

Preached by Dr. Carl Rush  
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA  
February 6, 2008, Ash Wednesday

Hosea 1:1-11  
Esther 4:1-17

## **ESTHER AND THE GOSPEL**

Poor Esther ... she's clean, she's secure, but she can't respond to Mordecai without placing herself at great risk. Just as Gomer has to be willing to be loved, in spite of herself, by Hosea. And Israel, the rebellious child, learns the news that repentance always leads to obedience.

We know these stories in the book of Esther. We know that King Xerxes—the bitter, ruthless man that he is—and we know his best friend Haman who hates Mordecai because of some tribal differences in traditions dating all the way back to Samuel and Paul. We know Esther—the beauty queen—who carries out a deliberate and well-planned appeal for her life and for a certain group of the King's subjects. Notice how carefully later on in Esther she refers to them as “her people” not as Jews.

After Esther feeds King Xerxes with his sneaky companion Haman in later chapters, she feeds him a banquet fit for a king the first night, then asks them to come back for a wine-fest the second night. Better to warm him up to her plan. But between all the banquets and the king's coming and going, he develops a little insomnia, so he has someone read to him. Lo and behold, his servant reads the king his own history; what better to soothe someone than to bask in one's self-idolizing?

After hearing his own history, he was able to fall asleep. The story had been about Mordecai uncovering an assassination plot. Before he dozes off, he asks his servants in attendance, “What did we ever do to repay Mordecai?” The rest of the story becomes even more intriguing. The king gives to Mordecai a public ceremony and gifts which Haman had mistakenly prepared to receive himself. What would happen if we planned our own perfect recognition ceremony, not in humility but with everything we ever wanted, and then God told us to offer it to the very people we perceived to be our worst enemy? Then later, Haman receives the very punishment he had hoped to accomplish against Mordecai, only Haman deserved that punishment and Mordecai did not.

Hosea and Gomer, Esther ... they understand the words of Jesus, the Good News, the Gospel from the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew that says, “Do not fear those who kill the body, for they cannot kill the soul.” We know, looking back, that if Esther had done nothing, part of her would have died when her people were massacred. Even if they had been spared, even if she had avoided the sword from Haman's planned genocide, part of her spirit would have grown lifeless.

Most of our death-dealing blows to the soul are self-inflicted. They happen usually when we go along to get along. In the process, part of our inner peace is severed. The Good News is so much more than making it to heaven. The Good News says that we are part

of God's Kingdom for just such a time as this, and the victory that we celebrate every Sunday during Lent is a victory for our living today.

I read a story about a young man who stopped coming to church because his conduct at work made him feel like a hypocrite. He was contacted by a wise church friend and their conversation was basically, "Do you remember if you are a Christian or not?" The young man answered that, of course, he is a Christian. The church friend then asked him, "When is it you don't act like a Christian?" He answered, "At work, I already told you. I swear and say things that I wouldn't say any other time. I do things to people that I wouldn't want anyone to find out about." The friend continued, "So, it's not when you are at church that you are a hypocrite, but when you're at work and you pretend to be something other than a Christian." "Oh, you're right. When I pretend not to be a Christian, that's when I'm most hypocritical." "Right," the good church friend said, "Maybe when you come to church around people who love you—your church friends, maybe those who know you best—maybe that's the only time that you're not being a hypocrite, but being who you really are."

Later in the story, the very next chapter, it says Esther put on her robes, and I can only imagine what they must have been. She went out to be who she really was, one of God's children. Just as Gomer risked being loved. For just such a time as this, we have been placed together as God's people.

I wonder, up until this point, if you've been able to observe the silence without talking to God. Have you been able to say nothing in the silent time, to think as little as you can control yourself? For that's what it takes to listen. So, as we respond to the Holy Spirit tugging at our hearts and as we do so by making an offering of who we are, try to truly be silent within.