

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: God - At Work in the Shadows

Haman: Enemies

(selected passages from Esther)

Study #3

Introduction: Opponents vs. enemies...

When the San Antonio Spurs play the opening game of the 2016-17 NBA season, it will be the first opening game in nineteen years without Tim Duncan in the line-up. (Sorry, but I just had to...).

In that game, our Spurs will face off against one of the league's other twenty-nine teams. That team will be a *roadblock* to the Spurs' quest for another NBA championship. On that night, that team will be the Spurs' *opponent*. We Spurs fans might even refer to the other team as an *adversary* or a *foe*.

But we would probably stop short of calling the Oklahoma Thunder or even the Golden State Warriors an *enemy*.

ENEMY speaks of something more serious. Armies face off against ENEMIES. ENEMIES seek more than the last bucket before the buzzer sounds. ENEMIES seek our lives. ENEMIES want to destroy.

People like me who aren't in the military don't often think in terms of enemies, except when we're reading the news.

But if you are currently serving in the military, or if you have ever served in the military, you know what it is to think about enemies. The military trains men and women to defend against our nation's enemies.

But even those in the military don't often think of enemies outside of a military setting. There is a context for thinking about enemies. And, frankly, Sunday morning church is generally not one of these contexts.

It's interesting, though, that when we turn to the Bible we frequently find "enemy" vocabulary. In the Old Testament we read about the enemies of Israel. In different eras, enemy nations tried to destroy Israel, and God protected His people against these enemies.¹

In the New Testament Jesus told His first followers that they would face enemies. He, personally, had to deal with those who opposed Him and He assured Peter and James and John and the rest that if He was opposed, they would be, too.

He told them that they would sometimes be persecuted for following Him - and sure enough, they were. And what Jesus said would be true for them is also true for you and me, today, who follow Jesus.

It is a very helpful thing to know that we will face opposition for following Jesus. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. And our time together in the book of Esther today will take us into the part of our story that includes enemies. Our consideration of enemies brings us to a consideration of the villain of Esther's story: Haman.

Let's begin by reminding ourselves of the setting in which Esther and company were living. They were living in Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire.

Trouble in a Persian Paradise

Living in the Lap of Luxury (the Jews in Susa/Persia)

Different "conquered people" policies

The Jews were defeated by Babylon, under King Nebuchadnezzar, over one hundred years before Esther was born.

¹ Sometimes He miraculously delivered them and sometimes He allowed them (even commanded them) to destroy their enemies.

The Babylonians deported most of the influential leaders, taking them away from Palestine and dropping them in Babylon. Deportation was the “conquered people policy” of the Babylonians.

They intentionally disrupted the culture of the peoples they conquered in battle by taking them away from their homeland. Deporting the leaders took the fight out of their enemies.²

But when the Medo-Persian Empire defeated the Babylonians, they put in place a “conquered people” policy that was very different from and much more enlightened than that of Babylon.

The “conquered people” policy of Medo-Persian Empire

Once the Persians defeated a people militarily, they wanted to make loyal subjects of the defeated nation.

So, their policy was to encourage conquered peoples to remain in their homeland. Retain their customs. Maintain their culture. Their policy was “*Live and let live*” (as long you do what we say and pay us lots of money in taxes).

The Persians also allowed peoples who had been defeated and deported by the Babylonians - as the Jews had been - to return to their homeland.

So, the first king of the Medo-Persian empire, King Cyrus, allowed any Jew who wanted to return to Palestine to go home. He even financed that return, paying for transit and for materials to rebuild the Jerusalem temple.³

² Before the Babylonians were the world-ruling power, Assyria was the bully on the Ancient Near East block. And the strategy of the Assyrians in dealing with their defeated enemies was to bring in their own armies and leaders to intermarry, thus taking over their culture.

³ You can read about this in the book of Ezra. Some generations later, the Persian king, Artaxerxes, even supplied materials for rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem under the supervision of Nehemiah.

