

“Finding the Rock”

Esther 4:6-16; Matthew 7:21-27 ¹

What comes to mind when I mention the word “sand”? I think of many things.

I remember climbing to the top of the White Sands National Monument in New Mexico with an old friend in 1972. Nathan and I have hiked to the top of the Great Sand Dunes National Monument in Colorado. Jill and I have climbed to the top of the Jockey’s Ridge Sand Dune on the Outer Banks, near where Wilbur and Orville Wright launched their frail airplane at Kill Devil Hills, and we’ve made the mile-long walk out the beach to the point of Cape Hatteras where North Carolina descends dramatically into the sea.

When we lived in Texas, we experienced frequent sandstorms that painted the world a faint purple. Even with windows and doors closed, the sand came into the house through every opening, covering much of the interior with grit.

I’ve seen a lot of sand, but what I’ve experienced has been no more than a “sandbox” in comparison with the great sandy deserts of the world. Sand is pretty durable when we think of it in terms of great sand dunes and great deserts. Those geographical features last for thousands and thousands of years. But though sand is durable, in its natural state it’s not a very good material to build things with.

I expect that most of us have made sand castles and sand sculptures at the beach, but no matter how complex or wonderful the sculpture, building things out of sand or on sand is a temporary business at best. The wind and the sea do their work on sand in pretty short order.

Once upon a time, Linus of *Peanuts* built an enormous sand castle on the beach. His castle had towers, fortresses, minarets, spires, windows, gates—everything you could possibly imagine. As Linus surveyed his creation, a drop of rain hit his nose. Before long, the drop had become a downpour, and his castle quickly disappeared into the melting sand. As he looked at the place where his castle had been, Linus said, “There’s a lesson to be learned here somewhere, but I don’t know what it is.”

Hold that thought. We’ll return to the idea of “sand” and discover the lesson to be learned, but our journey this morning begins in the book of Esther.

As I’m sure you know, Esther is one of two books in the Bible named for women—the other being Ruth—and Esther has the distinction of being the only book in the Bible that doesn’t clearly mention God. If you want to get a good overview of the book, I recommend watching the movie, *One Night with the King*.² It’s a good film, and pretty faithful to Scripture; but just as a reminder, here’s the plot line leading up to this morning’s text . . .

The story begins with a Persian king named “Ahasuerus” as he gives a rowdy, drunken party. Many scholars think that “Ahasuerus” is another name for Xerxes I, who ruled Persia in the fifth century BCE.

Xerxes decides that he wants to show off the beauty of his queen, Vashti, to his drunken guests, but she refuses to be so treated. In a rage, Xerxes deposes Vashti and begins looking for a more congenial consort. A search is made throughout the empire, and a young Jewish woman named Hadassah is chosen, though her Jewish heritage is unknown to the king.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 3, 2019.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Night_with_the_King

The king names his new queen “Esther,” and all is well for a while. Later, the king elevates a man named Haman to be second in command in the empire, and people are instructed to bow down to Haman as though he were the king. For some undisclosed reason, Esther’s older cousin, who raised her after her parents’ deaths, refuses to bow down to Haman.

Haman was an insecure man who was fond of both flattery and vengeance; and when he learned that this insolent Mordecai was a Jew, Haman vindictively arranged for all the Jews in the empire to be annihilated on a date about a year later. We began reading this morning at the place where Haman’s edict has become known, and the royal city of Shushan, or Susa, has been thrown into a great uproar by this news.

As the scene opens, Mordecai is making a great display of grief at the king’s gate, and word of his distress has reached Esther within the palace. Many questions are left hanging. We don’t know how the palace staff knew of the connection between Esther and Mordecai, because he had told her to keep this secret. We don’t know how Mordecai discovered the specific amounts of money involved in this plot; and we don’t know why Esther was unaware of Haman’s decree.

All of these questions deepen the mystery, and the extremity of Mordecai’s distress undoubtedly comes both from the imminent loss of his own life and from the suspicion that it may have been his own behavior that led to this announcement of genocide. When Esther’s servants ask for an explanation of his behavior, Mordecai explains the edict in a note to Esther and asks her to go to the king to beg that the edict be withdrawn.

