

**SERMON TITLE:** “Things Are Not as They Seem”

**TEXT:** Esther 5:1-14

**PREACHED AT:** Killarney Park Church, Vancouver, BC

**BY:** Ryan Dueck/Ken Peters

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### **Life is Difficult – Another Story**

*Ryan* – Several weeks ago, on Monday October 2, a dairy truck driver from Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania walked into a one room Amish schoolhouse and where he proceeded to kill four and wound seven young girls before turning his gun upon himself and committing suicide. According to the *New York Times*, Charles Roberts had been nursing a 20-year-old grudge against women, and was *deeply* upset with God and life in general. The Amish schoolgirls who paid the ultimate price to satisfy this anger seem to have been chosen for no other reason than their geographic proximity to Roberts. The story is truly horrific – a deeply disturbing and graphic example of the shocking evil that human beings are capable of.

Unimaginably, the story gets worse. The actions of Charles Roberts do not seem to have been the result of a sudden loss of sanity, a crime of passion, or an instance of uncontrollable rage. He had quite obviously been carefully planning his actions for quite some time. His attention to detail and the ruthless and systematic manner in which he executed his plan upon innocent, unsuspecting children make us *shudder in revulsion*.

*Ken* - Surely, only a monster could perpetrate a crime such as this.

*Ryan* - But this does not appear to be the case. Roberts was an ordinary man who worked hard to support his family. He drove his kids to soccer practices and birthday parties, and “never once refused to help change a diaper.” (NYT) He had no criminal record and no history of psychiatric illness. In short, there was nothing obvious which could possibly lead one to suspect that behind the veil of ordinary appearances lurked unspeakable evil.

*Ken* - Stories like this remind us that life is difficult. When we can agree on this most foundational truth, only then can we begin to talk with truth about what faith in Jesus Christ means. Christian faith is an acceptance of life’s struggles infused with hope that the eternal life Jesus promised is not confined to heaven but reaches back and provides meaning in our lives here and now. Followers of Jesus believe in God’s love. Followers of Jesus believe in God’s goodness, his blessing, glory and purpose in this world even when He appears invisible, when the world never speaks His name: when God is never referred to. Especially in times of trouble and darkness, followers of Jesus continue to follow Jesus.

### **Smoke and Mirrors in the Book of Esther**

Followers of Jesus believe that things are not always as they seem. Followers of Jesus remind themselves of this when they read the Bible and come across passages like Esther chapter five. There’s something in the works – we don’t know what – but as our passage ends Haman is in good spirits. That’s not a good sign. He’s pleased at the ominous sound of hammers and saws that build the gallows for Mordecai. He’s pleased because the edict, which will result in the destruction of the Jews, is still very much in place. He’s pleased because he’s experiencing the good favour of the King and the 1<sup>st</sup> lady, Queen Esther. He’s pleased because his family supports him in his climb to political greatness. The story leads us to believe evil has the upper hand.

## **Esther**

*Ryan* - But are things the way they actually appear?

The characters in chapter five are played off against one another, and in so doing the author subtly leads us to draw some obvious and not so obvious conclusions. The first character introduced is the beautiful Queen Esther. She's a charming, flirtatious: a kind and caring host. But the beauty given to her by God, the charm taught to her by the palace she now uses as weapons in warfare. She's not just setting the stage to appeal to the king "to beg for mercy for her people." She is positioning herself to expose Haman as the evil culprit that he is. Esther's no longer just the beauty queen, she's no longer innocent. Things are not as they seem.

## **Zeresh**

At the other end of the chapter we have the other wife, Zeresh, the supportive spouse of Haman. She's concerned with his career and service to the Empire. She's empathetic and caring. Given what she knows and believes, she provides good counsel that soothes her husband's troubles and anxieties. Unlike Esther, Zeresh operates in the open. She does not conceal any thought. She's only providing appropriate domestic support under the circumstances – but as we're coming to realize – things are not always what they seem. Zeresh represents the customary manner in which raw power deals with "problems" like Mordecai: he must first be publicly humiliated, and then eliminated.

## **Xerxes**

*Ken* - Neatly folded on the inside of each of these very different women are two very different men. The first is Xerxes who was first introduced to us in the initial chapters as a ruthless monarch. Xerxes is, as usual, intoxicated with his power, and is carelessly tossing about promises (5:3) – up to half of his kingdom. Upon Esther's intrusion however we discover Xerxes has become a gracious, generous and most importantly, an innocent character.

As we ponder Xerxes' innocence in all the scheming that swirls about him, we realize that knowledge of goings-on and happenings is paramount in the development of the story. Until Xerxes knows the severe reach of the Haman's "Final Solution", Xerxes will not act. He becomes instead a mere instrumental character – that is, he becomes the means by which other people accomplish their goals. This is not what we expect as we've come to know the Emperor – things are not as they seem.