Thousands of Jews took Cyrus up on his offer and returned. The city of Jerusalem was re-populated by these patriotic Jews. However, while lots of Jews returned, many more thousands did not.

Many conquered Jews did not return

In fact, most of those whose great grandfathers had been deported stayed right where they were. They kept on living, working, and raising families in the land of the Persians.

For these Jews, life was good. They were living in the most enlightened society in the world. They were allowed to practice their faith. They could observe Passover and other Jewish holidays.⁴

The Persian economy was good. There was political stability. It was safe. It was an extremely cosmopolitan society.

At no time in their history outside of Palestine have the Jewish people lived under better conditions than during the years when these descendants of deportees were living in the land of Persia.⁵

The Jews had fully assimilated into Persia. They fit in. They weren’t anybody’s target. Life was really, really good.

And then, while living in the lap of personal peace and affluence, seemingly out of nowhere, up jumps the enemy.

At a moment when nobody would have expected it, when everything was going great, God’s people faced opposition, threat, persecution, and the danger of annihilation in the person of Haman.

The opening of Esther’s book trace Esther’s unexpected ascent to the throne as queen. Immediately following that ascension, Haman appears, also as a rapidly rising star in the court of King Ahasuerus.

⁴ This, from papyrus documents discovered on the Elephantine Island, in Egypt.

⁵ So Eugene Peterson, in [Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work](#).

Enter, Haman, the Enemy

Mordecai's offensive non-action

Problems started when Mordecai - a Jew - refused to bow before Haman when he walked by. Mordecai just stood there. And Mordecai's offense was not a repetitive thing. Day after day he would not pay Haman the respect he believed he so richly deserved.

We read that Haman **[3:5] was filled with rage** toward Mordecai. Haman chose to become the enemy of Mordecai.

Haman, offended, takes action

Petitions for the extermination of a "different" people

From that initial enemy-making scene outside the king's palace, we move to a second scene showing Haman to be the enemy, not only of Mordecai, but of all the Jews.

He arranged a meeting with King Ahasuerus to present his plan. He so hated Mordecai that he wanted to exterminate all of Mordecai's brethren, that is, all the Jews.⁶

Haman promised the king lots of money - ten thousand talents of silver that would be confiscated as plunder from these people he wanted to kill - if the king would just allow him to get rid of them.

The king listened to Haman's proposal and agreed that it would be best to be rid of this pesky, "different" people and to gain their wealth.

So, [3:10]...the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite⁷, the enemy of the Jews.

⁶ All the Jews in the kingdom would have been all the Jews in the world.

⁷ Haman was an "Agagite." This likely means that he was a descendant of the Jews' enemies, the Amalekites (Exodus 17; 1 Samuel 15). Haman is another in a long line of Amalekites who hated Israel.

[11] The king said to Haman, "The silver is yours, and the people also, to do with them as you please." ...[13] Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces to destroy, to kill and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to seize their possessions as plunder.

Haman has established himself as the dread enemy of all of God's people. And he made one more "enemy move." This time it was a personal move against Mordecai.

Builds gallows

Mordecai continued to refuse to either bow down or to stand at attention when Haman walked by. So Haman arranged to have gallows built especially for hanging Mordecai, the Jew.

This idea came courtesy of Haman's wife, Zeresh, who suggested, **[5:14]... "Have a gallows fifty cubits high made and in the morning ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it; then go joyfully with the king to the banquet." And the advice pleased Haman, so he had the gallows made.**

There is no doubt about it. Haman chose the role of enemy of the Jews. And his function in the story of Esther is multi-faceted.

Haman's function in the story

1 - The conflict

First, in terms of his fit in the masterfully told narrative of Esther, Haman supplies conflict.

Every story has a plot, and every plot worth its salt has conflict. Without Haman, there is no story. Haman makes this story a story worth telling and a story worth remembering.⁸

⁸ The protagonists are Esther and Mordecai. The antagonist is Haman.

Second, Haman's presence in the story is important, theologically.

