

GEMS Sunday Sermon – Esther’s Hope

Isaiah 40:27-31-

Why do you complain, Jacob?

Why do you say, Israel,

“My way is hidden from the Lord;

my cause is disregarded by my God”?

²⁸ Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,

the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary,

and his understanding no one can

fathom.

²⁹ He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;

³¹ but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

This is the Word of the Lord.

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While our passage for today is Isaiah 40:27-31, I want us to imagine how Queen Esther might have read this passage. I know that you girls in GEMS have been looking at Esther’s story over the year, and that verse 31 of this chapter is your theme verse, so I thought, why not put them together!?

There is a lot of value in doing this all over Scripture. To see how others might apply God’s word to their lives opens up his Word in unexpected ways. Isaiah’s words here though are especially fitting to Esther’s life, and the way the Bible tells her story. Even though the book doesn’t mention her reading Isaiah, I imagine Esther reading these verses from Isaiah as she sought to understand what God was doing in her life. I hope that we too will learn from these what God is doing in our lives, and how God can shape our lives when we hope in him.

For those of you who do not remember Esther’s story, I’ll give you a little summary.

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Esther began her life as an Israelite in exile. Her family was from Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, from God’s promised land, but they had to leave that place because a big army came and forced them to leave. This was a part of God’s plan for his people.

God had originally given his people a place to live in the Promised Land; a place where they would be able to follow God and worship him as he told them to. God had saved his people from slavery in Egypt, and given them a land of their own. Part of being in the land meant

that Israel had to follow the Law of Moses. God told Israel that if they did not follow this law then the gift of the promised land would be taken from them, just as the garden of Eden was taken from Adam and Eve.

As it turns out, God's people did not follow his law and so they were taken out of the land by the Babylonians. This is where we find Esther, living in Babylon. Not only was Esther in exile, but like in every good princess story, she was also an orphan. With no parents, and in a foreign place, it would be very difficult for a girl like her to know what it meant to be a member of God's chosen people.

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Scripture begins Esther's story with a party held by the Babylonian Emperor Xerxes. Apparently, Xerxes was having a bit too much of a good time and wanted his wife, Vashti, to come in looking great for everyone to see her so he could show her off. When she refuses, Xerxes gets really mad, kicks Vashti out, and even issues a law that all men must be a "ruler over his own household."

To get back at his ex-wife, Xerxes held something like a beauty contest to find the new queen. His officials would search the Empire for the most beautiful woman, and then present them all to the emperor. Esther, who as an orphan, was being taken care of by her cousin Mordecai, was selected as the new Queen. Mordecai advised Esther to not let anyone know she was an Israelite to keep her safe from persecution.

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After Esther was selected as Queen, Mordecai was hanging around the palace, and got into a dispute with a man named Haman, who had just been promoted as Xerxes' right-hand man. Apparently, Haman wanted all to bow to him, but Mordecai refused to do so. Probably because Haman was an Amalekite, a nation that had the most animosity with the Jews. Haman also hated the Jews, and sought to destroy them to spite Mordecai.

Haman eventually gets the support of Xerxes to do write an edict to kill all the Jews in the Empire; quite the retaliation for not being bowed to! Haman tells Xerxes that the Jews do not follow the laws of the empire, and so they all should be killed. If you think of the stories in Daniel, this is partly true, the Jewish people did stick out because of their religion, but their disobedience was not disruptive to order in the nation, in fact, it helped it.

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Mordecai learns of Haman's plot to have all the Jews in the empire killed, and goes to tell Queen Esther. Mordecai reminds Esther of her identity as an Israelite, and her duty to her

people. Esther however explains to Mordecai that she cannot simply go into Xerxes' presence unbeckoned, as that is a capital offence.

Mordecai is able to convince her that she must attempt to save her people. Esther takes the risk of being killed and asks Xerxes to have another party, and invite Haman, as she has a request. Xerxes, still infatuated with her beauty, says he would give her up to half the kingdom.

Haman continued to brew in his resentment of Mordecai, as Mordecai still refused to bow to him despite the threat of death. Haman even had a 75' high gallows built for the grand event of hanging Mordecai when Xerxes edict came into effect.

At this time, Xerxes, who had a restless night and so wanted to do some work, came upon a document that told of Mordecai uncovering a plot to kill him by some of his guards. Out of gratitude, Xerxes wanted to honour Mordecai. It was at this time when Haman came into his office to get the go-ahead to kill Mordecai. Instead, Xerxes says that Mordecai should be arrayed in gold and trotted around on a horse all around town with Haman by his side. I imagine Haman was not too pleased with this result!

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At the party that Queen Esther asked for from Xerxes, she uncovers Haman's plot and his petty vengeance. Xerxes gives Haman's very large estate to Mordecai, and sentences Haman to death on his own 75' high gallows. The king's edict is not only reversed, but the Jewish people are from then on a protected group in the empire. The plot of Haman eventually came upon himself.

