

HOW TO DEFEAT THE ENEMY

Esther 4: 1-17 with Intro

What is the greatest threat to our world today?... While we can point to people, there is also a philosophy behind the people. Let me name it by a familiar term: Toxic Masculinity. And while certain persons immediately come to mind when we think of Toxic Masculinity – Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Benjamin Netanyahu to name the most obvious, the swing to the political right in Europe among other places suggests toxic masculinity is not just about those who identify as men. Rather, it is a way of thinking and behaving that can sometimes include women too.

OK preacher, so tell us, how would we identify the toxic masculine mindset. Well, one word we often hear a lot of is: narcissism. Here's the Mayo Clinic definition: Narcissism is a personality disorder "in which people have an unreasonably high sense of their own importance. They need and seek too much attention and want people to admire them. People with this disorder may lack the ability to understand or care about the feelings of others. But behind the mask of extreme confidence, they are not sure of their self-worth and are easily upset by the slightest criticism." Wow! Isn't this the perfect description of Donald Trump!

OK, but let's expand this a little more, shall we. I would argue that the toxic masculine mindset which is caught up in narcissistic selfishness, unable to see others and their needs, is also constantly wanting more for itself. The word for this is: greed. I can never have enough. You exist to give to me and if you won't give to me I will take it and use whatever means I must to take it. So then, there's selfishness, greed, and let's add one more characteristic. Others become a threat to me, a threat I must overcome, dominate, control or erase. And so, I create a me versus you, us versus them mindset. And who are they and them? They are a different race. They are a different gender. They are a different sexuality or gender expression. They are immigrants and refugees. We have the privilege, the power, the wealth and the comforts we have because we are superior and we have earned them. Let's take what belongs to us and use whatever means we must to secure and establish our rightful dominance. This is the toxic masculine mindset.

OK, I'm sure many of you here recognize this kind of thinking, and many of you have seen it not just in political and corporate leaders. No. You see it sometimes with men in their families or anyone who is trying to control a person or a relationship. It is a huge problem in our world and it creates victims the world over. When others are seen as a threat to us we can try to run away. Or else, we can dominate and control them so that they no longer threaten us. In the process we cause great harm to them and create an environment where fear and mistrust rule. It's about dominating and controlling others with whatever means necessary.

OK, so how do we defeat the toxic masculine enemy not only out there, but in our lives too, around us and sometimes creeping into our mindsets, especially when we feel threatened? Enter the biblical book and story that is Esther. While Esther is a stand alone story, it is also reflective of the whole biblical narrative. The God of the Hebrews is also the God of all of us. And this God is a God who stands against the great enemy to our planet: the toxic masculine mindset. How do we fight and defeat such an enemy? Let's review the story of Esther.

1) And let's begin by identifying the toxic masculine. In this story there is a great emperor king by the name: Ahasuerus. Later, he also names a second in command by the name: Haman. Both Ahasuerus and Haman represent the toxic masculine to a T. What they care about is power and glory for themselves. Other people, the earth and all life in it are there to showcase their power and glory. They also love to party and celebrate so they can show off their achievements. Who is more powerful and glorious than them? Nobody! They party, get drunk and tell stories all with a single purpose – “Look at me” they say. Others exist only to serve and celebrate them.

2) OK, but what happens when the toxic masculine get's threatened? How do they perceive they are threatened? Anything and anyone that does not obey their wants and needs, anything and anyone that is perceived to undermine their power, glory, control and domination, anything and anyone like this becomes a threat. They live by dominating and controlling the world around them so that all power and glory shines on them. Threaten that and you are enemy number one.

OK, so who is such an enemy in the story of Esther and how are they to be dealt with? Enemies are other men also wanting your power and glory for themselves. In fact, Haman who is number two to the king wants what the king has but the king is too drunk with his own power and glory to see that. But also, those you seek to dominate and control can become your enemy because the only reason they obey you and serve your glory is because they are threatened and forced to do so. What happens if they say: “No”? The two groups who are singled out in the story of Esther are women and a marginalized people within the empire called Jews. Race and gender are threats to the toxic masculine. How does this come out in the story?

After lots of partying over many days, the king wants to show another side of his power and glory. He has the most beautiful woman in the world as his queen, and he wants to show her off to all his guests. It's not her intelligence he wants to show off and its not her beautiful character he wants to publicly recognize. No. Rather like a typical toxic masculine it is her physical beauty, her body, her flesh, he wants to show off. All people are possessions and that is especially the case for the women of powerful men. They are treasure like gold and silver. And so, the king calls his great queen: Vashti is her name, to come and do a few twirls for all the great men of the kingdom to see how awesome he is for possessing her.

Well, but here's where the story begins to get really interesting. Queen Vashti says: "No!" She will not come and she will not be paraded around for drunk men to look her over. She will not be a spectacle for anyone. Wow! Power to Vashti and all women who follow her lead!... OK, but before we hear what happens to Vashti and any woman who would dare say "no!", let's skip over to the marginalized people: the Jews.

If the great King Ahasuerus is rebuffed by a woman representing all women, his second in command, Haman, is rebuffed by the Jew Mordecai who comes to represent not only all Jews, but all marginalized races within the empire. Haman is honoured as second in command and he comes up with a means for people to glorify him. Every time he passes by a crowd in public people are supposed to bow down before him in respect. Wow! But one man, Mordecai, says: "No." Why does he do it? The story doesn't say. But Mordecai refuses to bow down. It's not about disrespecting Haman. It's about self-respect. Mordecai may be part of an enslaved people – the Jews, but he is no slave in spirit. Vashti may be a woman in a highly toxic masculine sexist world, but she will not be submissive to any man anymore.