2 - Enemies are real

Up to this point, the Jews in Susa were living in the most relaxed environment they had ever known. They were at ease, protected by the government of the most powerful regime on earth.

Haman's entrance into the story says to the people of God at all times that we are not living in Eden anymore and we are not yet living in Heaven. These years on earth are the years of conflict and challenge.

As good as things can be, we should never be surprised when Haman rises up. Haman says to us that an approach to life without an appreciation for enemies is not a realistic approach to life at all.

Accepting the idea that there are enemies is not paranoia. It would be paranoid to see an enemy behind every bush. But just because some people are paranoid doesn't mean that there aren't some enemies behind some bushes. Enemies are real.

Then, given the reality of enemies, the third function of Haman is intensely practical.

3 - Be vigilant

If there will always be enemies, we must always be vigilant.

Since God's people, the Jews, faced enemies in the 5th century BC, in Persia, and since Jesus told His followers that they would have enemies, we should be on the watch for enemies today

None of us should be surprised to hear that we who follow Jesus in 2016 have enemies.

4 - _____ (wait for it)

And there is one more, a fourth function of Haman in this story. But I'm going to wait until the end to name it.

We're not at the end yet, so we'll shift to think about how we, Jesus' followers, can lead God-honoring lives in a 2016 setting where we face enemies.

We'll start out by considering one particular enemy.

Trouble Right Here in River City

About Enemies...

Last Sunday, we were all inspired by Ken and Denise Case as they told us about their upcoming change of address from San Antonio to Thailand.

It was exciting to hear of their plans and we'll want to stay up-to-speed on their progress toward becoming cross-cultural missionaries.

You'll remember that Denise said something about the intensity of "spiritual warfare" in Thailand. There are routine practices in Thailand that we would associate with what the Bible calls idolatry. Demonic activity there is rather evident. It is overt.

Can we accept that reality of spiritual warfare is just as real right here in River City as it is in Thailand? That would be the Bible's teaching. We don't live in a demon-free zone.

It may be that the enemy's presence here is more covert than overt. Or it may be that his activity is less obvious because THIS is our setting and we simply are blinded by familiarity.

It might be helpful to parallel the overt vs. covert picture of spiritual warfare with the current war we are waging against terrorism.

In warfare in past centuries, it was easy to see which soldier was on which side of the battle. Confederate soldiers wore grey and Union soldiers wore blue. Ancient Roman and ancient Persian and ancient Spartan battle garb was easy to distinguish.

Today, one of the insidious thing about fighting ISIS or Al Qaeda is that the soldiers are not easily identifiable. They blend in and don't stand out.

And we who follow Jesus do have an enemy.

Several years ago, Hadley and Lee Reed attended Northwest. They live in Ohio now. Hadley served as an elder here and was a great guy. Hadley had great insight into the Christian life and he had a great way of saying stuff.

He referred to the most obvious enemy you and I face as *"the hater of your soul."* Variouslly called in the Bible *Satan, Beelzebub* and *the tempter*, he is also **[1 Peter 5:8] your adversary, the devil.**

Remembering that *"Satan hates you and has a terrible plan for your life,"* here are a couple of "Rules of Engagement" for dealing with this enemy.

The Hater of Your Soul

Protect yourself with the Word of God (Matthew 4)

After having fasted for forty days and forty nights, Jesus was tempted by the devil. He responded by quoting Scripture.

The Lord told the enemy, **[Matthew 4:10] "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'"**

That quotation was enough to make the devil flee.

When you find yourself tempted by Satan's malicious lies or by his enticing temptations, you can do no better than to contradict them with God's Word. Scripture is the *"sword of the Spirit"* (Ephesians 6), the only offensive weapon God provides us in the fight for holiness.

You prepare for battle with your enemy when you *own* your Bible. The Bible's truths, hidden in your heart and mind, will protect you against Satan's traps and attacks.

So, make it yours. Love it and learn it and live it and let it loose!

Quickly forgive AND set aside anger (2 Cor. 2; Ephesians 4)

And speaking of traps, when the Apostle Paul was warning Christians about the tactics Satan likes to use to trip them up, he mentioned two of the enemy's favorite ploys.

