

2022-03-13-Providence-NN

Providence
Esther 1
03/13/2022
Nathan Newman

Thank you, PD, for the session, for the invitation to preach, Uncle Jon as well. Good morning, church family. It is a joy to be back with you. Back I say, because last summer, I was here for the Bugs and Slugs concert. So, if you don't know me, you may remember my daughter was here starting the mosh pit at the front of that concert. She was just dismissed to children's church, so no mosh pit as we start out this morning. But maybe. We'll see how things go. We've all been through so much this past two years. I don't have to tell you that. But I also am a part of a church that just went through our own transition, where I lost a best friend in this last year. And a senior pastor who moved to a church in Nashville. I don't know if that sounds familiar to you. But we've been through a lot. I will never remember when I got that phone call about our senior pastor leaving the church, my friend and spiritual mentor, because I was down in Huntsville, Alabama where I'm from. Because I was there alongside my youngest brother who was dying of cancer, and he was with hospice at that point. And I was going to pick up my wife, Jess, at the airport. And [she] said, 'Oh by the way, you know, our senior pastor is leaving to take a church in Tennessee.' Just a few weeks later, my youngest brother Phillip did pass away from cancer. And just two weeks after that, our youngest daughter was born, who's named after him. So, she is Philippa, Pippa, and is in the nursery this morning. So, thank you for caring for her, for caring for our family. And this passage has meant so much to me, and my prayer is it will be an encouragement to you as it has been to me over these last two years, especially.

So, if you have a Bible, open it up to Esther, chapter 1. And the Bible in the back, if you grabbed one of those on your way in, that should be on page 233. It's in the Old Testament. Find Job. Move back earlier. There's no shame in going to the table of contents. It's one of those ones that's a little bit harder to find. Let's read chapter one together.

Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones. Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished

according to the bounty of the king. And drinking was according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?" Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike." This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let's pray together. Father, we do ask that you would make this word profitable to us, to help me to preach, that you would help us all to listen, to see you. Would you speak to us, even in your silence, we pray. We ask for your blessing. Amen.

Okay, what is this that we just read? What is God up to? Where is He? These are questions that have been really on all of our minds over the past couple of years. In particular, we feel like that king in ancient Greek mythology, forced to live eternity rolling up the rock

uphill. Racial tension, disease, cancer, a war in Ukraine, congregational pains and sufferings, including the loss of a senior pastor, loss of loved ones who are close to us, loss of dreams, maybe for that special wedding day or for that prom that you never got. Where is God in all of these things? The good news is this book, the book of Esther, helps us to see God. That's what this book is all about. When it looks like God is nowhere to be found, we see that God is now here, whether we know what is next, the next second, minute, year to come. How can we trust Him? And Esther helps us to see God's providence and points us to Jesus.

We need this message right now. I need this message right now. And so, let's look at how God is working behind the scenes. Before we get into this crazy story, let's be reminded of just a little bit of the context. This is 5th century BC, and that's not 'Before Covid.' That is a long time ago in an empire far, far away. These first few verses, the king just in case we didn't know who it was, is mentioned a couple of times, Ahasuerus. Under his rule and reign which was around 480 BC as we understand it. And he's maybe more commonly known from his Greek name, King Xerxes I. And this was an epic kingdom, an epic kingdom. In it, we see here in 127 provinces. But this is modern day Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Israel, regions of Russia, Afghanistan, Central Asia, North Sudan and more. This is a huge territory, and it was ruled by the Persians for 200 years until Alexander the Great came onto the world scene. And Esther, we're told, she's this character, the main character of this story, who's not even mentioned in this prologue, the first chapter. But we know that she lived in the capital city of Susa. And you may remember from biblical history, Xerxes grandfather. King Cyrus, great grandfather, I think actually, was the one who let the people go back to rebuild their homeland. So, I think Ezra and Nehemiah, but there was a group, a contingent of Israelites who remained in exile. And if you remember the prophet Jeremiah's words, this is not surprising, because God was the one who sent them into exile. Jeremiah 29, 'But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you.' Into exile. This is not an accident. 'And pray to Lord on its behalf. For in its welfare you will find your welfare.'