3) But what happens in the face of such resistance? The story tells us that terrible things happen and promise to happen. Vashti is removed as queen and a ruthless campaign begins to replace her whereby the king's men round up all young women, a thousand of them, to be tested by the king (you can imagine what that means) with one being chosen to serve as the next queen and the rest of these young, violated women discarded into the king's harem. One woman says no and a thousand women are victimized.

In the case of Mordecai the Jew, Haman is so incensed that one man refuses to bow down before him that he convinces the king to issue a decree for the genocidal slaughter of all Jews in the empire with all their property confiscated for the king's treasury. That's how you remind people who has the power and how they should think twice before they challenge it. This is how the toxic masculine claims power and glory. Survival of the fittest! All resistance is crushed!

But the story of Esther is about a different kind of power and glory. And to get to that, the stage is set to introduce the main character and saviour within the empire: a woman and a Jew named Esther. So how does Esther enter the story?

4) Esther is a young, orphaned Jewish girl who is adopted by her elder cousin Mordecai. Mordecai raises her and teaches her how to claim her full personhood and her racial culture. But he also teaches her that in a world of toxic masculinity where she is threatened as a woman and a Jew, she must be smart and careful in order to survive. Unfortunately, though, Mordecai cannot protect Esther from being rounded up with all other younger women to be tested by the king. But he gives her important advice. Keep your racial background hidden dear

Esther. It is dangerous to be a Jew. And play the game, dear Esther. You are a beautiful young woman, be smart and careful.

So, what happens? Esther becomes a favourite of the king's servants and she is chosen to become the new queen. Is this the beginning of the end of all her fears for her safety, or does it put her in the right place at the right time to undermine the toxic masculine monster that is the heart of the empire?

5) Well, here's where the story takes a sharp turn. Once the decree is sent out that on a certain date in the near future all Jews are to be exterminated, Mordecai sends a message to Esther. She must act! She cannot hide behind the palace walls. Because she is a Jew they will eventually come for her too. She must do something! But what can she do? The king hasn't asked for her in a month and if she tries to see the king without being invited, she can lose her life. Plus she's a woman. What power can she have to influence the king? But Mordecai won't let up. "Esther, you must act to save our people. Perhaps this is the very reason you've ended up where you are. Choose your destiny and fulfill it empowered as a child of God with a mission for your people." This, in effect, is what her cousin Mordecai tells her.

6) OK, so what does Esther do? Does she use the same tactics as the toxic masculine – threats of violence, revenge, suppression of dissent, erasure of the enemy? No. First of all, like all marginalized people and women, she has observed and knows the enemy better than the enemy knows her. She decks herself out in all her beauty and invites the king and Haman to a private party, knowing how much they love this kind of thing. But she also plans all her moves very carefully. She must get the king to do whatever she asks and she must undermine Haman's murderous plans for her people. You must read the rest of Esther's story to get the full effect of how Esther achieves her goal and gains the upper hand.

But the thing I want to emphasize is how Esther presents us with a very different mindset in contrast to the toxic masculine in three points: First, Esther calls on all her people for help. She sends word through Mordecai that all Jews throughout the empire must fast and pray together for Esther and for victory, and she and her maids will do the same. If the toxic masculine mindset is me-myself-and-I against everyone else, the alternative mindset is us coming together to work and pray together for a better future together. We need each other to succeed on this planet and that begins by caring for one another rather than seeing each other as threats to our individual power and control.

Second, after bringing all her people together and strengthening their common identity as a marginalized people rising up against the tyranny of one, Esther finds a way to turn the tables on Haman, showing him up as a threat to the empire and to the king. Esther's strategy works and the king turns on Haman. Haman is to be executed as a traitor to the king and his kingdom. But what about the terrible decree of extermination of all Jews throughout the empire? Esther

persuades the king to issue a counter-decree that empowers Jews and all marginalized peoples to defend themselves against any threats to their safety and welfare. This turns the tables and shifts the power. But here's the difference with Esther. Rather than revenge, this counter-decree is one of self-defence. It is intended to stop the murderous genocidal campaign of the ruling race, that's all. It is not about a counter slaughter. The restraint in self-defence is intended to lead to a different future for all people so there can be space for coexistence and tolerance if not reconciliation. It's not about destroying others because they are a threat.

And this leads to the finale of the story of Esther. The Jews once marginalized and threatened with extinction, are raised up to new prominence and privilege in the empire. Mordecai takes over Haman's role as second in command in the kingdom and Esther is raised up as a woman with easy access, influence and advice to the king and his advisors. But having been marginalized, all their decisions going forward recognize the rich diversity of peoples and genders in the empire. Persia will grow strong and Ahasuerus and his kingdom will succeed much better because privilege and power will now be spread throughout the empire rather than residing only with a few who are only men and a single ruling race. Building trust along racial and gender lines, creating greater equality of privilege and opportunity, working together rather than seeing each other as competitors and threats... this is the way to counter the toxic masculine mindset...

OK, but this is just a story, as beautiful and inspirational as it is. What about the real world? Well, we all need inspiration and empowerment. Even as toxic masculinity seems to have so much power in our world and cause such great harm to our planet, having a revelatory alternative based on love and justice from the ground upwards – this is the only way we can ever counter the toxic masculine... Stories like Esther are revelatory inspirations to live differently where we can, as we can, with whoever we can... And with faith, hope and love we also pray for strength, courage, resilience and patience as we work for the kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven... We need both protest and prayer, calling out the toxic masculine openly, saying no, but also working to build relationships of trust, care and compassion so that others see us as friends rather than enemies. And this begins with one on one relationships in our own lives... What do you think? Amen.