Haman also mentioned that a lot of money and property could be added to the royal treasury if all of the Jews were eliminated.

King Xerxes was apparently a pretty easily influenced sort of guy, so he told Haman to make appropriate plans to carry out this genocide.

Now...while it was clear to all parties involved that *Mordecai* was Jewish, no one knew that Queen Esther was also a Jew. When she had been gathered up to compete for the role of Queen, Mordecai warned her not to tell anyone she was Jewish. So, now, thanks to Haman's superiority complex, all of the Jews in Persia were to be killed – and, unbeknownst to Haman and King Xerxes, this genocide would include their Queen.

When word spread throughout the kingdom of this plan to kill all of the Jews, Mordecai got in touch with Esther. (She had not been informed of Haman's evil plan, by the way.) Through a servant, Mordecai told Esther about Haman's plan and he begged her to talk to the king about it.

Initially, Esther said “no” because there was a rule that, if the king didn't ask to see you, and you just showed-up to talk to him, you could be killed. King Xerxes hadn't asked to see Esther in a month and she didn't want to put herself at risk. In response to this, Mordecai offered the most famous words from the book of Esther: “If you don't speak up now, we will somehow get help, but you and your family will be killed. It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!”

Esther was compelled by these words and she agreed to talk to the king, even though she knew she would be putting herself in danger. Today's reading focuses on all that happens next. //

Three days after Mordecai communicated with Esther, she approached King Xerxes and, thankfully, he welcomed her presence. In fact, when she appeared before him, the king said to her, "Esther, what brings you here? Just ask and I will give you as much as half of my kingdom!"

Esther then requested that King Xerxes and Haman join her for a dinner that evening. Both men happily obliged and, during the course of the dinner, King Xerxes again asked Esther what she would like him to do for her. Instead of coming right out and saying what she wanted, Esther requested their time and attention at another dinner, the next day. At that time, she would make her official request to the king.

Haman was feeling pretty high and mighty after this dinner...but, on his way home, he passed Mordecai at the palace gate and, of course, when Mordecai did not bow down to Haman, Haman began fuming inside.

When Haman got home, he had a little pity party for himself: he gathered up his wife and friends and went overboard gloating about how awesome he was – with so much power and so much money and so much honor in the Persian Kingdom...plus, he bragged about how the queen had personally invited him to not one, but *two* special dinners with the king.

The real pity party came when Haman said, "But none of this makes me happy, as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the palace gate."

What...a...*baby*. I read that line and I just can't handle how immature and offensive it is! "*But none of this makes me happy, as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the palace gate.*" What is wrong with this guy?!

Haman's wife suggested that, in order to take care of this problem, Haman should build a gallows and then ask King Xerxes to hang Mordecai on them the next morning. So. Haman had some 75-foot tall gallows built for Mordecai – right then and there.

That same night, King Xerxes had trouble sleeping. To help him fall asleep, he asked one of his servants to read the record of everything that had happened while he had been king. When the servant got to the part about how Mordecai had discovered two servants plotting to kill King Xerxes, the king realized he had never done anything to honor Mordecai for saving his life.

Right about then, Haman arrived hoping to ask King Xerxes to have *Mordecai* hanged the next day. But, when Haman approached the king, before Haman could ask about this, King Xerxes asked him: “What should I do for a man I want to honor?”

Being the self-righteous narcissist he was, Haman assumed Xerxes was being coy and was planning to honor *him*. So Haman said, “Weeeelllll...if you want to honor a man you should give him one of your own robes, put a fancy headdress on one of your royal horses, and then have someone lead him around the city on that horse, yelling, 'This is how the king honors a man!'”

King Xerxes *loved* the idea. But, of course, Haman quickly discovered that *he* was not, in fact, the man the king wanted to honor. Ooops!

“That's brilliant,” the king said to Haman. “Let's do it! Why don't you go grab Mordecai and make sure *he* has one of my robes, the headdress, a royal horse – the whole deal: *you* can be the one who leads him around the city, yelling, 'This is how the king honors a man!'” And it was done.

Can you *imagine* how Haman must have felt? There he was, fuming about how Mordecai never privately honored *him*, and then *he* had to honor *Mordecai* in a very public manner. After leading Mordecai around the Capital City, Haman went home in complete shame and disgrace. But he didn't have much time to wallow because he had to get to the palace for Queen Esther's special dinner. During that dinner, the king again asked Esther what she wanted him to do for her and, this time, she explained what was going on: “If you really care for me,” she said to Xerxes, “you will save my people. Someone has planned to kill them!”