And so Esther is continuing, is a part of the biblical story, where we see God redeeming a people for Himself out of every nation, tribe, and tongue. And yet if you're familiar with the book of Esther, there's 167 verses and God's name is not mentioned once. And yet, we want to look at how God is working through this story, because here's why this matters to us. Because every Christian has experience, experienced, or will experience, a dark night, a dark night of the Lord, where maybe you remember these psalms that David prays. And they end in lament and despair. Psalm 88 comes to mind. Where it feels as if God is absent. And so, this is important for us too, whether you are in that place now or you might find yourself in that place in the future. This is a part of God's story. Maybe you wanted to be happily married but that special someone hasn't come along. Or parents, you have a child, who maybe even grew up in this church but has walked away from the faith. What is that story for you? David shares these cries of anguish in Psalm 43, where he cries out, 'Answer me speedily, O Lord. My spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me lest I be like those who go down in the pit.'

What are your questions, as you think through this passage? Maybe even your own story, the circumstance that you're in. Here's a few that I wrote down. Where is God? Has he

forgotten his people? What is the point of this story? Where is God at work? And what's the purpose? I wonder if any of these questions resonate with you as you even heard these verses read. So, here's, here's the road map. Here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna enjoy this story. We're gonna answer those difficult questions as best we can. But before we answer them, let's enjoy this story together, and then I'm gonna offer three quick takeaways at the end.

So, look back down in this story. We've got a little bit of our historical context. And we see in verses three and four that the king is giving an opulent feast for everyone, his officials, his servants. Everybody was there. And this was the party of all parties to show his riches, really to probably to prepare him for the next war. As we know in history, that was on the horizon. And the author of Esther wants us to kick our imagination into gear. That's why we get this beautiful description of couches made of gold. Okay. We're supposed to think about the grandeur of this party, the finest linens, the best China, drinks that were poured into golden vessels and shots every time the king drinks. The king had given orders to do such as every man desired, and we know that never is a good phrase when that is mentioned in the Bible.

So, on the seventh day of this feast, this drunk king calls his cabinet together, Mehuman, Harbona, Bigtha. What if your name was Bigtha? I don't know. These are great, these are great names. They decide to call Queen Vashti to parade before them in verse 11. They objectified her beauty because she was beautiful to look at. And so, they thought it was a good thing to just parade her out in front of all these leaders. And something happens that's unexpected in the story. Of course, we're like, thank God. But the unexpected thing to the king is that she, Queen Vashti, refuses his order. She defies the king, and in verse 12, it says, 'The king became enraged and his anger burned within him.' Now we're not told why the queen refused to come, though it's not hard for us to think of reasons why she would not have come. But it's amazing that her domestic disobedience ultimately leads to her being deposed by the king.

But what's going to happen? What happens next? These leaders are thinking. Queen Vashti. She has to be made an example, and so goes this abusive cohort of the pagan king and his friends. And they say, all women in the kingdom are going to look on their husbands with contempt if you don't do something about this. If you don't respond publicly to how she has responded to you. And I think the author of Esther really wants us here to feel the pettiness of the king, and his supposed leaders and friends around him, and their response. And I could not help get out of my mind the whiny king George III from *Hamilton*. So, when I was thinking through the king in this context, that's what I had in mind. But all of these things, they just seem so random. These coincidences, this random string, but we're reminded at the beginning to look at what God is doing and where He is in this story. Because Vashti's fall paves the way for Esther to come on to the scene and to save her people.

And Christians we have a word for this. We call it providence. And for Christians it's more than just a word. It is a world view, how we think about God and everything in this world. My pastor in college, it was a man named David King. And he defined providence like this: God's unseen hand that rules all things according to His good purposes. I'll repeat that if you're taking notes. God's unseen hand that rules all things according to His good purposes. So, let's unpack that definition a little bit, because this story is one of the most beautiful examples of

providence in all of scripture. It really is the author's literary gift to us because it is true. It's often more the unseen providences of God that God works throughout history and even in our own lives. Of course, we understand the big things, the miracles, Jonah and the fish, water to wine, resurrection, but it's often the unseen things, the completely ordinary events of God, that mean and have the biggest impact in our lives. And we see one of them in this story, that God uses a drunken pagan king's party and the dismissal of his queen to pave the way for his people to be rescued in a foreign kingdom.

