

When Exile Hits Home

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 October 2019

Preacher: Rev. Daniel Beilman

[0 : 00] Good morning. We continue this morning in the book of Esther. Now, I hadn't planned on doing this, but it just occurred to me, and this is a spoiler, that in the sermon and from the passage we heard in Esther, that God is often working unseen, unnoticed, unheard. And it occurred to me that our sound guys kind of demonstrate that. They kind of embody God for us. They embody Christ, you know? They work, but when everything is going wrong, and you don't know it, they are like delivering us, working behind the scenes, like making sure the sound runs great. So I really just want to thank Luke and Luke and Adam, Worthy, Roy, Kyle, for all they do for us and helping us worship. Can we thank them together? Yeah. Thank you. You have no idea how stressful it is, well, to be in exile as a church and to work with a sound system that's not ours. And they do a fantastic job. I'm really grateful, guys. So like I said, we're in the book of Esther. And this book has an important place in the lives of very many Jews. Every year and for the past 2,300 years, the Jewish people celebrate and have celebrated the Feast of Purim. The central activity of the feast is the reading of the scroll of Esther. And the celebration surrounding this reading is crazy. It's nuts. There's costumes, there's gift giving, music making, partying.

There's noise making. There's noise making when Esther is read, and we'll be introduced to Haman in just a minute. But if you are following the reading, you can tell he's the antagonist in the story. When the name Haman is read, everyone has noisemakers and are like spinning them around. It's trying to blot out the name of Haman. It's really, you can watch it on YouTube if you like. It's in Hebrew, but you'll know when they hit the name of Haman, because that thing goes nuts. And there's a lot of drinking during the Feast of Purim. As a matter of fact, the Talmud, which is like the body of writings which make up the Jewish civil and ceremonial law, the Talmud goes so far as to state that a person is obligated to drink on Purim until he does not know the difference between cursed be Haman and blessed be Mordecai. It's, the whole thing is a burlesque. It's, I would love to experience it sometime. This kind of revelry seems dissonant, however, when we read about the mortal threat posed by the new figure in this story, Haman the Agagite.

I mean, things are really bad. The Jewish people are exposed to the dangers of living in exile. So we're going to look this morning at the realities of exile and the response. So the realities of exile and our response to those realities. Let me pray.

I continue the prayer we prayed earlier, Lord. Good Lord, deliver us.

[3 : 32] And in this reading and studying of your word, give us hope. Open our eyes to your word.

Open your word to our eyes and ears. For your good, for our good, and for your glory. Amen. Well, let's first review the cast of characters from the first two chapters of Esther. Now there's King Ahasuerus. He's ruler of the Persian Empire. And he commands extraordinary wealth and countless people, except for one person. At the end of a lavish six-month party, when the king wants to display to the people and the nobles the beauty of his queen, Queen Vashti, she refuses.

The king loses it and wants a new queen. And so we meet Esther. She's chosen to belong to a harem of virgins who are given a year of training, a year of training and beauty treatment that each virgin is given one night with the king. And whoever pleases him the most gets to become queen. Esther does so. Queen Vashti is deposed and the crown is given to Esther. Now Esther, we learn, is an orphan and was raised by her uncle Mordecai. So there's four main characters so far.

Raised by her uncle Mordecai, an official in the capital of Susa. Both Esther and Mordecai were Jewish, yet they hid their identities. At the end of chapter two, Mordecai uncovers a plot to assassinate King Ahasuerus. Though Mordecai's actions are recorded in the king's book of Annals, Mordecai's deeds go unnoticed, unheralded. And so we arrive at chapter three and are introduced to the antagonist of our story, Haman the Agagite. Now you probably don't know what an Agagite is. I didn't. So we need to go back in the story of Israel to when the Israelites escaped captivity from

Egypt. We read an exodus of a tribe called the Amalekites, who were the first to attack them, having fled Egypt. The Israelites prevailed and God told Moses, write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

[5 : 51] Centuries later, that job was given to Israel's first king. But instead of fully obeying God and executing his judgment, Israel's first king destroys only what was weak and despised. And he kept the great looking stuff for his people. And that would have been the king, King Agag, and all the lovely people and all the lovely livestock and such. And though the prophet Samuel executes Agag, we can assume that Agag's descendants survive. And now several centuries later, one of them is elevated to a seat of honor higher than of all the other nobles of the Persian empire.

