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Midway Presbyterian Church
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Runaway Bride

Scripture: Esther 1:1–22

Esther 1:1 Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over
127 provinces, **2** in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, **3** in
the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and
Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, **4** while he showed the riches
of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. **5** And when
these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great
and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. **6** There were
white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods
and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble,
mother-of-pearl, and precious stones. **7** Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different
kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. **8** And drinking was
according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his
palace to do as each man desired. **9** Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that
belonged to King Ahasuerus.

10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded
Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served
in the presence of King Ahasuerus, **11** to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in
order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. **12** But Queen
Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became
enraged, and his anger burned within him.

13 Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure
toward all who were versed in law and judgment, **14** the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar,
Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who
saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): **15** "According to the law, what is to be done to
Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the
eunuchs?" **16** Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only against the
king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all
the provinces of King Ahasuerus. **17** For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women,
causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus
commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' **18** This very day the
noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all
the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. **19** If it please the king, let a
royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so
that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the
king give her royal position to another who is better than she. **20** So when the decree made by the
king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their
husbands, high and low alike." **21** This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as
Memucan proposed. **22** He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script

and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.

Introduction

Well, if you are not too familiar with the story of Esther, you're probably even more confused now that you've read the first chapter. There are some strange things here. We're stepping into a strange and foreign world and we're going to try to unpack that and try to understand the context and what's going on. But one of the oddest things about the book of Esther, perhaps you've heard this. It's a fun bit of trivia even, is that it is the only book in the entire Bible that does not mention the name of God. In the entire book nowhere is Yahweh mentioned.

What are we to make of that? Does that mean that Esther somehow slipped in by accident into our canon? Throughout the history of the church, some people have argued that. Some well-known theologians from church history have suggested as much - that perhaps this book shouldn't be in our Bibles because it doesn't mention God. But what we need to realize is that although God is not explicitly mentioned, He is everywhere present in this book. And that's not just because God is everywhere present all the time, always - though He is.

It's because Esther is a book that is all about God's people and wherever God's people are to be found, God is there with them. Isn't that the great comfort for us to hold on to today? For we might often feel like we ourselves are living in the days of Esther where it seems like God is absent from the world around us, that He's left us, maybe even abandoned, in our distress as perhaps the Jewish people who are living in exile in Persia might be feeling.

Perhaps we're tempted to think He's failed His promises. And even if we are to cling to some kind of hope in God, the fact that He's rarely mentioned in the world around us sort of just suppresses that all the more. Nobody mentions Him in our workplace or perhaps in our particular school setting or we don't hear of Him, in how He is working, when we turn on the news. And whenever He is mentioned, He's only mocked. And that is the reality for the Jews in the days of Esther.

They are living in exile from the promised land. They're in the city of Susa. You notice that in verse two, the story is set there, which is the the capital city in the Persian Empire. They're away from their home, the place they were led to believe that God had promised to keep them safe and sound. And now here in this foreign land, God isn't even mentioned. No one knows Him. No one invites discussion about Him. It's as if He never existed in the first place. Perhaps He was a figment of their collective imagination.

You could understand perhaps the despair that might creep into the Jewish mind during this time. And yet the book of Esther is written to combat this notion, teaching the Jews and teaching us today that wherever God's people are, there God is too. Didn't Jesus Himself say, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." And no one can pluck us from His hand, and we are always being held in His grip.

It is impossible, and you need to know this tonight, it is impossible to be a child of God and for God to not be there right by your side at all times. And so what does that mean? That means no matter what life throws our way, we are more than conquerors. Because if God is for us, if God is for me, who could ever be against me? If we belong to God, that means He's with us. And if He's with us, nothing can defeat us. And I start with this truth because it is what undergirds the entire book of Esther.

And it's something I want you to keep in mind as we work our way through it in the ensuing months - that God's people can never be conquered. They can never be exterminated. Although there is an attempt to do just that in this very book, but God's people can indeed never be defeated because God is with them. This is a book that teaches us this truth - the church shall never perish. The church shall never perish. That's indeed even the subtitle of our study through these chapters of Esther, the church shall never perish.

This book has a beautiful way of teaching us this. It's written sort of like a historical commentary looking back on this time of exile and reminding those who belong to true Israel that even if it seems like God isn't around, He actually is everywhere present, working by His mysterious providence to get His people where they need to be, bringing us through every danger, toil, and snare. And as I've mentioned for the Jews in Esther's day, that meant bringing them through what was almost utter entire annihilation. That's what we're going to see in this book.