The Heidelberg Catechism defines providence like this: Providence is the Almighty and ever-present power of God by which He upholds, as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures and so rules them, that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty, all things in fact come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand. God is at work in all things and everywhere. And what this tells us, that if His hand were removed, that the world would cease to exist. And so, when you think about all things, what comes to your mind? Here's a few things I wrote down: viruses, presidential elections, protests, animals, stock market, re-openings, masking, nature, sparrows, the roll of the dice, the number of heads on your head, the death of a 26 year old just starting his life, when bosses move on, the nations, the nations warring, the day of our birth, the day of our death, and on and on and on. We could add, what would you add, to all the things that God is sovereign for that come to your mind? Now it's a good thing for us to think about this, because scripture teaches that this is an important thing for us.

Proverbs 16:9. A man plans his ways, but it's the Lord who ultimately directs his steps. So, we're not called to cease planning. But ultimately, in God's providence, He is the One who is working all these things out, directing our path, ruling all things according to His good purposes. That's what we read in Romans 8 earlier. We know for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose.

This is a really thrilling story, and this is just the beginning. This is just the prologue of Esther. There's so much more that we could say about that, but here's what I want you to take away from today. Two quick things and then one that we will linger on a little bit longer. Okay. The two quick things. Can I give homework? Am I allowed to do that? I'm a guest preacher, so I can do this. I would encourage you to read the book of Esther sometime this week. It takes about 30 minutes to read in its entirety. And if you don't want to read it, you can download the ESV Bible app. And you can have Kristen Getty read it in her beautiful, Northern Irish accent. Okay. So, download it. Read Esther in its entirety and enjoy the story. Enjoy the character and the plot twists and the drama. It is a really beautiful story and something that I think can encourage you as you go throughout your week. It's a beautiful story.

Second thing I think this scripture puts in my mind is for us to thank God for how He has been at work in our lives in particular. Christian if you are a Christian, you're sitting here today. Thank God for His work in Esther's life. Thank God for His work in your own life. Who did God put in your path that brought you to saving faith? Maybe it was Elev8 ministry. Maybe you were a kid who grew up in this church and heard the devotional from your coach and pointed you to Jesus through basketball ministry. What was it for you? Who are the people and places,

perhaps in your way, that you can thank God for? Looking back in the rearview mirror His providence in your life, bringing you to saving faith.

The third and final thing I think that this passage teaches us is for us to look for where God is at work, to look for where God is at work. Because this book brings up so many questions in our minds. There are so many questions here, the most important of them, I think, is where is God? Why is this book that doesn't even mention God in the canon in general? PD is great. You can email him on Monday, and he can answer that question. God is not mentioned anywhere in this book. And yet He wants us to look for Him there, because that's what we're called to do when we approach God's revealed word that is living and active. It's here for us to be inspired and to be encouraged. And we're promised that our searching won't be in vain. So, enjoy the story. Look for where God is at work. It's okay to ask the question: God, where are you at work? You know, it's okay for us as Christians to ask that question. God, where are you? You know, God can take it. If you're in the middle of suffering or even debilitating pain right now and you don't understand how God is at work in your story, ask Him. Take your pain and your circumstances to Him. There's a loving God behind the details. You know, we don't believe in karma or chance. Providence is different than fate, because we have a God who rules and reigns over all things for our good ultimately.

I wonder, is this way part of your understanding of what it means to be a Christian? Scripture teaches God's universal control of this world from Old to New Testament. Colossians 1:16 comes to my mind. 'For by Him all things were created. And in Him, all things hold together. And if that isn't your answer. You have to have an answer to that, to that question. How do you make sense of the world around you? How can you make sense of viruses and disease and cancer and war apart from understanding the good work of God and His faithful providence at work in our lives and in our stories? Understanding God's providence in my life is the only way that I can make sense of these last two years. I don't know any other way or any other answer that is sufficient than a God who is ruling and reigning over all things and one day will be able to answer all of the questions that we have in this life.

