

THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD

Esther 6

The Book of Esther was written while the Jews were in captivity in Persia. Why were they there? They had no one to blame but themselves. God had warned them. He'd warned them repeatedly, in manifold ways, through various prophets. But they'd shut their ears to God's admonishment. They'd persisted in their sins. Thank God we're not like them. And so they sat in Persia, punished for what God would've preferred to have forgiven.

The Book of Esther is unique in Scripture for one reason: there's no mention of God. Imagine that: a Book of the Bible that doesn't mention God. Almost makes you want to get rid of it, doesn't it? But not so quickly. Leave those pages in your Bibles. God is all over the place in Esther, and He's proving a point. God is always working, guiding history, protecting His people, even when it appears that everything moves along in an entirely secular and explainable way. One could claim that the amazing events in this book are all coincidence, just history being history, but the believer sees no such thing. Esther is the Bible's slap in the face to such thinking as would rob God of His providence just because He doesn't have a seat in the Senate or a mention in the science books. God is always working, around you, even through you, through faith in you, and most importantly always for you, and that is no less wonderful when He does so behind the scenes than when He steps out from behind the curtain.

Esther was a humble Jewish girl in a haughty Persian kingdom. She was the meat and potatoes kind surrounded by five-course frivolity. More than that, she was a foreigner, from the least of Persia's peoples, the most insignificant of King Xerxes' subjects, the Jews. She was beautiful, but not at first glance. You had to clean her up and take a good look with an open mind. Yet by God's grace and guidance she ended up replacing Queen Vashti, whose disrespectful pride had been her downfall.

Esther's father had died when she was young. Mordecai had taken her in as his own, adopted her. He was a godly man, innocent as a dove, but also shrewd as a snake. He told Esther to keep her nationality secret. There was often a strong wave of anti-Semitism pulsating through the ancient world—they were a monotheistic people with a strict religious code in a polytheistic world whose religion often resembled a frat party. Esther wasn't ashamed of who she was, and she didn't necessarily lie, but she also didn't put up a billboard on the king's highway.

One day, while Mordecai was outside the palace gates, he overheard a conspiracy being hatched to kill King Xerxes. He told Esther, who told Xerxes, who dealt with the traitors as traitors were dealt with, and everyone went home realizing treachery didn't pay union scale.

In the king's retinue there was a man named Haman. Haman was the so-called Washington type. He yearned for power and all its trappings, and you can guess what he would do to get it: anything. And anything was working out well for him. Haman was rising up the food chain, elevated higher than all the other nobles. All the royal officials bowed down to him in reverence. But one man wouldn't. God alone deserved his worship. And that man was Mordecai. Needless to say, Mordecai's estimated lifespan dropped significantly.

Haman found out Mordecai was a Jew. His hatred for Mordecai burned so vehemently that killing him wouldn't be enough; he'd kill his people as well, wipe them from the face of the earth like barbeque sauce from a glutton's mouth. He plotted, and when he wasn't plotting he schemed. And everything seemed to be falling into place.

And then one night Xerxes couldn't sleep. Coincidence, right? And since he couldn't sleep, and since there was no television to turn on, he ordered the record of his reign to be read to him—exciting stuff, no doubt. And he was reminded of the plot to kill him. “What reward did this man Mordecai receive,” he asked. “Nada,” he was told. “Well, that ain't right,” he thought. And while Haman plotted and schemed and maybe even connived a bit, it all started to fall apart.

Haman had been busy building a huge gallows while all this was going on. It was quite the gallows, the kind any man would be honored to hang from if he had to hang. When he entered in to see the king, the king asked him what should be done for the man the king delights to honor. Of course, Haman assumed Xerxes meant him. Darn sinful pride will get you every time, won't it? So Haman closed his eyes, pretended it was his birthday and time to blow out the candles, and made his wish: “Oh, you should put a royal robe you've worn on him, and put him on a horse you've ridden, one all tricked out real fancy, and have the nobles lead him through the city so everyone oohs and aahs, and then have them proclaim before him, ‘This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor.’ Yeah, that's what I want, I mean, what you should do.”

And hell began to party like it was 1999. “This is my day,” the devil thought. “This is the day I get God, I receive my throne, my crown, my robe.” He had visions of grandeur. A victory parade was planned. Everything was going swimmingly. God's Son was beaten and bloody, blasphemed and bent over in pain. Hah! Some God. This was easier than he'd every imagined. What a sorry sight this Jesus was, this divine Jew outside the city gates. He didn't even hang on a supersized gallows. No, he was nailed to a pathetic hunk of tree, one He Himself had to carry through town while everyone shouted that this was what happened to those God despises.

Oh, wait, wrong story. Back to Mordecai. This was Haman's day. He'd practiced his power smile and celebrity wave. He was pumped, bursting with excitement. And then Xerxes said something more. "Do all this for Mordecai." You ever see Wylie Coyote fall off one of those cliffs? Haman's cliff was named Mordecai. Haman's world was turned upside down. First became last. Least became greatest. Despised became honored. The people condemned were rescued and set free. Thorns became blossoms and the tortuous tree a triumphant trophy—oh, wait, different story.

You are God's people. Yet you are nothing in the world's sight. To be honest, often less than nothing. Don't feel bad, I'm nothing with you. Even more, when the world does pay us attention as church, it's often not the kind of attention we want. The world hates us. It has to: that's its nature. It was our nature as well before God adopted us in Holy Baptism and gave us new birth into a living hope. We were by nature condemned for our sin, held in bondage to the devil, on the fast track to eternal death.

But Christ changed all that. The one stricken, smitten, and afflicted, despised by men, and hunted by the devil became the King's delight and received a seat at the Father's right side. No, he wasn't spared death. Rather, through His death He conquered. And the devil, like Haman, was hung with his own rope. And we were spared. And, yes, the world was turned upside down, first became last, least became greatest, despised became honored, and the people condemned were set free.

And that is what today is about. Today our adoptive and everlasting Father who also became our Brother in Bethlehem ascends to His throne, wrapped in all His regal raiment, and what He takes up again, having set aside to save us, He now uses for our good. He may not have seemed beautiful at first glance. He needed to be cleaned up a bit through the Resurrection—although may nothing every wash away those wounds in which we ourselves are washed—but He looks the part today, and the best part is that He will play it to a T, not because He's hungry for power, but because He who sets the captives free is love's willing prisoner. And having descended to hell to declare His victory, He now ascends to use it for our benefit.

You may not see God written on every minute of every day, on every cross and on every blessing, but His hand is still in the mix, and He is working feverishly to bring you where He has bought you with His own life-giving Body and Blood to be. Know that. Trust that. Live that. Hide in that when the dark waves of the world beat against the sides of this boat we call the Holy Christian Church. We've been to hell and back these past eighty days. It's time to taste a bit of heaven. That's what the Ascension is about. It tastes like forgiveness, doesn't it? It tastes like new life. It tastes like salvation. In short, it tastes good. Enjoy it, both now and for all eternity. Amen.