

**The Dumbest People in the Bible**  
**5. Haman**

Esther 4:12-17; 7:1-10

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
 Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on August 28, 2016]

I

This is Jeopardy and you are one of the contestants.

The category is "The Bible" and the clue is up on the board—

*"The only book in the Bible that does not mention the name of God."*

How would you answer?

Remember—it has to be in the form of a question.

*What is the Book of Esther?*

Actually, I'm not surprised God is never mentioned in the Book of Esther.

It is a most unpleasant story.

God may have considered it wise to stay out of it.

Here's another one for your next home version of Jeopardy.

*"The only person in the Bible whose name begins with an 'X.'"*

Your response: *Who is King Xerxes?*

Actually, there isn't much that can be said about Xerxes, the Persian emperor,  
 also known by his Hebrew name, Ahasuerus.

[The Jews preferred to use his proper name, Xerxes, instead of his Hebrew name, which  
 sounded like the Hebrew word for "headache." The rabbis said that whenever anyone

mentioned him that person's head would hurt.]

He was a blow-hard and a show-off who flaunted his wealth and power,  
yet people were always wrapping him around their little finger.

Xerxes was in the running for his own "dumb person in the Bible" sermon—  
but there is another kind of dumbness in the Book of Esther that is a  
thousand times more dangerous than just being gullible.

## II

I am thinking, of course, of Haman,  
the chief minister of King Xerxes.

Evidently the king had a certain fondness for his prime minister,  
since he had issued a decree that all other princes and court officials  
must bow to Haman as they would to Xerxes himself.

Now there was a man who lived in the capital named Mordecai.

You need to know two things about him—

He had a beautiful niece named Esther who had become Xerxes' queen  
(which you can read about in the first two chapters of the book);

And years before Mordecai had uncovered a coup attempt against the king,  
which landed him a civil service job in the palace.

One day, when Haman came prancing by,  
Mordecai refused to flatten himself  
and grovel in the dirt like everyone else.

Why did he refuse?

Here is the third thing you need to know about Mordecai —

**He was a Jew who believed that such reverence belonged to God alone.**

Haman, being a mere mortal, was not deserving of such homage.

To bow would violate the dictates of Mordecai's conscience and his integrity.

So when Haman passed by, Mordecai remained standing.

Sisters and brothers, there are times when God's people cannot bow—  
 whether to a corrupt flunkey like Haman,  
 or to the king himself.

God's people must remain standing.

The prophet Elijah would not bow his knee to Baal.

Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego refused to bow to King  
 Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue and ended up cast into a fiery furnace.

The apostles Peter and John refused to give in to the Jewish authorities  
 who warned them not to preach in the name of Jesus.

Peter and John said, "We must obey God, not men.

And since that time there have been others who have refused to bow—

Oskar Schindler, who used his charm and his wealth to save over 1100 Jews  
 from the Nazi gas chambers.

Rosa Parks, who kept her seat on the Montgomery city bus and launched  
 a movement that transformed civil rights in this country.

Nelson Mandela, who went to prison for 27 years for refusing to bow to the  
 racist policies of apartheid, but who, after being released from prison,  
 became the first president elected by **all** the people of South Africa.

Pastors Christoph Wonneberger and Christian Fuehrer of the Nicolai  
 Church in Leipzig, East Germany, who continued to conduct Monday night  
 prayer meetings at the church in spite of threats from the communist leaders.

Those prayer meetings gave birth to the October Revolution that brought  
 down the Berlin Wall and reunited Germany.

There are times when God's people cannot bow—  
 not to the king,  
     not to the president,  
         not to any earthly authority.

All of the people I have named paid a price for standing up:  
 persecution,  
     anger,  
         hatred,  
             misunderstanding.

Such was the price Mordecai was to pay for refusing to bow to Haman.

### III

It was just the break Haman had been waiting for.

Haman, you need to know, was a descendent of the Amalekites,  
 traditional enemies of the Jewish people.

So when Haman goes into a rage over Mordecai's defiance,  
 it is much more than just a personal peeve—  
     it becomes a release of long pent-up ethnic and religious hatred.

Haman reasons that if Mordecai refuses to bow because he is a Jew,  
 then what was needed was some good old-fashioned “ethnic cleansing”—  
     get rid of all the Jews.

Haman goes to the king,  
     and using his favored position as prime minister,  
         turns several half-truths into persuasive arguments for a new decree  
             that all the Jews in the Persian empire be exterminated.

Haman doesn't identify what group he is talking about.

He merely tells the king that there are certain people in the kingdom who are  
 different from the others,  
     whose customs and culture are different,  
         whose ultimate allegiance is elsewhere.