First, Satan loves it when Christians don't forgive each other when they are wronged. (2 Corinthians 2:11) Second, he claps his hands and clicks his heels with glee when we hold on to anger. (Ephesians 4:27)

So, let's do an internal check right now.

- Are you withholding forgiveness from someone who has wronged you?

Scripture says a lot about the importance of forgiveness. Jesus wants each of us to become "forgiven forgivers." We offer grace because we have received grace. And if we don't forgive, we open the door to Satan's destructive ways. He will have a field day with our souls if we don't forgive.

- Are you angry with someone?

Have you been angry with him or with her for a while? Can you not seem to get past that anger? The stakes are high. If you continue to cling to that anger, you'll **"give the devil an opportunity."** (Ephesians 4) He takes advantage of angry people. He twists the angry man into violence or depression. He turns the angry woman bitter. If we stay mad, we'll go mad.

Either one of these traps - a lack of forgiveness or a chronic losing battle with anger - will give the enemy access to your soul.

So, if you can't seem to get past either of these challenges, please get help. Talk with a friend. Open up at a Care Group. Make an appointment with a trusted, Christian counselor. Give a call to the church and set up a time to get with me or Pastor Jeff or one of the Elders. It's that important.

And there is more.

Sometime soon, take a few minutes and read, slowly, through Ephesians, chapter 6. You will learn there about some of the armor you can put on that will allow you to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. Turn over to James' letter (4:7) and Peter's (5:8-9) and hear their counsel to resist the devil.

You, a child of God, have been given the indwelling Spirit of God. You can stand firm against your enemy.

And you can be certain that this enemy is active. His work against you may be overt and obvious or it may be subtle and covert. But he is against you.

His aim is to steal, kill, and destroy you (John 10:10). Your struggle, ultimately, is ***[Ephesians 6:12] not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.***

So, when this unseen enemy attacks, we attack back with the weapons God provides.

But what do we do when we are attacked by those we can see? What do we do when the one who is attacking has a human face? There are "Rules of Engagement" available to us here, as well.

Some years ago, there was an evangelical craze that involved asking, when we found ourselves in a trying situation, "*What would Jesus do?*" (WWJD)⁹

When it comes to responding to those who oppose, we can go one better. We can listen to Scripture tell us what Jesus actually did.

Those Who Oppose

Doing what Jesus did

[1 Peter 2:21-23] For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, [22] who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; [23] and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously...

Peter perfectly captures Jesus before Pilate and Herod. Jesus didn't fight back. He didn't defend Himself.

And Peter's counsel to his first-century readers, who were being opposed because of their Jesus-following ways, was to imitate Jesus. Don't fight fire with fire. Put away your sword. Fight fire with grace and love. Entrust yourself to your God.

Peter says the same thing to you and me when we are opposed for our Jesus-following ways. Entrust yourself to your God. Respond to those who oppose with grace and love.

You and I see this response to opposition on beautiful display among persecuted Christians around the world today.

I enthusiastically recommend that you read, regularly, The Voice of the Martyrs magazine. Subscribe to it.¹⁰ You will read stories of your brothers and sisters applying 1 Peter 2 in ways that will inspire you.

I also urge you to take up and read [A Tale of Three Kings](#) by Gene Edwards. Based on the life of King David, it is written to those who face opposition. It is a quick read, but one that has been a guide to me for over twenty years. I read it most every year.

⁹ This mini-movement, even for those who don't know about the book, was based on Charles Monroe Sheldon's 1896, [In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?](#).

¹⁰ Subscribe by going to www.persecution.com.

But I only recommend that you read it *if* you are currently being opposed or *if* you have been opposed in the past or *if* you think you may ever be opposed, oppressed, or persecuted for following Jesus in the future.

If that's you, Edwards will gently lead you in the path of love and grace and faith in God when you are opposed.