So do you see Amalekites? From them is descended Agag the king, and from Agag is descended Haman. And if you were a Jew in the third century BC reading this book, you might suddenly hear ominous music in the background when you hear that Haman is an Agagite. Not unlike the music heard when in Star Wars episode one, the Jedi Council figured out that there is still a Sith. There's a Sith. And then when there's a Sith, there's two, right? So remember the ominous music? Like this is what a Jew in this time is like feeling and thinking. Probably. Kind of like that. If they're sci-fi fans. Well, it's that kind of moment, and there's a lesson in here for us, right? God gives us commands for our protection and our provision. And we might not understand his commands, but we trust and obey God. We trust him that they are for our good, not just for now, but for years in the future, or perhaps generations. Because Israel's first king didn't obey. Centuries later, the Jewish people will be threatened with total annihilation. And who was Israel's first king, by the way?

His name was Saul. And Saul was a Benjaminite. And so was Mordecai. Mordecai is a distant relative of King Saul. And in the beginning of chapter three, about four years after Mordecai uncovered the plot to assassinate King Ahasuerus, when all the other officials bowed down to Haman, Mordecai refuses. And we're not sure why.

I mean, it would not be a commission of idolatry to bow down to Haman. Elsewhere in the Bible, we find people paying honor, showing honor to other people by bowing to them. It's not breaking a commandment. So does Mordecai refuse to bow to Haman because of the bad blood between their ancestors?

[8 : 38] Perhaps. Or perhaps Mordecai is resentful that having saved Ahasuerus' life, he wasn't given this prominent position, but it was Haman instead. Or perhaps Mordecai was just being a pompous jerk.

Well, that sounds like me. I would relate to that. The book of Esther, though, is remarkably silent on its character's motives. So we don't know. But we do know that this gets Mordecai in trouble, whether it's his foolishness or his bravery. By this time, Mordecai has revealed that he is a Jew. So when Haman gets furious in typical book of Esther fashion, he goes way over the top and makes plans not just to destroy Mordecai, but all Jews in the Persian Empire. He uses his wealth to influence the king to make an edict, which is sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill, and annihilate the Jews, young and old, women and little children, on a single day.

Now, if you are paying attention, you may have noticed the language Haman used to describe the Jews. He said to the king, Did you hear that? It's like they've infiltrated.

They already sound scary. Their laws are different from those of every other people, which is true. And they do not keep the king's laws, which is false.

[10 : 19] But that's believable because it's mixed with the truth. So that it's not to the king's profit to tolerate them. You know, it's the same language used of the Israelites by Pharaoh in Exodus chapter 1.

Pharaoh said, The people of Israel are too many. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply. And if war breaks out, they join our enemies. Did you hear the commonality?

There's a certain people scattered and dispersed. They're different. Let's deal with them. Lest they multiply. Frankly, it's the same language that has been used by countless cultures, including our own, when there is a fear of minority cultures.

Language that too often leads to oppression, dehumanization, and hatred. Lord, lead us to love and cherish and defend those around us who are different than us.

Those who do not have a voice. Because they are made in your image. And you love them. When we read scripture, a common mistake people make is to read ourselves into every hero that

scripture presents.

[11 : 34] Or to make moral examples of its heroes. David was brave, so we should be brave too. Joseph was obedient, so we should be obedient too.

Right? Moses was a pretty good leader, so I should be a pretty good leader too. Well, there's two major problems with this approach. First, the Bible's heroes aren't terribly heroic.

They're quite the opposite. And they're usually not very good moral examples. They are very flawed and sinful. I mean, do you want to be like David who used his power to sexually coerce his friend's wife, get her pregnant, and try to cover it up by having her husband killed and marrying her right away?

This is not what we want to emulate. This is not how the Bible presents its characters. Not as figures to emulate. Okay? The other problem with reading ourselves into the Bible's heroes is the assumption that the Bible is about us.

But it's not. The Bible's not about us. The Bible's about God and his glory. It's about his plan to rescue a people for himself and to renew and restore a broken world.

[12 : 37] A world broken by our sin. So I can still read myself into the book of Esther. Not the best choice to read myself into Mordecai nor Esther.

Who am I in the book of Esther? I'm probably just one of the unnamed Jews in exile. The disobedience of my people have put me here in exile, and I am powerless to rescue myself from mortal danger caused by miles away by wealthy, powerful people.

The disobedience of the human race has exiled us all from paradise, from the Garden of Eden. And now we are subject to the mortal dangers of sin, of brokenness, of injustice, and we are powerless to lift ourselves out of our condition.