And tonight, as we examine this first chapter, we find that it functions as a sort of introduction. It sets the stage for that terrifying horror that is about to befall the Jews, this genocidal event. And the key figure to introduce us, in order to properly set the stage, is the Persian king. He's at the center of chapter 1. King Ahasuerus. In Greek, it's Xerxes, the same individual. And he's so critical in understanding the story because he's the one who as it were controls Israel's destiny as they were under his reign in exile.

And the first thing I want us to consider as we work our way through this chapter is something of his vanity. Actually, that's the main thing we're going to consider tonight.

1. A Vain Party

First, we're going to look at his vain party, the party or parties that he throws in order to prove himself to be rich and powerful and to show off all the endless resources that he has at his disposal. He wants everybody to know about it. The opulence is almost disgusting. But yes, he is powerful, no doubt.

Verse one says he reigns over 127 provinces, each their own mini country. And here he brings the leaders and the military officials, government officials. He brings them together into this capital city for a six-month, we could call it a propaganda party, proving to the people under his charge that he is a king worth believing in. He's a king worth following. He's a king especially worth fighting for. And so verse four says he puts on a show of the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness.

Since wealth could be translated into military might, this was meant to inspire awe. This is the third year of Ahasuerus' reign, which likely corresponds to a great war council in 483 BC. You all knew that anyway, I'm sure. But just to refresh your memory, the historian Heroditus records the king, or Xerxes, saying this to his officials. “It is my intent to lead my army through to Europe to Greece that I may punish the Athenians for what they have done to the Persians and to my father. Whoever comes with his army best equipped shall receive from me such gifts as are reckoned most precious among us.”

So, this is a point in history where Persia and Greece, they're locked in this great geopolitical conflict. And Ahasuerus has an attack he would like to mount, but he's going to need all the support that he can muster. So, that seems to be at least part of the point of this half year long party. The king is essentially saying, "Look at all the spoils I have that I could bestow upon you if you simply fight with me. Aren't I a commander-in-chief worth following?"

And so, the culmination of this six-month party is a week-long banquet. That's verse five. When these days were completed, the king gave it for all the people present. So now we've moved beyond just the leaders and now just every citizen, all the people present in Susa and the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting seven days. Again he's being strategic here.

It's another way of winning the loyalties of the military leaders beneath him and preventing an uprising. Happy citizens make for happy generals, and happy generals don't stage coups. So he pulls out the fine linens, the rare china, and he invites them inside to his palace to feast. Just picture it. You're you're a poor peasant nobody, and you get to dine in the king's house. You get to eat the king's food, use the king's precious silverware. And most importantly, you get to drink the king's wine, as much of it as you want.

Look at verse eight and nine, which stress the point there. Drinking was according to this edict, right? There is no compulsion. Their drinks are served in golden vessels, different kinds. Royal wine lavished according to the bounty of the king, and you can drink as much as you want. Don't worry about keeping up appearances. That's the idea of the edict being there's no compulsion. You know, drop your keys in the jar when you get in the door. We'll offer valet service to get you back home. Tonight's just about letting go and enjoying yourself. You deserve it after all.

One commentator though I think correctly notes that this is the epitome of an autocracy wherein even the absence of a rule needs a law. You can drink whatever you want but we had to make it a decree so that you know to do that. And so you can imagine how his approval ratings are skyrocketing after such a week. But he wasn't done putting on his show or displaying the riches of his glory. The pinnacle of his wealth, the crowning jewel of his treasure is the queen herself, Queen Vashti. She's the grand finale.

And at the end of the seven days, the king asks her to be brought out. We're told in order to show the peoples, this is verse 11, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. It should make us uncomfortable. He treats her just like one of his toys. She's just another possession. He perhaps recognizes she's his best possession, but still an object nonetheless. And it's as if everything is building to this moment. This is the pinnacle of this vain party. And yet, what happens? Oh, she doesn't show up.

The bride's nowhere to be found. She refuses. And so what was an effort to display his power has actually fallen flat.

2. Vain Power

We've seen the vain party and now we see vain power. There's nothingness here. He actually doesn't have any authority at all, right? The whole point of this banquet is to show what kind of an amazing leader he is. Look at the lands I've conquered. Look how the people love me. It was supposed to instill confidence in his generals, but he can't even get his wife to show up when he calls her.

What does this say about his ability to rule and to lead? It was an icy stab right through his arrogance and through his pomp and through his pride. It's a humiliating moment for Ahasuerus. And the author of Esther wants you to feel it in all of its humiliation. You're supposed to laugh. Yes, Presbyterians are allowed to laugh, and we're supposed to when we read Esther. It's meant to be comedic. We're meant to chuckle at this turn of events. The preceding verses are setting us up for this big moment. Everything's over the top, nauseiatingly extravagant.

