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Sermon  
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Park Congregational Church  
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Working Redemptively Behind the Scenes”

Scripture Text: Esther 1:10-12, 16-22; 2:1-7, 15-18

Dear people of God, no mention of God, no mention of worship, no mention of faith, no mention of prayer. I’m talking about the Book of Esther, one of the most controversial and neglected books of scripture. In Jewish communities, however, the book and the characters are cherished. Many Jewish parents name their daughters Esther. The Jewish festival of Pur-IM, based on the story of Esther, is celebrated every year in either late February or early March. Usually as part of that commemoration, plays based on the story of Esther are staged in almost every synagogue. Members of the audience are given noisy instruments, and encouraged to rattle, bang, toot, and clatter whenever the name of the villain of the story, Haman, is mentioned, drowning out the name. As you can imagine, Jewish children, especially, enjoy commemorating this holiday.

But in our Christian churches, the festival of Pur-IM is hardly ever mentioned. Maybe some of you have never even heard of it. That’s because Esther isn’t discussed or studied much, though our Bible Study group did study it back in 2000. Those of you who have read the book probably think it’s a delightful and fascinating story, but you might wonder why it’s in the Bible. It seems to be more suited for inclusion in an anthology of romance novels or perhaps even in a collection of fairy tales.

Though there doesn’t seem to be anything explicitly religious about this book, the story of Esther is nevertheless one of the finest examples in the Bible of God working redemptively behind the scenes. As our Confirmation students are learning right now, when we read the Bible, we must always look for its redemptive focus. The

Bible is not just a bunch of nice stories that make us feel good. It's not just a bunch of laws and commandments that we must obey. It's not just a bunch of historical information that we should memorize. The Bible's purpose is to show us God's redemptive actions throughout history so that we come to faith and are reinforced in our faith.

Many books of the Bible include its own commentary or interpretation, which makes it easier for us to learn its message. But the Book of Esther doesn't do that. We must figure out the book's message on our own. By itself the book is just a nice story about how a beautiful Jewish girl becomes the queen of Persia, and how because of her influential position, she manages to save her people from annihilation. But where does God fit into this nice story? The book itself doesn't tell us. We must figure it out. And by faith, we can figure it out. We can figure out why it was included in the Old Testament. We can figure out why the early church included it in their Bible as well. Esther is very much a religious story. God is present in every moment of this story from beginning to end. Though not mentioned anywhere, God is present everywhere. This is a story that shows as well as any other biblical story that God works behind the scenes to bring about redemption. Just as God works behind the scenes in our own lives to bring about redemption. Do you see God working redemptively in your life?

Some of the Jews in that day didn't see God working redemptively in their lives. The events of this story happened in the days of King Xerxes, who reigned from 485BC -465 BC over 127 provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia. Among his provinces, of course, were the lands where Jewish people lived, including Jerusalem. In the third year of his reign, Xerxes gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. He invited all the military officers of Persia and Media as well as the princes and nobles of the provinces. The celebration lasted 180 days, a tremendous display of the opulent wealth of his empire and the pomp and splendor of his majesty. As if that

were not enough partying, when it was all over, Xerxes decided to give a banquet for all the people, from the greatest to the least, who lived in his fortified city of Susa. It lasted for another seven days. Everything about the banquet was extravagant, from the gold and silver couches to the mosaic pavement of marble and mother-of-pearl to the wine served in goblets of gold. And the wine flowed throughout the seven days, reflecting the king's generosity. In fact Xerxes gave the order that no limits would be placed on the drinking; each man would be allowed as much wine as he desired. How'd you like to attend a party like that?

At the same time, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes. On the seventh day of the feast, when King Xerxes was no doubt feeling good because of the wine, he told the seven eunuchs who attended him to bring Queen Vashti to him so that all the other men could gaze on her beauty. But when they conveyed the king's order to her, Queen Vashti refused to come. This made the king furious, and he burned with anger. He immediately consulted with his advisers, who knew all the Persian laws and customs, and they answered that Queen Vashti had done a great injury not only to the king, but to all nobles and citizens throughout the empire, for if word were to get out that she disobeyed the king, women everywhere would begin to disobey their husbands and chaos would reign. And so they advised Xerxes to decree that Queen Vashti should be forever banished from his presence, and that he should find a queen more worthy than she was, and to publish that he has done this and why he did it so that throughout the empire, husbands everywhere would receive proper respect from their wives.

