

Holy Cross Lutheran Church  
Livestream Adult Bible Class  
May 9, 2021  
Esther 2:19-3:15

With Xerxes calmed and Esther crowned as Queen, we now move to the heart of the scriptural story – the plot of Haman to annihilate the Jews who remained in the Persian Empire. In a fit of rage one man threatens to exterminate all Jews throughout the entire kingdom. Though the plot was ultimately foiled, it would only be the first of what has turned out to be many plans right up to the years of World War II and beyond to persecute the descendants of Abraham, God’s people of the Old Testament.

### Setting the Stage - Esther 2:19-23

Sometime after Esther is crowned a second gathering of the virgins is held. No one is exactly sure when this happened or why this happened, but it happened. Mordecai is still keeping a close watch on Esther and for her part, Esther has not yet made known her ancestry. Mordecai is said to be “sitting at the King’s Gate.” This doesn’t mean that he was in the habit of loitering around the entrance to the palace, but that he was doing his work as a rather high-ranking official in the buildings that surrounded the king’s residence. He had access to the royal court and to certain members of the royal family.

The plot thickens however in verses 21-23. Mordecai overhears a plot by two of the king’s eunuchs to assassinate the king. We are not told the reasons for the plot against the king, but they have become frustrated with the king’s apparent weakness, upset over the failed attempt to invade Greece or any number of other issues. Interestingly Xerxes would ultimately be assassinated in 465 BC by members of the palace guard.

Mordecai overhears the plan and informs Esther. Esther informs the king and the two men are hanged on the gallows. All of this is recorded in the chronicles of the kingdom (which will come in handy later in the story).

### Mordecai and Haman - Esther 3:1-6

The story takes an unexpected turn as chapter 3 opens. Having saved the life of the King one might expect that it is Mordecai who is exalted and given a greater position in the administration. However, a new character enters the story in the person of Haman who is promoted to the second highest office in the empire. We don’t know too much about Haman beyond what is written in Esther. He is identified as an “Agagite” which makes him a descendant of the Amalekites whose hatred of the Hebrew people is longstanding.

Why Haman is appointed second in command is left unstated. It may be that Mordecai is being intentionally or unintentionally snubbed, or it may be that Haman has earned the promotion

## Haman’s History

Amalek was a grandson of Esau (Genesis 36-12).

The Amalekites waged war on Israel (Exodus 17:8-16).

Samuel identifies Amalekites as enemies of Israel (1 Samuel 15:1-90).

Amalekites attack Israel in the days of Kings Saul and David commands the army of Israel in defeating them (1 Samuel 30).

In Judaism the Amalekites are the archenemy of God’s people.

through his own work. The problem comes when Mordecai refuses to obey the king's order that all his servants are to bow down and pay homage to Haman. Mordecai will not bend the knee; he will not pay respect to Haman. The only reason given in the text is that Mordecai was a Jew. The longstanding hatred between Jew and Amalekite prevents him from bowing to Haman.

At first Haman is unaware of Mordecai's refusal to bow down, but when it is brought to his attention, he is filled with fury. He will take revenge, but not just on Mordecai, but on all the Jewish people in the Persian Empire.

### The Planned Holocaust - Esther 3:7-15

The second half of chapter 3 details the various stages of planning and scheming that went into Haman's plot.

- **The Casting of Lots** -- Haman gathers the diviners together to determine the best day, according to the gods, for him to carry out his diabolical plan to destroy all the Jews within the empire. They do this by casting lots, which may be something like modern-day dice, for each day on the calendar in succession until the most propitious day is determined by how the lots fall. As they move through the calendar, it is eventually the twelfth month for which the lots give the sought-after date. Even though he will have to wait nearly a year, Haman has his day set.
- **Securing Support** – Haman then goes to the king to get his support for the extermination of the Jews. He offers the king 10,000 talents if he is allowed to do as he plans. The sum of money he offers is almost certainly beyond his ability to pay. 10,000 talents was about 2/3 of the annual tax revenue of the kingdom. That one man would have those resources is utterly impossible. Clearly, Haman is exaggerating or planning to donate the entire wealth of the Jewish people to the king. Regardless, the king is once again not thinking straight. He accepts the bribe and gives Haman his signet ring to use in issuing the necessary decrees.
- **Issuing the decree** – The scribes are summoned, and the edict is written. On the day before the Jewish Passover the order is written in all languages of the empire and sent by courier to all corners of the empire. For the Jews, the torture had begun. Imagine for a moment knowing for up to an entire year that you and all your family, friends and all who share your heritage are to be killed. In an empire as vast as the Persian Empire, there was no way of escape, except perhaps for a few who were fortunate enough to be close to the borders.