Now for many of you, that's where it feels like you are. You are in Esther chapter 3. Right? In Eden, we were meant to work and have a calling, but your job sucks.

You have a boss that has treated you unfairly. Co-workers have betrayed you. Your responsibilities are tedious and frustrating. Every day at work, a piece of your soul dies. This is Esther chapter 3.

[13 : 50] In Eden, we were meant to be whole persons. But you feel like you're held hostage to addiction, to mental illness, to physical illness, to loneliness.

From Eden, we were meant to multiply and fill the earth, and yet you can't join in that mandate due to infertility and every day you feel the loss.

Or you have adult children who have walked away from the faith. You worked so hard to instill in them because you wanted them to be image bearers. But they have walked away.

Now you feel like a failure. Eden was supposed to be a place of safety. Where no harm could reach us.

But harm reached you. You've been abused. And every night is a struggle to go to sleep because you can't forget the sound of those footsteps coming down the hall when you're a child. Eden was to be a place of shalom.

[14 : 59] Where the fabric of our relationships and communities and society was to be characterized by peace and mutual self-giving and justice. Yet you look around and you are overwhelmed by the injustice that pervades society.

And you're desperate, wondering if it will ever end. I mean, less than two weeks ago, after the conclusion of the trial for the murder of Botham Jean, in Dallas, another African-American, 28-year-old, a Tatiana Jefferson.

This was last night. Two nights ago. Was shot and killed by a police officer standing in her own house in neighboring Fort Worth. Just moments after playing video games with her nephew.

We are in exile. This is not Eden. You feel it. You know it. We are in Esther chapter 3.

And right now, for many of us, that's where it seems the story ends. One more point. We belong to a worldwide family.

[16 : 05] That's in exile. Who face the literal dangers of Esther chapter 3. Because they belong to Jesus, they face opposition, violence, and other threats.

These are our brothers and sisters. In June, authorities in a Laotian village threatened a local pastor in Gunpoint, insisting that he and his congregation renounce their faith, and that he sign a document agreeing to seize worship in his home.

On July 12, 2019, a demolition crew hired by local authorities surrounded a house church in Zhengzhou, Hainan province in China, in order to demolish it. During a scuffle with the work crew, a

Christian man who was at the house church with his wife was severely beaten, suffering three severed tendons in his wrist.

On Easter Sunday, do you remember this? On Easter Sunday, attacks on churches in Sri Lanka left 250 dead and 500 wounded. On the same Easter day, this year, in a different country, a Christian congregation held a fire drill.

Elderly members in their beautiful Easter Sunday clothes had to cross busy streets, but it was worth the practice and precaution due to their country's history of attacks on churches.

[17 : 15] That would have been Canaan Baptist Church in Columbia Heights. We were going to worship there that very evening. And I only know this because I stopped by there to grab a piece of equipment for us to use Easter morning at Luke Seymour High School.

And I saw people filing out of the church wondering what is going on. And I learned it's a fire drill.

And I thought, oh, that's a funny thing to do on Easter Sunday.

You know, that's not very seeker sensitive. You know, what a pompous ass I was in that moment.

On top of the long, ugly history of attacks on black churches in our country, there had just been three arson attacks in the three weeks leading up to Easter. This year, 2019, of course they're going to have a fire drill.

We're in exile. So what should be our response? When the realities of exile hit home, what do we do?

[18 : 23] Well, the first is to acknowledge it. Acknowledge the realities of exile. Acknowledge how bad it is and listen to your emotions.

Listen to the sadness, the frustration, and the grief. Pause and listen. Because the temptation is to think we need to immediately change those bad emotions from negative to positive.

We look for the right technique or the right steps to do so, right? But as Dan Allender writes, rather than focusing on trying to change our emotions, we are wiser first to listen to them.

They are a voice that can tell us how we are dealing with a fallen world, hurtful people, and a quizzical God who seldom seems to be or do what we expect of him.

Our emotions reveal something about how we are dealing with God. How we're dealing with God. In other words, this emotion, it's either taking me toward God or away from him, right?

[19 : 25] Is it leading me away from God into independence and idolatry? Or is it leading me toward God, into God, into awe, into dependence, and ultimately gratitude?

Hear what the Jews do in chapter 4 of Esther, verse 3. In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews with fasting and weeping and lamenting.

We have songs and prayers in the Bible that teach us how to do this. We can call them the psalms of lament.

Walter Brueggemann calls them the psalms of disorientation. They help us make this journey from listening to our emotions into the very heart of God.

