

## **Their Story, Our Story: Esther**

**Psalms 75:1-7          Esther 1:1-12, 19-22**

Only two books of the Bible are named for the women in the story: Ruth and Esther. Last week we talked about Ruth; today, Esther. The book of Esther is nestled between the books of Nehemiah and Job in the Old Testament.

If Ruth was a back-page story (if it made the news at all), then Esther is front page material. In fact, an entire Jewish feast is held annually in her honor: the feast Purim (the book explains the origin of the name Purim; read it and you'll find out how it got its name).

Purim is the most festive and joyful of all of the Jewish feasts. We'll see why by the time we're done. At Purim every year, adults and children dress up as one of the characters in the story, with masks, and gather at the synagogue or temple. The rabbi then reads the story of Esther from beginning to end. When a good character's name is mentioned, the people cheer. When a bad character's name is mentioned, they boo. When Esther's name is mentioned, they cheer *and* use noisemakers. And, while rabbis preach moderation in all things, Purim is the one Jewish festival during the year where moderation goes out the window and the people are permitted to drink a little more wine than normal.

Although Esther is front-page material and Ruth is back page, more importantly it shares something in common with Ruth, in that it is a story of courage—Esther is mainly a story of courage—and like Ruth it’s a story of faithfulness, and of Providence—even though God is never mentioned in the book of Esther. This makes Esther unique in all of the Bible; there is no mention of God at all in it. However, there is clearly a sense of God at work, providentially, through his people, and through some divine arranging of events. It’s clear that Esther wouldn’t have done what she did without a deep faith and trust that God was with her, and that God had placed her in a position of great influence “for just such a time as this” (4:14—the most famous line in the book).

I’m going to summarize the story of Esther, and introduce the cast of characters, and then we’ll bring it home with a couple of reflections.

But before I do that, I want to say what a joy it has been to revisit some of these great Old Testament stories, and be reminded that this is really good literature! The people who gave us these stories were excellent writers, just like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were writers. These are not statisticians or clinicians who are giving us data to analyze or a set of propositions to agree or disagree with. They are storytellers and writers, who are inviting us into the story

of God's redemptive work, through his people, throughout history, and today. So, as always, I would encourage you to read the book of Esther—for the enjoyment because it's great literature; and, to find yourself in the story. And, as always, to find God in *your* story as you ponder how God is at work in your life.

The setting: around 500 BC, in the city of Susa of the eastern edge of the vast Persian empire. The Israelites had been in Babylonian exile & captivity from about 600 BC until about 530 BC, when they were permitted to return to their homeland, because the Babylonians had been conquered by the Persians, under king Cyrus. While most did return, many remained in Babylon or they relocated to other places. This was the second diaspora, or dispersion, of the Jewish people.

The story of Esther begins this way (like last week, I'll read most of chapter 1 to give us the context of the story, and then go from there):

## **Esther 1**

<sup>1</sup>This happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus who ruled over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia. <sup>2</sup>In those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, <sup>3</sup>in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were present, <sup>4</sup>while he displayed the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and pomp of his majesty for many days, one

hundred and eighty days in all. (i.o.w., 6 months of everyone having to look at a king's ego on display!)

5 When these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in the citadel of Susa, both great and small, a banquet lasting for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. <sup>6</sup>There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings tied with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and colored stones. <sup>7</sup>Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished in accordance with the bounty of the king. <sup>8</sup>Drinking was by flagons (large pitcher), without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired. <sup>9</sup>Furthermore, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women in the palace.

10 On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded [his servants] who attended him, <sup>11</sup>to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold. <sup>12</sup>But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the [servants]. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.

Pause there...

Now, even though Vashti only makes a cameo appearance at the beginning of the story here, we really like her. Because, when drunk husband tries to parade her in front of his cronies like a prized animal at the county fair, she says "The heck with you!" We cheer for her for doing that. She stands up for herself.

The enraged king then consults with his sage advisors, to ask them what to do about the situation. They say, “She must be deposed. Because, if she is allowed to stay then other women might get ideas and stop obeying their drunk husbands. If you depose her, then that’ll teach women a lesson.”

Here is what it actually says at the end of chapter 1. When you hear this, you may think, as I did, that some things haven’t changed; the struggle continues... The kings’ advisors say:

<sup>19</sup>If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she, <sup>20</sup>so, when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.’

<sup>21</sup>This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as they proposed; <sup>22</sup>he sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house.

This is the word of the Lord!

So, Vashti is deposed, but the king gets lonely. He misses her, or at least misses having someone by his side. So his servants suggest that he have a beauty contest (my interpretation of what it says) and he can pick his next queen. This

wasn't any ordinary beauty contest, though, because every young woman who was chosen for this had to undergo months of cosmetic treatment, and then when the time came, one by one, they had to appear before the king and bring him a gift. And whoever pleased the king the most would be chosen.

So, while the story of Esther ends up being a story of courage and faithfulness, it's first of all a story of abuse of women, and abuse of power. Which makes Esther all the more a courageous woman in the story.

Enter Mordecai (yaaay!). Mordecai was a Jewish man who lived in Susa, and he adopted his orphaned niece, named... Esther. When the king's servants go out to collect the beautiful women from the empire, Esther was taken to be part of the proceedings, because—the book tells us—she was fair and beautiful. Uncle Mordecai, though, tells her not to reveal to anyone that she is Jewish. Presumably because there was prejudice and even racism against the Jews. As there would've been against other foreigners as well (because conquering people and empires—or at least the leaders of the empires—almost always believe that they are superior, racially and otherwise).