All of this was true,  
     but then Haman added a lie—  
         these Jews didn't respect the king or the law of the land.

Half-truths are always more dangerous than outright lies.

They contain enough truth to be believed and enough falsehood to be destructive.

Haman, you see, fits the classic definition of a demagogue—  
     a leader who seeks to rouse the passions of people  
         by speaking half-truths and falsehoods.

American history has produced a long line of demagogues:

    Huey Long,  
         Father Charles Coughlin,  
             Senator Joseph McCarthy,  
                 and Governor George Wallace,  
                     to name a few notable ones.

How do you know a demagogue when you hear one?

    They use the pronouns “I,” “me,” and “my” almost exclusively.

    They speak in half-truths, generalities, and outright falsehoods.

    They prey on the weak, the fearful, and the uninformed.

    They seek to persuade you that things are so bad,  
         the situation is so dire,  
             that they alone can fix it.

    And they make scapegoats of minority ethnic, religious, or social groups.

Earlier generations of Americans made scapegoats of...

                            the Chinese,  
                     the Irish,  
     German-Americans during World War I,

Japanese-Americans during World War II,  
and alleged Communist sympathizers during the Cold War

We see this today as loyal Muslim Americans are scapegoated and victimized every time there is a terrorist attack;  
and when a presidential candidate says that Mexicans coming to this country in search of a better life “are bringing drugs, crime, and are rapists.”

Notice that King Xerxes is a most willing and compliant audience for Haman’s demagoguery.

The king never asks who will be affected by this decree.

He never asks about Haman's motivation.

He pretends not to know anything ("plausible deniability" is the term used by government bureaucrats).

But pretending not to know does not absolve Xerxes of responsibility,  
any more than it absolves any of us of responsibility.

#### IV

As news of the decree began to spread, Jews throughout the kingdom engaged in acts of fasting,  
prayer,  
lamentation,  
and mourning.

Mordecai stood at the palace gate in sack cloth and cried loudly and bitterly—  
so loudly that his niece, Queen Esther, heard him from inside the palace.

Of course, Esther herself was a Jew;  
ultimately this decree would affect her as well.

Haman was unaware of this.

He had no idea that his plot to get rid of Mordecai and all the rest of the Jews would reach right into the king's own heart...

right into the king's own bedroom.

Such is the extent to which hatred and prejudice will blind a person's eyes and pervert a person's mind.

But Mordecai knew that Esther was the only person who was in a position to save the Jewish people.

So Mordecai sends a message to Esther—

*You must go to King Xerxes and interceded for your people.*

However, this wasn't as simple as picking up the palace telephone or walking down the hall to the king's office.

In those days, no one could speak to the king unless invited by the king.

An uninvited person walking into the king's presence put him or herself at great personal risk.

If the king saw you and raised his scepter,  
you could approach and speak.

If not, you might be executed on the spot,  
even if you were the queen.

Mordecai urges Esther go and speak to the king,  
but Esther replies that she can't just barge in and talk to him.

"Why, it's been 30 days since he invited me to be with him," she says.

Mordecai's impassioned response forms the heart of the Book of Esther (4:14)—

*If you keep silence at such a time as this, deliverance will come from somewhere, but you and your family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to this royal position for just such a time as this."*

Esther then asks her uncle to gather all the Jews to join her in a time of fasting and

prayer.

She resolves to do what she must do.

She resolves that, whatever the cost, she will intercede for her people.

**"I will go to the king," she says, "and if I perish, I perish."**

That is the attitude God's people need to cultivate.

*I'm going to do what I must...and if I perish, I perish.*

*I'm going to stand for right and speak the truth...*

*and if I lose the election,*

*if I lose friends,*

*if I lose church members*

*if I lose financial support,*

*then so be it.*

*I'm going to answer God's call upon my life,*

*I'm going to live by God's principles,*

*I'm going to trust God to take care of me...*

*and if it costs me my life,*

*then I will pay even that cost.*

## V

Esther dresses herself in her royal robes,  
and, with great trepidation, goes before the king.

Xerxes, however, not only raises his golden scepter to her,  
agreeing to listen to her request,  
but goes so far as to promise her anything she asks,  
up to half his kingdom.

Esther only asks that he and Prime Minister Haman join her for dinner that evening.

Again at the dinner, Xerxes offers to fulfill her request.

But she asks only that they return and have dinner with her the following evening.

At this point, Haman had to be feeling pretty good about himself.

Not only had he dined privately with the king and queen,  
but he would be coming back the following day.

On his way from the palace, whom should Haman see, but the one person capable of bursting his bubble—

**Mordechai**—

standing there in defiance,  
refusing to bow,  
reminding Haman that he was not so great in everyone's eyes.