The Jewish people celebrate this event with the feast of Purim (they did so a couple weeks ago). Purim, comes from the word 'pur', meaning 'lot', which is a device like dice, that would be used to find the will of God by apparent chance. Casting lots is a way that shows God's control over all things, a fitting name for this story which shows God's hidden hand constantly working.

This brings us to the most curious aspect of the story of Esther, God is not mentioned once. Nor is prayer, worship, sacrifice, or any other aspect of the Law. The closest thing we have is a mention of fasting. On the face of it, the book seems remarkably secular. While this may be seen as taking away from its value to many, for us, in our time, this can give us a certain kind of hope.

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The main value of Esther's story for us is that everything God is doing is in the background. Does that mean that God is absent from Esther's life? No, of course not! In most of

Scripture we see God acting up front, in Esther's story, he is hidden. The author intentionally does not mention God so that, when we feel like God is nowhere to be seen, we can trust that he is still actually ordering all things for our good. Just as God is not absent from our lives, but is directing our lives from the background. God is not absent, but hidden.

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If we only read stories like the Exodus or Joshua, we might think that the only way that God works is through the grand acts of the miraculous. God does do these things, when necessary, but our God is big enough to order the world through what seem to us to be the monotonous day-to-day life that we all experience. Esther's testimony shows God's work in a life where he is content to be in the background, not up front. If we believe that our lives are just as important to God as those recorded in Scripture, then we should recognize that God thinks it more important for us to not see the grand acts, but to believe without seeing, as Jesus tells the Apostle Thomas in John 20:29.

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Whether we recognize it or not, this is the work of the Holy Spirit in all our lives. In the small and quiet ordinary ways, the Holy Spirit brings our lives to worship him. God is a God of order, who desires peace. 1Tim.2:2 says that God wants us to live peaceful and quiet lives in his creation. Our world is full of revolutionaries, disrupters, who seek to turn society on its head, but God calls us to be agents of peace, not revolution.

The story of Esther doesn't ever say exactly what God is doing, because it is not revealed to the author. In our lives we are not granted to know exactly why things happen to us either. Many are quick to point out exactly where God is working in their lives, as if this shows their faith in him. We are not granted certainty in this life to know exactly what God is doing or why. Typically, when God does tell a person his plan for their life, it is because it's not going to be a great time for them! This is not the norm, our lives are a lot more like Esther's, living with the hidden God. What we do know, is that God is directing our lives to his ends. We know that he is in control, and not purposeless chance, or malicious fate.

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If there is a real hinge to Esther's story, it is when Mordecai comes to her and tells her about Haman's plot. He says to her, "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴For 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?" How is Mordecai able to say this? How is he able to have this hope?

He is able to say this because of what is taught in our verses from Isaiah. We can see how these verses from Isaiah that we read would comfort Esther, and give her hope so that she could face the trial ahead of her.

Isaiah himself wrote this prophecy before Israel had been taken to exile. He knew that these words would be comforting to those like Esther who were taken into exile, that God is ultimately in control whether they can see him or not.

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It is easy, especially in a time of distress, to think that God doesn't care about our lives. Isaiah asks, "Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God"?" Feeling that we are disregarded by God, is part of following the God who is hidden. All who follow God feel this way at times. God's ways are not our ways, as Isaiah says himself (55:8-9). We must constantly be reminded of who he is, and who we are if we are to remain faithful to him in this world where he is hidden.

I imagine Esther, after hearing Mordecai request her to put her life at risk to request Xerxes go back on his edict, maybe reading these verses from Isaiah. They would have been written some 250 years previous to her, to put that into perspective, it is about as old to her as the song "Amazing Grace" is to us. As she sits there with Mordecai's plea, and Isaiah's words in her mind, she considers her options.

On the one hand, nobody knows she is Jewish. She is in a pretty sweet spot as the queen of the most powerful empire in the world, even if she has a temperamental husband who is known to depose his wives at the slightest irritation. If she can fly under the radar, she can manage to keep her place of comfort and luxury. On the other hand, her people are about to be massacred. In reality the options are not equal, we all know what the right thing to do here is, but it is easy to see how she might not want to draw attention to herself.

As she considers this, she also considers the hidden God. As Isaiah says, "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom." It is because of who God is that Esther can put her trust in him, and do what she knows is right.

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Isaiah goes on, he says, "those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." Renewed energy to do what is right comes from hope in the Lord. It is because we know

who he is, the “everlasting God” that we can hope in him, but it is through this hope that we are given energy to trust God.

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As human beings, we are designed by God for hope. Paul says in Romans 8:24, “For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?” Our present situation, even if it is really hard like the situation that Esther faced, can be faced because of the hope that we have within us.

Even if God appears hidden to our eyes, he is the “everlasting God.” If we want to have the energy to face the challenges of this world, hope is key. A person who has hope for the future, because they believe that God, though hidden, is directing their life towards a good end, this person lives differently. This person has an engine propelling them to God’s ends. They live differently, with purpose rather than despair. Esther is a great example, let us read the words of Isaiah with her. Let us, hope in the Lord, and have our strength renewed.

Amen.