Until then He asks us to come to Him and to come and bear one another's burdens as well as we work through sometimes God's bitter providence in our lives. And ultimately seeking and looking for where God is at work. History has shown us that God has not ceased working on behalf of His people. We've got Naomi and Ruth. Book of Job is a great one. Joseph as well that great passage in Genesis 50. That great summary. You remember the story of Joseph after he has suffered an incredible injustice and suffering at the hands of his brothers. He winds up in jail in a foreign land and through God's divine providence, he is released from that jail and is successful. So successful that he rises up to be the right hand to pharaoh, helping orchestrate all of the agriculture and grain. So that when a famine comes upon that part of the world and Joseph's brothers come begging for mercy and for grace from their grain storage, Joseph is able, once they recognize, once he's able to tell them who he is. This is how he responds. You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. Now if you'd asked Joseph when he was in the pit as a young man if that was his experience, I think we'd be hard pressed to say 'yes.' But with time and God's faithfulness and his life in the past and the present and looking even ahead to this

future, he saw God's hand at work. How do we know that to be the case? Because the greatest injustice and suffering that the world ever saw was not an accident. Because God sent His son Jesus to die an unjust death. Why? So that we might be redeemed for our good. That, that, God sent His son, Jesus, to die on the cross for our sins. So, we can give our circumstances to God because he is ruling and bringing about His purposes. I love this quote from one of the Esther commentators that I read, Karen Jobes. God is moving all of history forward to accomplish all that must happen before the return of His Son, Jesus Christ, the true King of kings.

I want to walk you through just a bit of God's providence and smile and even how I am here today. Because I'm here today because my Uncle Jon and Aunt Vicki baptized their daughter, Whitney, at McLean Presbyterian church. Was that 26 years ago or something like that? And Jess's parents, my wife's parents, were there and were inspired to go back to West Michigan, where she grew up, and plant a PCA church there. Where she grew up to learn about Covenant College, a place that she would have never attended on Lookout Mountain, Georgia. Lookout Mountain, Georgia, being from West Michigan. And it was there that we met. Me. I'm a boy from Alabama and a girl from Michigan met in Georgia. And in God's providence, Jess moved here to DC, lived with her aunt and uncle for a little bit. Thirteen years later, we're here and there's a lot more providence in between about how God has been at work in our stories and we, we look on that, and we just have to give thanks to God for His work. Now of course the point of this, this is, this story is not about me, because the world would look back on all of those chance encounters and call it serendipity.

But as Christians we look on that and see God's providence, His hand at work leading and guiding us. So, I want you, in this moment, to connect your own dots, and how God is at work in your story. Where is God at work providentially in your life? And maybe this is a new paradigm for you. That Christians, it's crazy that they would think that things happen according to a plan. Like that just, that doesn't make sense to you. We're so glad that you're here. That is awesome and we'd love to walk alongside you, to help you as you understand more about the place that God has called you to live, to work, to play. Because the hope is that when you look back on this story, the story of Esther from beginning to end, I hope that you will be able to say and see God working through it all. Wherever you are in your own story, my hope is the same for you.

You may be wondering: how, like how, do I process all of these things? I know where I'm at in my story. Sometimes it feels like chapter one. And you have to work through that together in your community about where you are. But we worship God because he's shown us His goodness in the past and His protection and preservation of His people like in this story in exile. He's shown his goodness to me personally in the present, even in the midst of great suffering with the birth of our daughter who's named after my brother just two weeks after he passed. And no doubt He will show his goodness to you as a church, both corporately and individually, as you walk together in this season looking for the next senior pastor and to seek the welfare of the city together. Past, present, future. God is at work in all of these things. And I'll end with this. An encouragement to my family has been Psalm 77. Where the psalmist cries out in the middle, where are you God and near the end in verses 29 and/or verses 19 and 20, it

says this: Your way was through the sea. Your path through the great waters. Yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. And it may seem at times, that God's hand is unseen. But by his grace he is leading us by His providence.

Let's pray together. God, we are thankful to be alive, thankful for your grace and your mercy, thankful to be seen even when we don't feel like it. We don't deserve to be treated the way that we are, beloved by you. But God, you have preserved us. You've protected us. You know us by name. We thank you for the eternal hope that we have in Christ Jesus, a hope that leads us to dancing and abundant life. And so, we ask Lord, that you would help us, Lord, just to look on our stories and to see you working through it all for our good and for your glory. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.