Mordecai is now asking Esther to reveal her Jewish heritage, which he has previously told her to conceal. She reminds him that to approach the king unbidden results in execution unless the king extends his scepter in welcome, and “*I have not been summoned to come to the king for thirty days.*” The king has a track record, and she has good reason to be afraid.

Mordecai’s reply to this objection has become the most famous statement in the book: “*Do not think in your soul that you will escape in the king’s household more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place—but you and your father’s household will perish. Who knows whether you have attained royal status **for such a time as this?***” (Esther 4:13-14).

Esther’s response to this challenge is also memorable: “*Go! Gather together all the Jews who are in Shushan and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast in the same way. Afterwards, I will go in to the king, even though it is not according to the law. **So if I perish, I perish!***” (Esther 4:16).

This exchange gives us the only hints of God’s presence in this story: first in Mordecai’s affirmation that help will come “from another place”; and then from Esther’s command to fast, which implies prayer. Mordecai’s challenge to Esther is essentially this: “You might die for making this request, but you will surely die later if you do nothing. Your whole life has been leading up to this moment, and God has put you in the palace *for just this reason*. Don’t blow it.”

This is Esther’s defining moment, the moment when she has to decide who she really is. And once she decides to act on behalf of her people, Esther deploys a carefully constructed plan that does in fact save her people from destruction.

It is in such defining moments that our lives are changed and human history turns on its hinges. In the movie, *Braveheart*, William Wallace has such a defining moment when he shouts to his army, “Aye! Fight and you may die. Run and you will live, at least awhile. And dying in your beds many years from now, you would be willing to trade all the days from this day to that

for one chance, just one chance, to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives, but they will never take our FREEDOM!”³ⁱ

Defining moments are moments in which you and I, too, find out what we’re made of; and I find it exciting to think that, like Esther, you and I have been prepared for this moment . . . ***for such a time as this!***

There have been many preparations for this moment, for this very day. Think of a few of them: the place you were born, where you grew up, the number of persons in your family, where you went to school or go to school, the type of school it was or is, whether or not your family went to church, and what type of congregation it was, how often you went, your vocation, the good times and hard times you’ve been through, who you married or those you didn’t marry, who you may be dating now, who your friends are . . . the list is endless.

God has been at work in all of these things, in all of these circumstances, and through all of these persons to mold you into the person that you are this moment. Sometimes God has worked quietly; sometimes not so quietly. Some things have been fun; some things have been painful; but all these things have worked together to make you who you are, right now: a person with hopes and dreams; a person with memories; a person with skills; a person with knowledge; a person with problems; a person with opportunities; a person with grief; a person with joy; a person with bitterness; a person with love; a person with purpose.

Every moment of your life has pointed to this place, to this time. And there are things right now that God wants to have done. There are people right now who need to experience God’s love through you and through me. There are giants to face, there are mountains to climb, there are enemies to conquer.

And, as Mordecai told Esther, “if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish.” We might rephrase that to say that God’s purposes will be achieved with or without us – but if we do not respond, if we look the other way, we will forfeit the blessing, the joy, the adventure, and the glory of being a part of God’s work, right here and right now.

Such awareness has the power to make every moment electric with anticipation, and it can make us more sensitive to the people around us. Such a viewpoint gives patience, inspires courage, and subdues fear. November 3, 2019 is a crucial time in the history of the world. It is a crucial day in your life, and in mine. *What will we do with it?*

But this moment is important for another reason as well. Not only has all of life brought us here and prepared us for this moment, but this moment, this day, is also one of the building blocks that is preparing us for the future events of our lives. We are building *now* the persons whom we will be *then*.

If you’re in elementary school, high school, college, vocational school, the military, or beginning your working life, you are laying the foundations, framing the rooms and building the roof of the structure that is your life. You’re designing the wiring, determining where there will be power, and where there will not.

Work continues on this building as long as life lasts. We complete the basic structure in our youth, and then in the middle years we furnish it. We make refinements to what has been built. Sometimes we find that walls need to be moved or rooms added. In our crowning years, we

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Braveheart>

have more leisure to enjoy what we have made of our lives . . . or to worry about the poor wiring, the leaky roof, and the poor design that result from not having built very well.

Jesus actually talked about this problem, and this is where we return to the sand: *“Anyone who listens to my teaching and obeys me is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won’t collapse, because it is built on rock. But anyone who hears my teaching and ignores it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will fall with a mighty crash”* (Matthew 7:24-27).

