

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family**Title: From sorrow into gladness and from mourning into joy!****Lesson: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 NRSV**

Unfortunately, some of our church members tested positive for Covid-19 this week. It seems undeniable that Covid is spreading in our county. I am also feeling some low fever after meeting them at church this week. I don't know yet if it's just a cold or if it is Covid, but I'm going to get tested after service this morning. Depending on the result, we will be able to decide whether to hold In-Person worship services in the future, or not. Please pray for those who recently tested positive, as well as for me and my family, and for our trip.

Today's scripture is about Esther. As you all know, my wife's English name is Esther. Of course her official Korean name is Eun Jin. When we were in Korea, her pastor saw her faithful faith and named her Esther. She would never have imagined at the time that she would be called Esther by people in the states. The Bible describes Esther's beautiful appearance. Because of this, many Korean women tend to call themselves Esther. Even when I was studying at California, there were many Esthers there. I later learned that the name Esther is a bit of an old-fashioned name in America. Some of my American friends said: "Is your wife's name Esther? That's my grandmother's name!"

Anyhow, today's scripture is Esther. The book of Esther describes the process of changing despair into joy that the people of Israel felt in a foreign land. It is God's work of salvation that despair turns into joy. The transformation of water into wine, the healing of the sick, and the hungry gaining energy to live through food are all God's works of salvation. Although we are currently in a situation where we are anxious and a little frustrated due to Covid-19, I hope and pray in the name of the Lord that when the Lord's healing hand touches our lives, all the uncertainty, despair, and frustration will be turned into joy in our lives.

The book of Esther is the story of Jews who lived in a foreign country. As a result of their disobedience to God's word, they became prisoners of the Gentiles. But ironically, when they tried to keep their faith and tradition in a foreign country, they were oppressed by the Gentiles because of their faith.

The historical setting is that the Babylonian king allowed his captives to return to their homeland and live freely serving their God. So, along with leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah, many Israel people returned home. After going home, they built the second Temple in Jerusalem and restored the walls of Jerusalem.

However, not all Jews returned home. Many Jews still lived in Persia. Perhaps they wouldn't have thought of returning to their homeland because they built a house, got married, and already laid the foundation for their lives there.

At that time, there was a man named Haman in Persia. He was a very smart man, and his social position was high. But, he had a conflict with Mordecai, Esther's cousin, because Mordecai neither knelt nor bowed to his boss Haman. Mordecai worshiped only God.

Haman was furious with Mordecai's such actions, so he planned to kill all the Israel people in Persia accusing the king that the Jews were a people who didn't obey the king's laws. Haman's plan was successful because the king's letter ordering to kill all Jews, young and old, women and children and take their property in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month was sent. (Esther 3:13)

Esther 4:3 describes all Jews' feeling: "There was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes."

Mordecai informed Queen Esther that the lives of all Jews were at stake so she risked her life to save her people, saying "If I perish, I perish." (4:16) Esther risked her life and came to the king. She exposed Haman's conspire revealing that she is also a Jew who will be killed by Haman.

Esther gave up everything she had to save her people from Haman's bad plan. However, when she gave up everything and relied on God, God's hand helped her. Like this, God helps those who put everything down and depend on Him.

Today's scripture is the scene where Esther invites the king and Haman to a banquet, and then exposes Haman's bad plan. Finally, Haman was a trusted servant of the king, but his life was in jeopardy because of his bad plan. The Bible describes the end of the unrighteous: "Their mischief return upon their own heads, and on their own heads their violence descends." (Psalm 7:16, NRSV)

Haman was planning to kill Mordecai and all Jews on the tree, but rather he was hanging on the tree. The Bible warns that those who commit injustice will eventually perish because of their injustice. "They set a net for my steps; my soul was bowed down. They dug a pit in my path, but they have fallen into it themselves." (Psalm 57:6)

Haman's death shows the end of the unrighteous. Verse 10 tells that "They hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated." Haman died, but life and peace came to all Jews.

The situation was totally changed once Haman died. All Jews got life from the brink of death. Their despair turned into joy, their last day of life turned into a feast, and their funerals turned into a big holiday.

Esther 8:16 tells that "For the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honor."

All Jews were almost dying because of Haman's plan, but they were saved and enjoyed the joy of liberation again like their ancestors who experienced during the Exodus from Egypt. For Jews, Purim was the second Passover.

Purim is a story of salvation. The Bible says in one sentence: "From sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday." Their sorrow turned into gladness, their mourning turned into a holiday.

Jews still observe the 13th of December as their fasting day, when Haman decided to kill them. And, they keep the 14th or 15th as the national holiday called Purim. On this day, they feast and rejoice, send gifts of food to one another. (9:22)

The story of Esther is similar to the story of Joseph in Genesis. Both were prisoners and slaves at each foreign country. But, their lowest position turned

into their highest position. Esther and Joseph were the people who God prepared. Esther said “I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.” (4:16) Joseph said “Even though you intended to do hard to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve numerous people, as he is doing today.” (Genesis 50:20)

People, including myself, usually get frustrated and have negative thoughts when they encounter difficult situations. That’s so natural. Personally, I was touched while reading the story of Esther. My family and I were planning to visit South Korea around when Evan turned one year old. However, it wasn’t easy because of Covid. At that time, a two-week quarantine was mandatory. That meant that even if we went to Korea for three weeks, we would only be able to be with our families for one week. Therefore, we postponed our trip and instead we went to Los Angeles. Thankfully, from July-August, people who are fully vaccinated don’t have to quarantine in Korea. So we planned to visit S. Korea in mid September, but it was postponed to the beginning of October due to expensive flight tickets. Also, we learned that we must prepare various documents to return to the states safely. And at this point with only one week left before our trip, Covid-19 is spreading in our neighborhood. I don’t know yet if my low fever is a cold or Covid, but I was feeling anxious and frustrated about our trip, which has become uncertain. Many concerns and worries came up like: “What if the airline doesn’t accept a date change?” “How are Evan’s grandparents going to feel if meeting their grandson for the first time is once again delayed after waiting and anticipating the joyous occasion for a year and a half?” But today’s message gave me a lot of comforts and strength.

Esther and Joseph’s faith changed their situation. I believe that the Lord will turn all our current Covid situations into joy. From sorrow into gladness and from mourning into joy!

May our anxiety and fear turn into our confession of faith and joy. Amen.