In her book, Broken Halleluias, Beth Allen Slevkov recounts her experiences with her own illness and with that of her husband's and then with infertility and then with the death of her brother.

[20 : 32] And she writes, As I read the psalms, I discovered my journey of childlike belief and the loss of some of that belief is not a journey of moving away from God, but part of the journey all of us are on who seek to honestly engage with God throughout a lifetime.

The lament are the prayers offered after the chair's been pulled out from under the people of God. They are the where are you God psalms. They are the why aren't you protecting and providing for us psalms.

Aren't we God's chosen people? Didn't God say he would protect us? The psalms of lament teach us how to pray in the dark. They help me see that God is bigger than both my current felt experience of God and my past assumptions.

Reading the psalms might even lead me to believe that if I don't come up against some serious loss of faith from time to time, I might be carrying around a very small God.

Did you hear how lament moves us into worship, into new theological insights and conclusions?

And that in turn leads us into mission.

[21 : 46] Sung Chan Ra writes, Lament recognizes the struggles of life and cries out for justice against existing injustices.

The status quo is not to be celebrated, but instead must be challenged. So if you've never prayed a psalm of lament or knew you were praying a psalm of lament or know what one was, how do you do that?

Well, there's psalms of lament in the Bible. There are psalms 10, 13, 22, 35, 43, 44. You can Google psalms of lament and find those.

And you can use them as a template to compose your own prayer of lament. So listen to a loss that is inside of you, wanting some acknowledgement, and then pour out your honest, raw emotions to God.

Try not to edit them or judge them. Just pour them out. Whatever comes to mind. You know, I'm reminded of a song by Bruce Coburn when he saw injustice in Central America.

[22 : 53] The refrain is, if I had a rocket launcher. God, if I had a rocket launcher. It's a cry. You're letting God know how you feel.

Then ask God to act decisively, to do something decisively. Act, God. Wake up. Come. Hear me. Help me. And then remember how God has been with you in the past. Remember how God has been with you in the past.

This leads us to our second response. All right? Our first response to the realities of exile, to acknowledge the brokenness in the world and to lament that. The second response, it's to remember God being with us in the past.

Chapter 3 would teach us to remember that when all seems hopeless, God is there. You may remember Tommy telling us two weeks ago that God is nowhere mentioned in the book of Esther.

[24 : 02] And because of this, the book of Esther is most, it most closely approximates our own lived experiences in this world, with our faith, with God. But in this book, the longer he remains unmentioned, the larger he looms.

Now, earlier I mentioned that the scroll of Esther is read during the Feast of Purim. Purim comes from the word, the Persian word, poor, P-U-R. And it appears in chapter 3, verse 7.

Haman determines the day of the Jews' destruction by casting poor, by casting lots, rolling the dice. And through the rolling of the dice, the day of the Jews' annihilation was delayed for 12 months.

You see, when God appears to be absent, he is working through what appears to be luck, coincidence, fate, chance, or the misuse of the free will of human beings. But he is always present, suffering alongside of us, working things to our good.

Now, ultimately, our exile from Eden is a bondage to sin and death. But God proves he is active in providing for us a means of rescue from exile before we are even aware of our need, before we're even aware God's there, acting.

[25 : 31] In Romans chapter 5, we read that God shows his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. That's ultimately how we know. Look at the cross.

Jesus triumphed over sin on the cross. In Christ, we are no longer slaves to sin. Our sins are blotted out and with salvation comes healing, you know, there is more healing in your relationships.

There is more healing for you, your nation. There's more healing for you. and there's more freedom available to you now freedom from shame freedom from fear now it's because you belong to a kingdom you're in exile but you have been rescued and delivered into a kingdom ruled by the one who rules and made the universe in his resurrection from the dead Jesus destroys death because of Christ's resurrection we look forward to our own resurrection when we'll have an eternal feast a wedding celebration celebrating our deliverance in a world made new in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen let's pray Almighty God we long to see you

Almighty God we long to hear from you it is indeed most of our experience that you seem silent to us or absent thank you Lord for being here in this meal that we're about to share you are truly here so in this bread and in this wine speak to us assure us comfort us show us the hope that we have in this bread and this wine heal us thank you for always being with us we pray in Jesus name Amen now I'd like us to rise thank you thank you thank you we pray in Jesus our family our friends thank you thank you our family our son was we're still here in this our family our father and if our father know who our police key our parents believe me our parents know our families and everybody thank you thank you thank you john