

For Such a Time as This
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Pound Ridge Community Church
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 30, 2018
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

Probably some of you found the reading from the Old Testament a little hard to follow today. It was a few verses from the Old Testament book of Esther, sort of the beginning of the middle of the end of the story. And if you are not acquainted with the story of Esther, it probably made no sense to you at all.

The book of Esther is something of an oddity in the Hebrew Bible. It is the only book that says nothing at all about the Jewish law. It says nothing at all about prayer, and nothing at all about God. It reads like a novel, full of sex, scheming, political intrigue, and violence. But there are important lessons to be gleaned from Esther, and I thought we could use this time this morning to hear the story in its entirety and explore it a little.

The story takes place in the city of Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. Most scholars don't think the events in Esther actually took place, but the context is historical. Xerxes I was the king of Persia from 485 to 465 BC. There were many Jewish people living in the kingdom at that time, and how they came to be living there is also a matter of history. Some 100 years earlier, the Babylonians had conquered the Jewish people brought of them to the area to live in exile. When the Persians subsequently conquered the Babylonian Empire, the Jewish people were permitted to return to Israel, but many of them remained.

In addition to Xerxes, the main characters are a Jew, Mordecai, and his cousin Esther. Esther was a lovely young woman raised by Mordecai, who had taken her into his house when her parents died. The villain is one of Xerxes' ministers, Haman. Haman is a cruel and vain man who is hungry for wealth and power.

The story begins with a party – a really big party. In the third year of his reign, Xerxes entertained all the nobles and princes from Persia, showing off all his wealth and possessions for a full 180 days. He finished it off with a party that went on non-stop for 7 days. The wine flowed freely. While all this was going on, Xerxes' queen, Vashti, was having her own party entertaining the nobles' wives.

On the seventh day of heavy drinking, Xerxes realizes that the one beautiful possession he has not adequately shown off for his guests is his queen. He issues a command to his eunuchs to, "...bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at." (Esther 1:11) But his queen says she won't come.

We don't really know why. One possible reason is the speculation of Jewish scholars who have studied the text and say that what Xerxes wanted was for the queen to appear wearing "her royal crown" – and nothing else. And Vashti was having none of that. And her refusing a royal order is a really big deal.

Xerxes and his advisors realize that if the queen is permitted to refuse his request, it won't be long before everyone in the kingdom will know that she has defied him. This will not only make Xerxes look bad, but will cause women all over the kingdom to begin to refuse to do what their husbands tell them. They decide that Vashti has to be removed as queen.

The king and his advisors decide that all the fairest virgins in the kingdom should be invited to the palace so that the king can choose a new queen. Esther is among those who go to the palace, and she quickly establishes herself as the king's favorite. Esther becomes the new queen, but at Mordecai's insistence, she keeps secret the fact that she is Jewish.

Mordecai sat daily out by the palace gate, where Esther would visit him to receive his advice and counsel about fulfilling the role of queen. While Mordecai he was there one day, he overheard a plot to kill Xerxes, and reported it to Esther. She tells the king about it, the plot is foiled, and the perpetrators are executed. This puts Mordecai in Xerxes' good graces, and solidifies Esther's relationship with the king.

Meanwhile, the king decides to elevate Haman to a place of power above all his other ministers. The king orders that everyone should acknowledge Haman's new power and position by kneeling whenever they encounter him. But one day in front of the palace gate, Mordecai earns Haman's wrath by refusing to kneel. And when Haman discovers that Mordecai is Jewish, Haman decides that he will find a way to kill Mordecai, and all the Jews as well. Haman goes to Xerxes and tells him that there are certain people in his kingdom with different customs who do not obey the king's laws. Haman says he would like to get rid of them. Without even asking who they are, Xerxes gives Haman permission to issue an edict in the king's name ordering that they be annihilated.

When Mordecai hears that his people have been given a death sentence, he gets word to Esther, asking her to intercede with Xerxes. Esther initially is very hesitant. She explains that even though she is the queen, she is really without power. The law says that for anyone, even the queen, who approaches the king without being summoned by him the penalty is death. She is almost certainly afraid of how the king will react when he finds that she has kept from him the fact that she is Jewish. She knows that Xerxes has shown himself to have a "short fuse."

But Esther gets her chance, and finds her courage, one day when the king summons her and asks her what she would like him to give her. She has already decided what she will do, and she asks the king to invite Haman for dinner, and there she will tell the king what her request is. Haman is, of course, delighted to

be invited to dinner with the king and queen, and he boasts about it to his friends. Little does he know that is where Esther intends to expose his plans. That's the point at which we pick up today's reading. Xerxes is incensed to find out what Haman has done, and he orders Haman hanged on the very same gallows that Haman had erected to hang Mordecai.