So much detail is given. You perhaps felt it as we read through it. And truly, there's very little else in the Bible that receives as much detail as Ahasuerus's party, except the details of the construction of

the tabernacle and the temple. The emphasis here is just on the over-the-top nature. And then when you view it in light of Vashti's treatment of the king, the whole thing just topples in on itself. And it's meant to make us laugh.

We're not meant to be awed by the splendor of his riches as the generals were, but to laugh and say, "What kind of king is this? Yes, white linens, mother of pearl, whatever that is. But you can't even get your wife to listen to you." This first section of the chapter is written as though Ahasuerus is saying, "Look at me. Look how special I am." But but just like that with a single verse, verse 12, "But queen Vashti refused to come…". Just like that, the author turns everything upside down on the king.

And so, what's he going to do about it, right? What's he going to do about Vashti's behavior? Something has to be done. She has no right to refuse the king. She's under his rule just like any other citizen. So, it's not okay that she has disobeyed this order. And they're wondering what they can do about it. And the wise men are saying, "Look, if you don't get this under control, everything you've been working towards will be undermined. And people will assume you don't have all that power that you're trying to prove that you do have. And it's not just going to be disastrous for you politically. It's actually going to be disastrous for our entire nation. Wives will start following her lead and disobeying their husbands. And then what?"

And so, they have this twofold plan that they come up with. For one thing, they have Ahasuerus make one of those royal decrees according to the Medes and Persians. Boys and girls, do you remember that in the the book of Daniel, where the king's advisers, the emperor's advisers are said to make laws according to the order of the Medes and Persians which cannot be changed? That's one of these laws they're asking him to make. And it's a decree that says every man, we read it in verse 22, the summary of it, but that is essentially that every man is to be master in his own household.

And again, here's another moment where the author is poking fun at Ahasuerus and seeing if you're paying attention and if you're getting the joke and if you're laughing along with this comedy.

This advisor Memucan suggests a response and without thinking about it twice, the king makes it a law, and you have to remember, verse 10 tells us the king is merry with wine while this is all happening. He's inebriated, he's not thinking straight. This is how volatile and fickle he is. And so, you can imagine in a drunken stupor, he says, "Make it a rule. I want it to be a law - every woman must listen to her husband." Well, yeah, that's going to be real effective instilling confidence in the king.

One commentator says this, "Ironically, by accepting Memucan's advice, the king ends up publicizing his embarrassing plight by ordering throughout the entire empire what he himself could not accomplish in his own palace. Afraid that all women of the empire will hear about Vashti, he ends up assuring what he fears by sending a dispatch to every providence of the empire in every language." They all know now what has happened. In an attempt to save face, he simply blushes a deeper hue. That's the first thing they decide to do. We're going to make a law that says wives have to obey their husbands.

What's the second thing though? It's related to Vashti in particular. What would be done with this woman who so openly defied the king? Remember, she's his prized possession. She's the crown jewel, his living treasure. What would be done? Look at verse 19 with me. "If it pleased the king, let a royal order go out from him and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus.

And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she." Objects, even our favorites can be replaced. And just like that, Vashti's life is over. Perhaps not literally. We don't know the exact details, but for all intents and purposes, she's nothing now. She's nothing. Why? Because she offended a proud, arrogant, fickle, but yes, powerful man, a powerful king. The extravagance, the wealth, the power that was once an attractive aspect of the king becomes dangerous in the hands of such a petty individual.

So now imagine imagine that you are a Jew living under the reign of a man like this. Look how quickly he can turn on you if things don't go his way. The power that allowed him to lavish a feast before you is the same power that could allow him to exterminate you.

What do we do with this story? Esther 1, as I've said a few times, is written for comedic effect. It's satire. We're supposed to laugh at the vanity of this king, to laugh at the way in which he scrambles to save face. We're to laugh at how empty, how truly vain his power really is. But brothers and sisters, we're supposed to be disgusted, too. Esther 1 exists in part to make us hate in a deeper way the vain ways of the world and to long for something better and not just something, but someone. It's as though Esther is written to say, "This is the best you get when you write God out of the story, someone like this, someone like Ahasuerus, someone as pathetic as this man, as petty and fickle as this man, someone as cruel as this man."