And with that "the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion."

### What Does This Mean for Us? - The Holocaust and Christianity

Even though the events of Esther 3 happened long ago and far away, they continue to have relevance today for the church. Sadly, Haman's plot was not an isolated event in world history. There have been many plans through the years to exterminate Jewish people. In recent years, thoughtful Christians have begun to wrestle with the implications of the holocaust and to face up to the anti-Semitism which still finds its way into the church today.

- **Luther and the Jews** One of the greatest challenges in evaluating the legacy of Martin Luther interpreting his hateful language toward Jews. To be sure, Luther also had kind words for Jews

and in his last written sermon reminded hearers to pray for them. But at the same time, he said things that have been used and misused by people in the furtherance of hatred toward Jews. In 1523, Luther, writing in "That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew," urged Christians to treat Jews with kindness and respect. "We must receive them cordially, and permit them to trade and work with us, that they may have occasion and opportunity to associate with us, hear our Christian teaching and witness our Christian life."

But when Luther realized that the Jews weren't converting, his tone shifted drastically. In book called "On Jews and Their Lies," Luther made seven points, among them: that synagogues, books and schools be burned, Jewish homes razed, the rabbis forbidden to preach "on pain of loss of life or limb" and that Jews should be enslaved, expelled or even killed. "We are at fault in not slaying them," he wrote.

While we are deeply indebted to Luther for his rediscovery and proclamation of the Gospel, on the other hand, it is important that we deplore and disassociate ourselves from Luther's negative statements about the Jewish people.

- **Christians and the Holocaust** The role of the Christian churches in Germany during World War II, especially regarding the holocaust must also be reckoned with. The Christian Churches in Germany were often more nationalistic than confessional. This movement attempted to deJudaize the church by removing non-Aryans from the clergy, rejecting the Old Testament and reinterpreting the New, and purging church music of anything that sounded Jewish. Jesus was often depicted not as descending of Jewish origin, but of Galilean, thereby proving that he was Aryan. To promote anti-Semitism, some scholars even cast Jesus as the "great enemy of the Jews" and used his denunciation of Pharisaism and legalism as their support.

As Christians we must continually be on guard against sinful cultural and racial biases so that the Gospel may be heard as it was meant to be heard – **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."** Romans 1:16-17

### What Does This Mean for Us? - The Persecution of Christians

Ever since King Herod ordered the murder of innocent children in and around Bethlehem after Jesus was born, the followers of Jesus have been subjected to many forms of persecution for the entire 2000-year existence of the church.

As the world around us becomes more secular, Christians are again becoming targets for overt and subtle persecutions. The Bishop-Elect of the Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland, for example was recently charged for the publication of a document in 2004 that argued for the preservation of the historic understanding of Holy Marriage. (Finland did not legalize same-sex unions until 2017.) Christians in Canada who in good conscience cannot accept our society's use of abortion as a form of birth control cannot access government funding for hiring summer students.

Jesus himself predicts that in this world his followers will have tribulation and that as we come closer to his return, we will see more persecution. Few things make us wonder about where God is what he is doing than the sufferings of life and particularly those sufferings which come because we are Christians.

With the souls under the altar in Revelation, we cry out, "O Sovereign Lord, . . . how long?" (Rev. 6:10). We wonder why God would allow it and whether there is any redeemable purpose in it. And though we may never know why God has allowed any particular suffering or attack, we can at least know that he is not absent in the midst of it. We can know that he is working out his purposes, even if we do not understand how he is doing so or why we are suffering the particular attacks that we are. The cross tells us so.

On the cross, God himself stood in the path of the full fury of the world's hatred and violence. He took it upon himself to be with us there, and he took it upon himself for us. Therefore, even when we are attacked, when we are victimized and are suffering from the evil plots of others, and when we wonder what God is doing in all of it, we may not know or ever know everything he is doing or why he would allow it to happen, but we do know this: he is working. When the attacks come, when others plot evil against us, the cross assures us that God is still working, even if we can't see it. The cross assures us that God is with us, even when we can't feel it. The cross assures us that God's redemptive purposes are greater than the evil being done. As we look in faith toward the cross our hearts are lifted so that instead of being filled with anger we are filled with grace, hope and even forgiveness. (This paragraph adapted from Bryan R Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence: The Gospel According to Esther* (Gospel According to the Old Testament) . P&R Publishing. )