But if that ending isn't bloodthirsty enough for you, there's more to the story. They now must do something to save all the Jewish people in the kingdom, because before his hanging, Haman had already given the order that they be wiped out. But it's not as simple as issuing a new order. The law of Persia said that an edict issued with the king's seal can never be revoked, even by the king himself. So, a new edict is issued giving the Jewish people permission to destroy all the people who Haman had ordered to destroy them. That, the Jewish people do with relish, killing thousands of their old enemies.

So that's the story of Esther. It is an interesting and even funny story to read, and if you've never read it yourself, I encourage you to do it. You can easily do it in a half hour. As you heard in the end of what Nancy read today, the story provides the justification for two days of celebration that Jewish people still hold every year in March, called Purim. But beyond that, we might wonder what this story is even doing in the Bible. What is the point? Is it that it's okay to hide who we really are to get what we want, as Esther did? Is it that it's okay to send someone to the gallows if that was what they intended to do to us? Is it there to be a justification for slaughtering people who hate us?

It's a troubling story, and its inclusion in the Bible is perhaps made more troubling by the fact that it probably didn't even happen – that there likely wasn't really an Esther, or a Mordecai, or a Haman. But you know, Jesus taught his disciples repeatedly with stories that didn't really happen. We call them parables. And we can look for Jesus' lesson without ever wondering if there ever really was a sower, or a shepherd looking for his lost sheep, or a loving father and a prodigal son. Some of the images in Jesus' parables are pretty troubling, too. Jesus told us in today's gospel lesson that if our eye causes us to sin, we should pluck it out! But we know that Jesus didn't intend his parables to tell us, literally, how to behave. He intended them to give us a broader message.

And that's what I think the story of Esther really is – a parable. So, what is the point of this parable? Strangely enough, I think the message is to be found in something that's not ostensibly there. The message is in God's apparent absence from the story. God is not seen or even referred to in the story. God is not portrayed as working behind the scenes, giving orders through prophets, or making miracles as in most other stories in the Old Testament. God's name doesn't even appear in the story. But just as in our lives, when God doesn't seem to be there, that may be the time when God is most active. But God is working through us. And those are the times that we must tune our senses to see what God is doing.

God is at work in the woman Esther. Esther as a character exhibits extraordinary personal growth. She begins as a person who is getting by on her looks and not much else that we can tell. She is uncertain and, at first, needs the constant guidance of Mordecai. Esther finally acts on her own, and when she does, she executes a subtle plan that requires maturity, courage and patience. Even though she didn't think she was ready, didn't have the skill, didn't have the power, she put her life on the line for others. But the most important thing to notice is this: deliverance comes to Esther and her people when she finally decides to publicly claim her Jewish identity. She abandons the identity the world had given her – servant of the king – and adopts her true identity as a servant of God.

God works through Mordecai in this story, too. In fact, I think the real meaning of this story is found in something Mordecai says. It's actually in a section of the story that we didn't read today. Esther has given Mordecai all the very valid reasons why she should not risk approaching King Xerxes to try to save the Jewish people. Mordecai says that maybe she's right. If she doesn't act, someone else might. Something could happen to save the Jewish people. But, he adds, "...who knows but that you have come to [your] royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

Have you ever had that kind of experience? What I mean is, have you ever felt like you were led into a particular situation because God had something in mind for you to do there? Have you ever had the feeling that you suddenly understood what that was? I had a friend in seminary who gave some really good insight into those situations. He said that in new and uncertain situations in his life, it was easy for him to pick out the voice of God. God's was usually the voice telling him to do something that made him uncomfortable.

Most of us will never be called upon to take action in a situation that is literally life-or-death. But a friend might call needing care and support that we can give them. A person who is hungry might approach you in the street. Maybe we will see work that needs to be done that nobody else seems to want to do, or encounter someone in need of our love and forgiveness when we really aren't feeling particularly loving or forgiving. Perhaps there is an untruth that needs to be called out, or an injustice that needs to have a light shone on it. Maybe when we're faced with those situations, we don't feel we have the time, or the skills, or the piety, or the power, the energy or the patience. Maybe we're concerned what others might think of us, or what others might do to us. But maybe God has brought us to where we are for just such a time.

God is at work. When times are good, when times are not-so-good, when times are chaotic. God is making God's plan happen, through us. And the questions we should be asking ourselves are always the same. Why has God brought us here, now? And how has God prepared us for service in a time exactly like this one?