Now, you might be wondering, "What does any of this have to do with God?" Well, all of these events were God's working redemptively behind the scenes. The text nowhere says this. That's why we must know how to read the Bible. The Bible, in many cases, is not its own interpreter. We must supply the interpretation. And we can

do that only if we have a proper faith and the Holy Spirit is guiding us. The Roman Catholics leave interpretation of the Bible to what they call the “Teaching Magisterium of the Church.” We Protestants believe that we, clergy and layperson alike, are equipped by faith and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to interpret the Bible appropriately. It was one of the hallmarks of the Protestant Reformation to put a Bible in the hands of all who could read so that they could study the Bible on their own.

And so, in this story of Esther, we must see with the eyes of faith that Queen Vashti being deposed and a replacement found was God’s plan to bring Esther into the story. Though the book never credits God with doing anything in the story, we know by faith that God is at work behind the scenes to accomplish the divine will to save the Jewish people from extinction. And God does this in the later chapters of the book, not in spectacular, miraculous ways, as might be seen in a Hollywood production, but through a simple petition of a Jewish girl, probably only a teenager, who was exalted to become the Queen of Persia as the book says, “for just such a time as this” (Esther 4:14).

You see, God works redemptively through people. Regular people. People like you and me. Do we forget that? Did the Jewish people of Esther’s time forget that? Is that why God isn’t mentioned in the book? Had a long time passed since the Jewish people of that time had a deep spiritual experience of God, so that now they forgot to put God’s name in the credits?

When you go to the movies, how many of you stay to the very end to watch the credits scroll down the screen? I must admit that I often do that. And those of you who have attended Movie Night know that I frequently don’t shut off the television until the very end of the credits. I’m usually the very last person left in the movie theater. The lights are turned on and the custodian is already at work sweeping the

empty buckets of popcorn and candy boxes on the floor and I'm still in my seat watching the screen. If it was a good film, I feel that I owe it to those who contributed to making it, down to the gaffer.

You don't know what the gaffer does in a movie? A film can't be made without one. Here's a homework assignment for you. I think that's only fair, since I give my Confirmation students homework. Look it up and come back and tell me next week what the gaffer does.

Most of us probably read the credits to see who the actors were in the movie, and maybe even choose to see a film because of the actor or actress. But even the biggest Hollywood stars cannot make a movie by themselves. It takes hundreds and hundreds of people to make a motion picture. And it takes millions and millions of people, perhaps billions, to bring forth God's kingdom.

King Xerxes wanted a lot of attention. He threw a feast for himself that lasted six months. Queen Vashti didn't want to be ordered around. If there were a film version of Esther--and there is one--they would be the stars, along with Esther of course. The actor and actresses chosen to play their parts would receive top billing in the credits. But the real star of this story and the star of all 66 books of the Bible is God, whether God is mentioned or not.

How often do we, like the Book of Esther, go chapter after chapter in our lives without giving God credit for what God has done for us? Instead of putting God high up on the marquee as the star of the show, do we stick God way down in the credits after the gaffer or the foley or the key grip?

Do you think that God can't be a part of the mess that is your life? That God doesn't get involved in the tedium or routine of your life? It's easy to write God out of your life's script. But the Book of Esther reminds us that God works redemptively behind the scenes, in your life as well. Maybe we don't notice because God is sort of

like the gaffer or the foley or the key grip, parts in the film that is our life of which we don't take notice. But God is there nevertheless.

Can we find ways to bring God farther up in the credits of our life, maybe even to big bold bright letters that come before the title that is our life? Yes, God works behind the scenes, but can we give star billing to God as well, as we take notice of how redemption has occurred during the many episodes of our days? Amen.