

Esther: Hero of Wisdom and Courage

Esther 4:8-14

(This sermon is dedicated to the extraordinary leadership of women these past two years at all levels of government, local, state, national and around the world.)

The Book of Esther has not always been popular in Christian scholarly circles. It's a bit racy and more than a bit violent. But the big reason is that God's name is not mentioned one time in the book. The King's name 190 times; God's zero.

But the Unseen hand of God is everywhere, principally through the courage and wisdom of Esther and her foster-father Mordecai. The book is so important to the Jews that it is featured and read every year at the festival of Purim, one of the five great Jewish festivals. You will see why.

At the festival of Purim the whole story is read. Every time the evil villain Haman's name is read the children are given the role of hissing and jeering the name *Haman, Haman!* The book is like a grand opera, or an early black and white movie melodrama.

I

Scene One: Queen Vashti Banished

The opening scene is a banquet. (There are banquets throughout.) King Ahasuerus threw a feast for his officials in the palace of Susa. It lasted 180 days. The king fancied parties, especially if the wine was flowing. Then there was a following party for all the citizens of Susa which lasted seven days. All the men were in one great hall, a kind of stag party, and all the women were in another hall with Queen Vashti.

On the 7th day when the king was “merry with wine” (read, “sloshed”) he sent for Queen Vashti to come parade her queenly beauty before the men. She was to wear her crown. That was probably *all* she was to wear. Vashti refused! She refused to be sexually exploited, as women through the centuries have been. She would have none of it.

The king exploded in anger. He went to his chamberlain, his chief advisor, and asked what he should do. The chamberlain said that Queen Vashti had set a terrible example for the wives and women in the kingdom. If a queen could refuse a king, the *whole social fabric would unravel!* So he advised the King to banish her as queen. The advice “pleased” the king, and Vashti was banished.

The chamberlain had another idea that “pleased the king.” There would be throughout the nation a “Great Queen Hunt.” The finalists would be brought to Susa, given a year’s beauty treatment at the king’s royal spa, then presented to the king for his choice to be the new queen.

II Scene Two: The Great Queen Hunt.

Now Mordecai enters the stage. He had become the foster-father to a young orphan named Esther. He brought her up as his own daughter and raised her in the Hebrew faith.

When the finalists were assembled, Esther was one of the ones chose. Mordecai went to visit her at the king’s spa daily to see how she was doing. The list of finalists was whittled down to seven, and when Esther appeared before the king the contest was over. Esther would be his queen, and he called for a feast called The Queen’s Feast. Mordecai privately counseled Esther not to reveal here Jewishness to the king, a most wise decision, as we shall see.

Mordecai had an official position at the King’s Gate. One day he overheard a plot to overthrow the king led by two of the king’s inner circle. Mordecai told Esther of the plot who then told the king. The plot was foiled, the two leaders were hanged and all this was recorded in the king’s chronical—including Mordecai’s role in reporting the insurrection afoot.

III Scene Three: An Obscene Decree

After the palace shake-up the king raised up a man named Haman to be his chief prince. It was a horrendous choice.

Haman asked the king to set up a law that everyone in the kingdom had to bow to him as he passed. Mordecai refused to do so. His Hebrew faith forbade him to bow to anyone but God. When Haman saw that Mordecai would not bow to him, he flew into a fury. His first thought was to have Mordecai killed. Then he had another more insidious thought. Why not kill *all* the Jews in the kingdom!? *Evil always overreaches.* And if unopposed, holocausts happen.

Haman went to the king with his evil plan. With a voice full of racist innuendo and malice he appealed to the king's paranoia:

There is a certain people scattered throughout the kingdom. Their laws and customs are different from everybody else's. They are dangerous to the kingdom. It does not profit the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king let us issue a decree to destroy them all. We can offer 10,000 talents to those who will carry out the extermination of the Jews.

The idea did please the paranoid and dim-witted king. He said the royal treasury is yours, and he gave his signet ring to Haman to execute the edict. "Do with them what you want."

The day of execution was set. That date the Jews call Purim. The decree went out—hear the words—to “destroy, kill and annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children.”

And here is how this part of the story ends: “The king and Haman sat down to drink, and the citizens of Susa were struck dumb.” They knew in their bones something was wrong.

We see why this story is important to the Jews who have lived this kind of horror over and over again.

It should be just as important to Christians too, we who should be defenders of our Jewish siblings, but who have too often have been on the side of the persecutors. This story is also a warning against the power of the state in all times to persecute people on the basis of race and religion.

IV Scene Four: The Young Queen’s Crisis.

When Mordecai heard of the evil decree, he tore his clothes, put on sack-cloth and ashes as a public act of mourning and went crying out through the streets. Esther’s maid came to her and told her about what her foster-father was doing. She had not heard of the decree. This may seem strange, but the queen did not rule. She was more like the most favored of the king’s harem.