## **Mordecai**

*Ryan* - Mordecai on the other hand, is welcomed back into the story as perhaps the only one who comprehends the scope of possibilities. However, in this chapter, the narrator provides him no voice; he has no need to speak. Mordecai's power lies not in his *words* but in his *posture* toward Haman at the King's gate. In commentator Joyce Baldwin's words, Mordecai is an object of "studied indifference to Haman's pre-eminence." In the space of a single glance – *just a single glance* - his very presence turns Haman's joy to burning hatred. Who would have predicted that a paltry, seemingly insignificant figure like Mordecai could so destabilize a mighty ruler like Haman?

But even Mordecai does not know everything. Unwittingly, his principled approach to Haman sets in motion the chain of events that will lead to his public execution. If we were to have only observed their silent exchange at the gate, the gravity and nuance of what was being communicated would have eluded us. Thanks to the narrator we once again conclude that things are certainly not what they seem.

## **Haman**

*Ken* - Haman is two-faced: while externally he exudes a controlled civility, underneath the narrator allows us to see uncontrollable rage and selfishness – much the same as Charles Roberts in the opening story. It

appears in the Esther story that no one is who they appear to be. The question for us is – are we any different?

## God

Ryan - Underneath all the characters and drama of chapter five lies an important truth: With *our* God, things are frequently not as they seem. *Israel* knew that God was accustomed to working in less than obvious ways. What hope had Israel had in living under the oppression of Egypt; what hope existed as they saw Pharaoh's chariots bear down upon the Red Sea; what hope did they have of conquering the Canaanites and occupying the promised land; what hope did they experience in being rescued from their exile in Babylon, and now how thin did their hope appear in the face of Haman's genocide? Israel was accustomed to facing situations that *appeared* hopeless... But if there was one thing that Israel knew, or *ought* to have known, it was that with Yahweh, things are often not as they seem.

## Reclaiming the Story of Esther for Our Present

Ken - Despite the expressions of evil in this world, followers of Jesus dare to hope God will act, bringing good out of evil, redeeming time and history for his own purposes. Oh we can catalogue evil after evil: Haman, Charles Roberts, Kimveer Gill – the assassin at Montreal's Dawson College, or Marc Lepine (who in 1989 committed the massacre at the U. of Montreal's Ecole Polytechnique. There is no shortage of evil, suffering and pain this world experiences that threaten belief in the goodness and love of God. Despite such evil manifestations, followers of Jesus believe God's salvation constantly breaks through moment-to-moment, vindicating the righteous and judging those who are bent on evil.

Followers of Jesus also realize God's judgment can be painfully late in coming, if it comes at all within our lifetime. Followers of Jesus are realists. Life is difficult. Bullying at school is real. Drug addiction is real. Parenting crises are real. But pain, suffering, addiction will not be the last word. The story of Jesus does not stop on the cross of Calvary. Followers of Jesus look beyond the empty tomb of Easter morning to that day when all humanity will finally see God's redemption of the world through Jesus Christ. All appearances and shades of reality will be cast aside on that day so that everyone may see and comprehend reality for what it is.

## Application –

Ryan - How will we live differently because of God's greater reality? As one example let's go back to Nickel Mines Pennsylvania where Charles Roberts stole from that Amish community the lives of five precious young girls. Still reeling from this indescribable loss, these Amish followers of Jesus, committed to forgiveness and peace, reached out to Marie Roberts, the murderer's wife, and her three children. "They have invited her to please stay, in fact to come and mourn together." (<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2006/10/lessons-from-amish-power-of-pacifism.html>). Because our Amish brothers and sisters believed that our God is a redemptive God who brings good out of evil, they could participate as agents of that goodness rather than contribute to yet more evil by hardening their hearts and lashing out in unforgiveness.

Because of God's greater reality, followers of Jesus can choose to have a longer view of suffering – a calm more patient demeanor that helps us to trust more deeply in God's ways (Gen. 45; Isa. 55). Our Amish brothers and sisters in Jesus choose to believe that it is the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers who are blessed, and who represent the way things "really are" and the way things will one day be. The awe and virtual reverence with which observers of this awful tragedy have viewed the heart-felt forgiveness of these Amish followers of Christ bears witness to the power of God's greater reality that things truly are not as they seem.

Ken - It is because of our firm belief that God will save, that followers of Jesus are released from or at least less inclined to the natural tendency of always having to have complete control over our own affairs. At the same time, paradoxically because we can “rest” and trust in God’s ways we can also be emboldened to act for Christ’s sake in defiance of the world’s attempts to paralyze God’s people and immobilize the advance of the gospel. When the Amish embraced Charles Roberts’ widow, it caused Witherington to write,

*Make no mistake. Revenge and retaliation come naturally to fallen human beings. Forgiveness, however, comes from God. It is supernatural and it transforms both the forgiver and the forgiven.*

Ryan - In defiance of what the world would have us believe, God’s people have always been confronted with situations that *appear* hopeless and irredeemable. But the Amish teach us different; Esther and Mordecai teach us different. Our God is unmoved in the advance of his Kingdom. And we – his church – are called to represent the *true* nature of reality to a hurting world, groaning under the weight of sin. Things are not as they seem... Do we truly believe this? Do our lives bear witness to this hope? Do our lives teach those around us something truly different? Something life-giving and redemptive? Do our lives point to the glorious unseen reality of God’s kingdom?

Thanks be to God that things are not as they seem.