



Sunday, April 16, 2023

Speaker: Pastor John VanderWindt

Scripture: Esther 4:1-17

Sermon Title: Authentic Faith

Good morning.

As was said in the video, my past is in Christian school and that's a sacred space for me as well. Chap Clark once said that every student needs five significant adults in their life to help shape them. Crystal (in the video) mentioned about the worldview which is being forced on our children and we need to find ways to counter that and to show them a godly worldview.

I also know that there are people who have been in Christian School and have been hurt deeply by Christian school. I do not want to make light of that. We need to pray for the staff. We need to pray for current families and prospective families. We need to pray especially for students. We also need to pray for those who have been hurt by Christian schools as well as those who have been hurt in churches.

That they too may be finding the forgiveness of God. That they may find a peace that God can give to restore that. And then to figure out how to do life in that place again. Christian education is a very valuable tool. Just like any other tool, there are times when it gets misused and we need to ask for forgiveness for that. We also need to say, "Lord, please continue to use your tools to sharpen our faith and to sharpen the faith of our community."

In some ways, that's where Esther sits. We have been studying, for the last couple years since just before I got here, a program called D6. D6 has a schedule in which they use passages and so on. We are going to continue with D6 until the end of May. Then we're going to forge our own path in studying scripture. One of the reasons why I feel like we need to switch from D6 is because, if you've looked at D6 for this next week, it is Esther 3 and 4. Then the following week, we will go to Daniel.

For the women in coffee break, you're thinking, "How in the world can you do that? We have just spent a couple of weeks on Esther 1 and 2. There's too much there to just say, 'Oh, we'll just do a couple of weeks in 20 minutes or half an hour, and then we'll just move on to another book and we'll be fine.'"

So today we're going to look at Esther 4. We're going to try to take some pieces out of it and apply it to where we figure out where and how we have authentic faith, as we see in not only Mordecai but also in Esther. And what does that look like in a world which is turned upside down? Before we get there, for those of you who don't know the story of Esther very well, I should back up a little bit and give perspective as to how we get to Esther 4.

So this is during the time of the exile. We are now into the Persian Empire. There is a king there who had a party. A very long party. At the end of his party, he called in his wife for things that she probably should not be doing and she refused. So he had a problem. The problem was, "If I say it's okay for her to refuse me, then that gives permission for all the wives in the land to refuse their husbands. We can't let that happen."

So he got rid of her. A while later he's like, "You know, I kind of miss my wife but I can't ask her back." I need to have a new one. So he has a beauty pageant. To prepare for this, it takes a year. At the end of this, Esther is chosen. Esther, being a Jew, has not revealed her nationality to the king and she is now the Queen of Persia. Within that kingdom, the king has a few close fellows that he depends on. They're the only ones who have free access to talk to him whenever.

One of them is Haman. Haman decided that it would be a good idea for people to show him respect. So there was this plan that when Haman walked by, you would bow to Haman. Well, there was a Jew by the name of Mordecai, who did not. Now to put it a little bit more into perspective, Haman is an Agagite. He is a descendant of the king of the Amalekites, King Agag - who, Saul was told by God, to destroy all the people when he destroyed the Amalekites, Saul did not. He allowed King Agag to live. There's a lesson there. When God tells you to get rid of something, get rid of it because it will come back to bite you if you don't.

So Haman goes to the king and says, "King, there are a group of people within your country who do not respect you." Truthfully, he was just mad at Mordecai but it went way beyond that. So he said to the king, "King, I will give you an insane amount of money, about two thirds of the annual income if you do this, and the money will help you make this happen. The edict is that we kill all the Jews."

Part of where he would get his money from is because, if they kill all the Jews, they inherit all their stuff and they get lots of money. So he's at this place and the king has just put out this edict. An edict in the land of Persia cannot be revoked. You cannot take it back. You cannot say, "Okay, we're going to cancel that one and it doesn't work anymore." If it's said, "Here's what's going to happen, it happens." So the edict is that a year from now, all of the Jews are to be killed.

Everybody in the land has heard that. And now we get to Esther 4. Put yourself in that place. Esther 4 begins.

1 When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. **2** But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. **3** In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

4 When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. **5** Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

6 So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. **7** Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. **8** He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

9 Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. **10** Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, **11** "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

12 When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, **13** he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. **14** For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

15 Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: **16** "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

17 So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

Join me in prayer. Dear Lord, we come to you today and we ask that, as we hear from your Word, that you will open our hearts and our ears to hear your voice. Lord, may our faith be strengthened in times of need and Lord, let our encouraging others be strengthened for all time. Lord, we pray that your Words may be spoken and that nothing of me may come out, but that you may, through the power of your Holy Spirit, give us your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So we have this situation. Mordecai hears of the edict. He tears his clothes and he puts on sackcloth and ashes. That is a very public thing to do. When you see a person in sackcloth and ashes, you know that they are mourning. You'll notice that Mordecai can only go as far as the entrance to the king's palace. In other places within Esther, we see that Mordecai is in the outer courts of the king's palace. So we know that that's a familiar place for him to be, but because of the fact that he's in sackcloth, and ashes, he can only go so far.

Because, you know, the king's palace is supposed to be a happy place. "We can't have sadness here." Now, ironically, this king's palace has been described in many ways as this beautiful place.

And here begins the question... "Are we allowed to, in a state of public mourning, enter church?" Or do we feel that, "Well, on Sunday morning when I enter church, I need to look good. I need to dress well. I need to have my happy face on." Or do we, like Mordecai, allow ourselves to say things are not okay? Now, that's a bit of a culture piece, isn't it? There's a lot of vulnerability there. And in that vulnerable place of saying, "I'm not okay this morning. I'm in mourning because of the loss of a loved one. Or I'm distressed from anxiety or illness which is in the family or within myself."