Notice the similarities between these two builders. Both builders were impressed with the need for building a house. Both were resolved to build a house. Both may have built their houses in the same area. Both persevered until a house was built.

On the face of it, the largest difference between the two houses was probably that one of them was built more quickly and with less trouble than the other. The main difference, the foundation, was out of sight. Later, both houses faced the same test, but the results were very different, and that, of course, is the point.

Jesus was using these houses to illustrate something about our lives. It is deceptively easy to lose sight of the fact that each of our individual private thoughts is like a plank inserted in the house of our lives. Every habit is like a beam, every imagination is like a window, well or poorly placed; and they all gather into some kind of dwelling, lovely or grotesque and we each must live in what we build.

Of the two builders Jesus spoke of, one was a thoughtful man and carefully planned his house with an eye to the future. The other was not a bad man, but he was thoughtless, and he casually built his house in what seemed to be the easiest way. There’s a story of a man who arrived at the heavenly gates and was shown to his abode in heaven, which proved to be just a tiny, rickety shack. When he objected, the angel said, “it was the best we could do with what you sent up.”

Have you ever wondered how someone goes about building a life? We tell each other to “Get a life!” but how might a person do that? The truth is that we build a life much as we build anything else.

Even as engineers sink their caissons deep into the earth under a river to reach the bedrock upon which to build a great bridge or tower, so it’s necessary for us to dig deeply into eternal things in order to discover the eternal truths God has given on which to build our lives. But knowing these truths is not enough. The man who built his house on the sand had heard Jesus’ words; but he didn’t live them.

My friend, would you like to know how to build **A Life that Matters**? Would you like to develop **Relationships that Last**? I can tell you how to do both of these in just one word: CHOICES.

All day long, every day, you and I are making choices. The world tells us to base our lives on money, sex, and power. The world tells us to get all we can, can all we get, and sit on the can. But do you know where that can always sits? It sits on sand.

So where do you find a Rock on which to build your life? You start by getting a copy of God’s Book, and you read it. That Book will tell you where the Rock is: *“Trust in the Lord always, for the Lord God is the eternal Rock”* (Isaiah 26:4); *“There is no other Rock—not one!”* (Isaiah 44:8). And when Jesus told us, **“If you have seen me, you have seen the Father. The**

Father and I are One,” He was identifying Himself as the Rock on Whom we build our lives (John 10:30, 14:9).

My friends, God has not cast us adrift in the universe. We are not lost in space. God has given us the Bible as our Manual for Life, and every word of that Manual either points forward or backward to Jesus. Jesus is your Center of Gravity. He is the North Star for your soul.

Can you hear it? The wind is getting stronger and the flood waters are rising. Where have you built your house?

In times like these you need a Savior,
In times like these you need an anchor;
Be very sure, be very sure
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!

This Rock is Jesus, Yes, he’s the One;
This Rock is Jesus, The only One!
Be very sure, be very sure
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!⁴

⁴ Ruth Caye Jones, 1944

ⁱ This reminds me of the words of the hymn, *Once to Ev'ry Man and Nation*:

Once to ev'ry man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, some great decision,
Off'ring each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever
'Twixt that darkness and that light.

Then to side with truth is noble,
When we share her wretched crust,
Ere her cause bring fame and profit,
And 'tis prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave [one] chooses
While the coward stands aside,
Till the multitude make virtue
Of the faith they had denied.

Tho the cause of evil prosper,
Yet the truth alone is strong;
Tho her portion be the scaffold,
And upon the throne be wrong:
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.
(James Russell Lowell, 1845)

See also *The Salutation of the Dawn*:

Look to this Day!
For it is Life, the very Life of Life.
In its brief course lie all the
Verities and Realities of your Existence;
The Bliss of Growth,
The Glory of Action,
The Splendor of Beauty;
For Yesterday is but a Dream,
And Tomorrow is only a Vision;
But Today well lived makes every
Yesterday a Dream of Happiness, and every
Tomorrow a Vision of Hope.
Look well therefore to this Day!
Such is the Salutation of the Dawn.

https://sanskritdocuments.org/doc_deities_misc/salutedawn.html?lang=sa