Esther tried to persuade Mordecai to stop and sent him a new set of clothes to wear instead of the sack-cloth and ashes. He refused the clothes. He sent her a copy of the decree and begged her to intervene on behalf of her people.

Esther sent her response: Anyone entering the king's chamber uninvited can be put to death. I have not been invited into his chamber for 30 days.

Mordecai sent back his forceful reply: "Do not think you shall escape in the king's palace any better than the rest of your people." And then he delivered the most famous words from the book:

Who knows? Perhaps you have come into the kingdom for such a time as this!

Meaning, Come into your royal position for such a time as this!

To this point in the story, Esther has been distinguished only by her beauty. Will she be more than just beautiful? Mordecai had raised her in the Hebrew faith with all its moral virtues—things like courage, wisdom, justice and compassion. Would she act on any of these?

Esther said yes. She had come to the kingdom for such a time as this! She asked Mordecai to ask all her people to fast and pray, and she would do so herself. "I will go to the king's chamber. If I perish, I perish." Someone has said: Courage is fear that has said its prayers.

As she approached the king's chamber the king welcomed her into his presence. Her life was spared, but there was more for her to do, again at the risk of her own life.

The king happy to see her said, "Whatever you request I will grant up to half of my kingdom.

Esther's strategic plan to save her people was now set in motion. She delayed her request and said she would make it the next day at dinner and to invite Haman to be there with them. Haman was thrilled to be asked to such an auspicious occasion, the King and Queen and I! But again Esther delayed her request. She would do so at their next dinner together.

Haman left feeling pretty full of himself. But then he saw the insolent Mordecai again refusing to bow down to him. He flew into a rage, went home and talked with his wife about the insult, and they concocted a plan with her to have Mordecai hanged in the center of the city.

The gallows was built, 50 cubits high! Noah's ark was only 30 cubits high! It was like putting an electric chair atop our County Courthouse.

Scene V: The Tables Turned.

That night the king had trouble getting to sleep. He asked a servant to come read the king's chronicles to help him get to sleep. (Even better than a sermon!)

As the servant read the part about the plot to overthrow him he discovered that Mordecai had been the one to report the plot to overthrow him.

The next day, he called Haman in. He asked Haman what should be done for a man whom the king wishes to honor. Haman, of course thought the king was talking about *him*! (You're so vain you probably think this parade is about you!)

Haman answered, put the King's robe on him and have a parade through all the streets of the city to honor him!

The king said, "Very good. Now go put the king's robe on Mordecai!"
Mordecai?! Haman was *mortified*!

Now came the last dinner of the three, the king, queen and Haman. Esther had shrewdly delayed her request. Now was the time, and now she for the first time revealed her identity as a Jew.

"If I have found favor in your sight", she said, "then let my life be given to me and to the lives of my people." The king dim-wittedly had forgotten about the decree he signed to kill all the Jews. "Who would presume to do such a thing?", he asked. Esther said, "He is seated across the table from you. He is Haman!"

And here's how the story ends. Haman is hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai, and Mordecai is given the king's parade that Haman thought

was going to be for him! King Ahasuerus could not undo the decree he had signed, but he gave the Jews the right to self-defense. When the day of extermination came, the Jews turned back the mercenaries and were saved.

Human evil in history is not always so easily overcome, but God's Unseen Hand is at work, sometimes through people like us. Our faith sings, "Though the wrong seems oft so strong God is the ruler yet!"

Here are some take-aways for me as I've preached Esther again:

-Human evil is real, and we see it everywhere: Holocausts, gulags, the slavery of an entire race for 250 years, the demonization of immigrants, the evil of systemic racism built into our institutions and laws. But God's Unseen Hand is still at work.

- And this, God needs our human hands to resist evil and defeat it. As Edmund Burke said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Eli Wiesel the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winner has said:

We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

-There is an Esther and a Mordecai in all of us. Their wisdom and courage can be ours for those are the gifts of the Spirit of God within us. God works in surprising ways through surprising people.

One of the most beloved hymns of the 20th century was written by Harry Emerson Fosdick in the years following World War One.

God of grace and God of glory,
on thy people pour thy power;
crown the ancient church's story;
bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour,
for the facing of this hour.

Lo! the hosts of evil round us,
scorn thy Christ, assail his ways!
From the fears that long have bound us,
free our hearts to love and praise.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the living of these days,
for the living of these days.

Heal your children's warring madness,
bend our pride to your control;
shame our wanton, selfish gladness,
rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
lest we miss thy kingdom's goal,
lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.

Amen

Set our feet on lofty places;
gird our lives that they may be
armoured with all Christlike graces,
pledged to set all captives free.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,

that we fail not them nor thee,
that we fail not them nor thee!

Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore;
let the search for thy salvation
be our glory evermore.

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
serving thee whom we adore,
serving thee whom we adore.