We're given a glimpse of the type of king that seemingly ruled and dictated the lives of God's people at this point in history. And it would send chills down our spines if we were not assured that he actually does not reign over God's people. Esther is written to remind the Jews that Ahasuerus does not reign, but the Lord reigns. Yahweh reigns. And of course, we know in the unfolding history of redemption that the Lord reigns in and by His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Psalm 2 tells us that the Lord has taken His Son and He has placed Him on His holy hill, not in Susa, but on Zion, the capital of God's kingdom. In the heavenly places, we're even told in Hebrews 12, that He rules there overall. And our king is such a better king than Ahasuerus.

The Better King

Friends, tonight I want you to see a contrast between two rulers and a contrast that should move you to praise and thanksgiving. That you can say, "I do serve a king, but it's not a king like this. I serve King Jesus."

Can you say that tonight? I pray that you would because look at this difference. Our king, He is not proud like Ahasuerus. He's not proud but He is humble. Yes, He's powerful, but His power is shown through weakness. His power was in emptying Himself of His divine prerogative, His divine right. And He took the form of a human servant. His humility is seen in the form of obedience, even to the point of death, even death on a humiliating cross.

His life was not a parade showing, as as we read in our text, "the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days." That does not describe the life of Christ on earth.

No, His royal glory and His splendor and the pomp of His greatness was displayed in nakedness, with royal red stripes down His back, with a crown not of diadems and jewels but of thorns that pierced His brow and caused blood to enter in, with the sweat and sting, His eyes. And He received no applause, no accolades, but the mocking jeers that say "Here he is, the king of the Jews."

You used to have someone as great as Ahasuerus, Xerxes, one of those mighty emperors of the known world. And now you have this man, half naked and half dead there on the cross. And as He's

gasping for breath, as He's feeling not just the weight and the pain of that torture device, but the indescribable weight of the curse of God as He's hanging there experiencing that, people would dare point at Him and say, "What a pathetic king." But why did Jesus endure this? Why would the king of the universe subject Himself to that kind of life, to that humiliation? Friends, I'll tell you why.

It's because our king called His people, called His church, called His bride to Himself, and they ran away. Like Vashti, they said, "No, I'm not coming." Do you see the contrast? Do you see the contrast? Vashti, she had good reason. Not legally, she was not allowed, but she would have had good reason to reject the summons of such a wicked man as Ahasuerus. But we have no reason, no reason to run away from the summons of one so beautiful and lovely and good and gracious and wonderful. And He does truly believe we are His greatest possession.

We truly are His most prized gem. There's a difference between being an object like Vashti was and being an object of affection. And that's what we are to Jesus. We're the object of His affection. We're the apple of His eye. We are that which draws out His deepest love. And so, who could resist the summons of such a king, who's beautiful and glorious and powerful and good and just? And yet we do, don't we? I mean, it's the story of the fall. It's the story of humanity. God created man for Himself in particular.

Even as we think of how Eve is formed for Adam and Adam finally sees her and he says, "At last, this is bone of my bone. This is flesh of my flesh. She's made for me." Paul says, and we heard it from Rick as he read it earlier in Ephesians. Paul says that's actually teaching us something about how Jesus feels about the church. There's one that's made just for me and we're united and we're together and He loves his church. And the story of the fall is that His people have run from Him.

And Ahasuerus, when Vashti runs from him, says “Get rid of her, find someone better.” Friends, when you sin, Jesus doesn't say, "Let me find someone better." He says, "Let me make you someone better." And so, He comes down and rather than showing off His pomp and His splendor, He humiliates Himself. Right? Ahasuerus is being humiliated, but he doesn't have any control over that. He doesn't know what's going on. Jesus knew full well what it would take to run after His runaway bride. And He didn't hesitate for a moment.

He didn't hang up in heaven and say, "Well, let me actually count the cost here. Am I really willing to go through this for people like that?" Well, no. He comes after us. He doesn't wait for us to get our act together and come to Him. Oh, if He waited for us to come, we would never come. He'd still be waiting. But instead, He comes down from heaven, and He pursues a runaway bride. Friends, do you see the goodness and the greatness of a king like this? He doesn't reject you though in your sin.

You reject him. He doesn't replace you when you refuse Him. He comes after you. He died to seek you, to save you, and to shape you into the beautiful bride that you were meant to be. Ahasuerus objectifies his bride. Christ gave himself up for His bride that He might present the church to Himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle. He doesn't parade her about. No, He washes her. We weren't chosen because we were more lovely than Vashti. We were chosen and therefore He makes us lovely. This is what Christ does for His church.

And friends, this is why the church will never perish - because our king won't ever let us go. The certainty of the existence, of the protection of the people of God in the days of Esther, is the same reason we can be certain that we will be sustained and we will be protected today as a church. And the reason is simply this. He loves you too much to ever let you go.