Xerxes hadn't put together the pieces of what Esther was talking about – again, he didn't know she was Jewish – so, in horror, King Xerxes asked, “Who would do such a thing?” When Esther replied, ‘That evil Haman is the one who is out to get us,’ all became clear to King Xerxes, and Haman's fate was sealed.

Knowing things did not look good for him, Haman begged the queen to spare his life – but to no avail.

Then, one of the king's servants told King Xerxes about the gallows Haman had built to hang Mordecai. The servant also reminded the king it was *Mordecai* who had saved his life when others had plotted to kill him. Then, in what is an absolutely stunning example of poetic justice,

King Xerxes ordered Haman to be immediately hanged on the gallows Haman had prepared for Mordecai.

When you read this story, you cannot help but rejoice at this point. If anyone ever got what he had coming to him, it was Haman. And, man, is it fun to delight in his downfall. If part of you doesn't want to stand up and cheer when King Xerxes commands that Haman be hanged on the gallows Haman had prepared for Mordecai, I think maybe you've missed something. “Poetic justice” really is the best way to describe it.

As I mentioned earlier, the Jewish people have a special holiday every year focused on the story of Esther. The holiday is called “Purim” and, again, we'll talk more about Purim next week...but, the thing about Purim is that, on it, Jewish people take delight in this part of the story.

Purim is a Halloween- or Mardi Gras-like festival where people dress in costumes, they have fun feasts, and, most importantly, they read through the entire book of Esther in one sitting – all ten chapters of it. *And*, as the story is read, they get to respond in various ways. For example, whenever Haman's name comes up in the story, there is yelling, booing, and they use a special kind of noisemaker called a “gragger” to express their disdain for Haman.

For fun, I bought one of these graggers: it's a goofy-looking, hand-painted, wooden representation of Haman. His head is on the top and his body is comically distorted. It's designed in a ratchet style so that, when you quickly rotate it, Haman's body twists against a little wooden paddle and a very annoying noise is created.

Imagine a sanctuary full of costumed people, listening to Esther being read, "booing," and shaking these things every time Haman's name is said. Sounds pretty fun, right? I mean, I'm sort thinking about just keeping this Haman gragger thing handy for every time one of my own enemies or rivals either comes to mind or interacts with me in some way.

Then, instead of dwelling on them and making myself crazy trying to figure out why they do the mean things they do, I'll just shake my Haman gragger in protest against them and move on with my life! Wouldn't it be fun to do that kind of thing every time an enemy or rival comes to mind or does something hurtful???

Now. I don't know because I am not Jewish, but I have to believe that part of the reason Jewish people delight so much in Purim is that it gives them an opportunity to celebrate against their enemies. It really is the case that Jewish people have been a religious and cultural minority group for much of their history as a people. They have had very real, very dangerous rivals and enemies.

Though most of us do not have comparable experience as *Christians*, because Christianity is the dominant religion of our area, most of us likely have *personal* rivals or enemies – people who simply make life far more challenging for us than we wish it were...people who intentionally hurt us...people who wish us harm...people who have stabbed us in the back...people who intentionally work against us just to be manipulative or cruel. Wouldn't it be fun to have a holiday where we could delight in the downfall of these rivals and enemies?

As I said early in this sermon, those of us who call ourselves Christian typically have a sense that we are *not* to take delight in the downfall of our rivals and enemies. After all, Jesus *did* say, "Love your enemies and

pray for those who persecute you.” And don't you just hate those words sometimes?

“Jesus, we don't *want* to love our enemies and we don't *want* to pray for those who persecute us. We want to *hate* them and we want to delight in their downfall. Why can't that be okay with you???” //

Haman got his just deserts. Haman got what was coming to him. Haman fell and he fell hard. But the thing about *our* rivals and enemies is that they just don't always get what they have coming to them.

We want justice to really be *justice*: bad guys and gals paying the price for the hurt they've caused. Unfortunately, that's not always how it happens. Sometimes the bad guys and gals get off scott-free while the good guys and gals suffer the consequences.

And when we are the ones suffering at the hands of rivals and enemies, our Savior tells us to love them...to pray for them. It stings a little, right?

But the promise of those verses from Romans chapter eight is never more true than when we we are dealing with some sort of rival or enemy: “We know that God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves him. They are the ones God has chosen for his purpose...”

*“We know that God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves him. They are the ones God has chosen for his purpose...”*

This is good news, people. Today and always. Thanks be to God. Amen.