When someone opposes you for your Jesus-following ways, does you dirty, tries to harm you as an enemy would, or does harm you, look to Jesus. Think grace. Our world doesn't see enough amazing grace. There is no more powerful way to respond to someone who opposes you for your Jesus-following ways than by grace.

And a couple of things more...

In many of the ways that count, those who oppose have set themselves against us as enemies.

However, those who oppose us for following Jesus are precisely the people for whom Jesus gave His life on the cross. Before we came to faith, each of us was among those who oppose.

So, I would recommend that we re-define those who oppose. I urge that we think of them, not as enemies, but as victims of the enemy.

Those who oppose you are both wholly lost and deeply loved by God.

So, stay engaged with them.

Plus...

Stay engaged (1 Corinthians 5:9-10)

[1 Cor. 5:9] I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; [10] I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world.

The Bible assumes that Christians will stay engaged with people who aren't. Jesus was constantly befriending those who were lost and who lived in the irreligious world.

You and I are called to follow His lead by engaging with those delightful people who have yet to discover that LIFE is found in Jesus.

He died for them. The least we can do is hang with them.

Second - and this will surprise no one - we are called to pray.

PRAY! (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)

[2 Cor. 10:3] For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, [4] for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. [5] We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ

Those we can see who oppose, we lovingly and graciously engage. We fight unseen enemies tooth and nail. And our best fighting is done in prayer. On our knees.

God rules over the realm of the spirit and God is sovereign over human hearts. So we pray that He will do what only He can do. We pray that He will break down strongholds of opposition, soften hearts, open doors.

In our prayers we fight WITH Satan and we fight FOR the souls of those who are the victims of our enemy.

And finally, think small. Think very small.

Think small (1 Peter 3:15)

[1 Peter 3:15] but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to EVERYONE who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence...

It is popular to think big. Grandiosity is in. Bass Pro Shop is two hundred thousand square feet of air conditioned space. Costco and Sam's Club and the H-E-B at 1604 and Bandera are all BIG stores.

The Democrat and Republican National conventions are going to be BIG. (some would say, "huge")

But, God's ways are not man's ways. And throughout history, rarely has He worked through the extravaganza.

With rare exceptions, God works through the close encounter, the hidden, the small and unseen persevering effort.

Jesus' favorite symbols for the growth of God's kingdom were leaven and the mustard seed - very small things that, over time, have impact far beyond what their size.

Those who oppose you for your Jesus-following will best be won by the loving influence of one friend. And that friend may well be you.

It staggers the imagination to think what good we could do if each of us simply and genuinely loved someone we know who does not go to church, disagrees with the Bible's teaching, and does not believe in Jesus.

Conclusion:

Earlier, I listed three functions of Haman in Esther's story. 1. He provides the conflict. 2. He assures us that enemies are real. 3. He warns us to be vigilant.

I told you that there was a fourth, and here it is.

4. With God, ours is the final victory.

Haman's presence in Esther's story assures us of God's final victory and of the final victory of the people of God.

Haman's evil plot to exterminate the Jews was defeated and he was hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. His end pictures the end of God's enemy.

God's people have had enemies from the very beginning. Opposition to God and His plan began in Genesis and won't end until Revelation. Jesus had enemies. We have enemies. Some we can't see and some we can.

But in the end, God wins. At the end of time, the enemy will be vanquished.

So, to those who have faced opposition for following Jesus, are facing it now or will ever face it, you need to hear this.

This life is not the end and this world is not Heaven. Rewards from God for faithfulness are not handed out at age 25 or 50 or 75. Jesus said that we would face tribulation in this world. So we do.

But our God wins. And our God will see to it that we share in His victory over the enemy. The promise is given in graphic terms near the end of Paul's letter to the Romans.

[Romans 16:20] The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

One day we will participate in the victory of the God of peace. One day we will participate in the defeat of the enemy.

And until that day comes we will fight with the weapons God supplies.

We will fight against our unseen enemy with prayer and holiness. And we will fight for those who oppose with prayer, loving engagement and the gift of grace, grace, grace.