Haman is so angry that he immediately orders a gallows to be built—  
75 feet high—  
with the first place in line reserved for Mordecai.

That would take care of that insolent Jew,  
and teach a lesson to anyone else who dared refuse to obey.

But...while Haman was building his offense against Mordecai,  
heaven was building a defense for Mordecai.

While the power of evil was at work through Haman to destroy Mordecai,  
the power of God began to work through Xerxes to save Mordecai.

Xerxes had trouble falling asleep that night, and so he asked to read the historical records of his kingdom (he's not the last person to fall asleep reading history!)

And what page should he turn to, but the account years earlier of how Mordecai had exposed the coup attempt.

Xerxes fell asleep resolved to reward such a loyal subject.

The next morning both Haman and Xerxes rose excitedly from beds of slumber.

One was excited about the prospect of destruction;  
the other excited about the opportunity for praise.

One was excited about the prospect of doing evil to someone;  
the other excited about the prospect of doing good for someone.

One awoke with a grudge;  
the other awoke with gratitude.

We can be thankful that when others get up early to do us evil,  
there is a Sovereign Lord who reigns over them  
and who is prepared to do us good.

When others rise to curse,  
the Sovereign Lord is ready to bless.

When others rise to defame and criticize,  
the Sovereign Lord comes to glorify and praise.

When others build a gallows on which to hang us,  
our Sovereign Lord reads our names into the Book of Life,  
and is prepared to reward us.

Haman arrives early at the palace to ask for Mordecai's life,  
but before he can say anything, the king asks him a question:

*"What should I do to honor someone who has really pleased me?"*

In his pride, Haman thinks that the king can only be referring to one person—  
Haman, as he thinks to himself,  
"Whom would the king wish to honor more than me?"

So he gave the usual answer:

*Dress the man in royal clothing,  
mount him on the king's royal horse,  
instruct the king's most powerful servant to escort him  
through the streets of the capital shouting,*

**"This is the way the king honors those who please him."**

The king says: *"Excellent! Now go find Mordecai and do as you have said."*

Haman did as the king instructed,  
and then he went home humiliated.

As he was telling his wife and friends what had happened,  
the king's messenger arrived to escort him to Queen Esther's banquet.

## VI

During dinner, the king again asks Esther what it is she wants.

Esther replies, very simply and directly, that she only wants her life and the lives of her people spared from destruction.

The king asks, Who would dare touch her or lay hands upon her people.

Esther points to Haman—  
"He is the enemy of my people," she says.

The king is so furious that he storms out into the garden.

Haman throws himself at Esther's feet, begging for mercy.

The king walks back into the room,  
sees Haman's arms around Esther,  
and assumes that he is attempting to rape her.

Haman is arrested on the spot,  
his head is covered,  
and he is led away to the gallows he had built.

D. R. Benson in his delightful little book "Biblical Limericks" puts it this way:

*By stratagem, Haman intended  
To have noble Queen Esther's life ended;  
But, just as when in school*

*A lad plays the fool,  
He failed, and was promptly suspended.*

Suspended, i.e., hung from the gallows he had built for Mordecai,  
hung from his own rope.

But it wasn't the rope that killed him,  
it was his own trap...  
his own greed...  
his own hatred...  
his own vindictiveness...  
his own scheming lies.

## VII

Haman thought he was smart,  
but he wasn't smart at all.

He will always be remembered as the man who was dumb enough to build the  
instrument of his own death.

Haman could have been a great man,  
but he knew nothing of humility,  
which is the true expression of greatness.

He was a powerful man,  
but he failed to use his power for good,  
which is God's only test of power.

He was a man who had tremendous opportunity,  
but he fought his petty little war of hatred,  
and God took away from him all future opportunity.

And here is the lesson from the story of Haman—  
what goes around comes around;  
the one who sows the wind will reap the whirlwind.

It is not smart when you allow little things to steal your joy  
and prevent you from enjoying the blessings of heaven.

It is not smart to satisfy your own ego,  
and not care who you may hurt.

It is never smart to set traps for other people—  
for in the long run you are the one who will get caught.

It is never smart to wish evil upon someone else—  
for that same evil will come back to haunt you.

It is never smart to be filled with hatred for another person or group of persons—  
for that hatred ends up destroying you.

Frederick Buechner said this—

*Haters simply lose themselves,  
because hate is the ultimate consuming passion.  
Lovers, by losing themselves in their loving,  
find themselves,  
become themselves.*

Don't be dumb like Haman.

Don't allow bitterness, hatred, and anger to consume you

Instead, be smart like Mordecai and Esther.

**Let the love of God fill your life  
so that by losing yourself in loving,  
you might become the person God intends you to be.**

Amen.

Sources:

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