Notice that Mordecai puts all that aside and he goes to a place where people will see him and he is that way. Did you notice Esther's response? Esther's responses in verse four, they tell her he's in great distress so she sends him clothes to cheer up. We don't know at this time whether Esther has yet heard of the edict because Esther, being the Queen, would be kept secretive in her own surroundings. She wouldn't necessarily know of all these things going on in the land.

So her first response is, "Oh, Mordecai, it can't be that bad. Here, get dressed, and then maybe we can chat." Mordecai's response is, "No, I'm not taking what you're giving me because you need to hear the pain which I am in."

And so he goes back and he says to Esther, "Esther. You need to hear about this." He gives Esther a copy of the edict and he says to Esther, "Esther. Right now you're in a good spot. But don't kid yourself. Being in the king's palace is not going to protect you from this. You will also be killed. What I'm going to ask you to do is I'm going to ask you to go in and say to the king, "King, please have mercy on us."

To which Esther responds, "Mordecai. I'm not sure if you remember this but if I go to the king and he doesn't want to see me at that moment. I'm dead. Let's just put it out there. And Mordecai, I've been queen now for about five years. The king has lots of other women. He hasn't called for me in over a month. Do you think me waltzing in there is going to be okay? Besides, this is kind of personal. If I waltz into his throne room, you know who is there, right? Haman. I'm not gonna walk in there and go, "Oh, by the way. I'm a Jew. Do you think it'd be okay if we kind of mess this up and don't do this quite like you said?" Haman would be all over that." Mordecai's response is again, "Just because you're there, doesn't mean you'll get out of it."

But then Esther does something else. We see this last conversation between Mordecai and Esther. It shows us two very crucial things that need to be part of our life. First of all, there is this public mourning from Mordecai. This aspect of lament. Lament is something which we need to think about more often.

In Scott Cormode's book, "The Innovative Church" says, "A lament allows the people of God or an individual to cry out to God and protest. To say directly to God that things are not as they should be. And to call on God to change whatever is amiss."

In Mordecai's conversation with Esther, we see that Mordecai is crying out to Esther for any help that he can get. But we also see how Mordecai, in his ashes and his sackcloth, is crying out to God. And it says in verse three, "In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes." Their first response to the tragedy was that of prayer.

Interestingly enough, in the book of Esther, there are two words which are never used. The word "God" and the word "pray or prayer." But when we read this passage, we read how they were fasting. Fasting in Jewish culture was always accompanied by prayer and usually a prayer of lament. And so all people are praying together and they are holding each other up together.

So Mordecai says to Esther, "Esther. Do you know why you've been called to be queen? Do you know that throughout the history of the world for the Israelites, God has been faithful and God has set up people to do what he needs to have done for the deliverance of his people?"

And Mordecai, asking that question to Esther, shows how Mordecai has this deep understanding of God's faithfulness. He knows the promises that God has given that the kingdom of Israel will not fall. He knows that the kingdom of Israel will at one time again, have a person on the throne of David who will rule over the entire kingdom. He knows that deep in his soul. And why does he know that? Because he knows the Torah. He knows the Word of God. And he knows that God keeps His promises that are in His Word.

In Matthew Henry, it says that among the Jewish people, there is this thought that between one of these conversations when Mordecai was going home, that he was met by three little kids who had just come from Hebrew school. And he asked them what they learned that day in Hebrew school. The first one said, "We learned from Proverbs **3:25-26**, "Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the Lord will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared."

And the second one said, "We learned from **Isaiah 8:10**, which says, "Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted; propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us. This is what the Lord says to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people that you are in." The third one says from **Isaiah 46:4**, "Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you."

And those are just some of the verses which Mordecai had within him. When he knew his Scripture, he knew that God's faithfulness would be there. So at this time when he's looking at this going, "In one year from now, there is going to be the complete annihilation of the Jews," it's not going to happen. "God's not going to let it happen. I don't know how but I know God will save us."

Have we ever thought of fasting? Not three hours between lunch and supper. But if we thought of fasting for longer than a day? And to spend that time in earnest prayer saying, "Lord, we need you to move in this person's life because Lord, their eternal salvation rests on it. Lord, their fate of eternity is in this space." And then from that prayer, where has God placed you to be a mediator for someone else?

Mordecai told Esther that God had placed her there for a very specific purpose. God has placed each of us in the place where we are for a very specific purpose. Maybe some of us are like, "I have no idea what that is." Then we need to start praying. We need to invite others to pray along with us to say, "Lord, what is my purpose in this place?" But for some of us, we know. For some of us, we know that person that we need to speak to and we know that person that we need to pray for. We know that person who may have offended us and we need to pray for forgiveness. We know that person who doesn't know the Lord and we need to pray for the spirit to work within them.

God today invites us into that space of prayer. A deep prayer. And then to understand where we need to be and to live in that space, knowing that God is faithful.

Join me in prayer.

Dear Lord, we thank you for your faithfulness. We thank You, Lord, that you are faithful, whether it's a good time or when the oceans are deep and we can barely float. Lord, we know that you are faithful. We also know that you've put us in places to be earnest in our prayers and to be earnest in mediating and praying for those around us.

Lord, we ask that you will give us the courage to pray boldly and come before your throne because, Lord, we now may come to your throne, the King of the universe, as was said by Kaes [Vanderkooy] in the congregational prayer, that we may enter your throne with boldness. Lord, we plead for the lives of the people that we know that don't know you and Lord, we bring them to you and ask that you will move in their lives as well. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Transcribed by: *Liza Perry*