Well, it turns out that Esther is chosen to be queen and the king truly loves her and is devoted to her. He throws another banquet in her honor and calls it

“Esther’s banquet” and declares a holiday and gives gifts all over the provinces “with royal liberality” as it says.

Now it just so happens that while Mordecai is sitting at the city gate one day, he overhears two of the king’s servants conspiring against the king, to assassinate him. Mordecai tells Esther, who in turn tells the king, in Mordecai’s name. The king investigates it, finds out it’s true, and let’s just say it was not a good ending for these two servants. This little turn of events is very important for later on in the story.

Next, enter Haman (boooo). Haman was promoted by the king to run the empire. Haman is like the chief executive officer, except he doesn’t respect the king, he has his own evil ideas about how things ought to be run, and he has an enormously inflated ego, so much so that he demands that people bow down before him whenever he enters their presence, or when they enter his.

One day when Haman is walking by the city gates, people bow down before him, except... Mordecai. People try to talk with Mordecai about this and explain the danger he’s in by not bowing down to Haman. And Mordecai simply says he refuses to do it; he won’t bow down. My assumption here is that he is showing his true allegiance to God alone, as the only one he will bow down before.

Haman hears of Mordecai's defiance and becomes enraged, and as a result he devises a plan, not just to do away with Mordecai but to annihilate *all of the Jews*—men and women, young and old, including children. He wants to commit genocide; a holocaust. And it is to all happen on one day, and he picks a specific day to do this. So Haman tells the king, quite deceptively, that there is a group of people out there (he doesn't say it's the Jews) there is a group of people out there who are not following his laws, and therefore they must be done away with or there will be disorder and lawlessness in his kingdom. And, he says to the king, as a result of their extermination the king will reap the benefit of all of their wealth and possessions. (Haman knows how to play to the king's wants and ego; he knows the king is greedy for more wealth to show off). And the king agrees with the plan and says, "Make it so."

So a decree is written and begins to go out to the provinces, announcing the planned annihilation of the Jews (the king obviously didn't read his own decree, so he didn't know it was against the Jews).

In the meantime, Mordecai—who hangs out at the city gate a lot—finds out about the decree and about Haman's plot against the Jews. And in his distress



Mordecai goes to Esther and begs her to go inform the king and get him to stop this from happening.

Esther at first says no. She tells Mordecai that she would be killed for even trying to go talk to the king like this, because there was a law which stated that anyone who tries to go talk to the king without his invitation shall be put to death, and she reminds her uncle of that.

But Mordecai prevails upon her, and tells her “If Haman’s plan goes through, they’ll find out that you are Jewish and you’re as good as dead anyway, because you’ll be killed along with the rest of us.” And he says to her (reading now from chapter 4): *“For if you keep silence at such a time as this, you and your family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”* And although the text doesn’t say it, it’s obvious that Esther realizes that the fate of her people is in her hands now, and that her position as queen was a divine appointment.

So she is convinced, and she asks Mordecai to organize a fast on her behalf, and she says that she and her close women will do the same. Here is another sign of her faith and seeking God’s strength and direction through prayer and fasting. And so, Esther begins to plan how she will gain an audience with the king to talk

with him about this, and get him to relent... which she eventually does. You'll have to read the story to find out her strategy and how she carries it out!

I will say that while talking with the king she courageously discloses to him that it is her people, "my people," she says, who are the ones to be exterminated. This was an extraordinary risk on her part, to disclose that she is Jewish. Yet because the king loves her so much, and trusts her so much (remember, she is the one who disclosed to him, from Mordecai, that two of his officials were plotting to assassinate him; so she has earned his trust), so when hearing of this he becomes so upset about it, he asks her "Who is it who has presumed to do this?" And she tells him it was the wicked Haman.

So the king does away with Haman, the Jews are protected, and Esther saves the day (noisemakers!). And, at the end of the book of Esther, the feast of Purim is established and it gives instructions for how this feast is to be celebrated.

What is God teaching us through Esther?

Mainly this: Esther, like Ruth, gives us another example of the courage and faithfulness of ordinary, everyday folks. Ruth was a *foreigner* who was brought into the story through tragic & unexpected circumstances, and because of her loyalty and her initiative she became the great grandmother of king David, and

one of Jesus' ancestors. Esther is an *orphan*, who through the care of her uncle and the providence of God finds herself in a place of leadership, and because of her courage her people are saved from genocide.

These are ordinary women, who, because of the courage they showed and the risks they took in being faithful to God in the midst of daunting circumstances, God brought extraordinary results. Like I said last week: never count yourself out from being used by God through ordinary faithfulness, or even extraordinary faithfulness. We won't always know what the results will be down the road, but the promise of God is that nothing from our lives goes to waste. God has a way of putting us right where we need to be, at the right time, not only for our own sakes, but for God's sake, and others' sakes, in the bigger picture of things. And if we find ourselves wringing our hands over life's circumstances, it might be worth considering whether or not God has put us where we are, "for such a time as this." These are the divine appointments that we are invited to pay attention to—***with the help of others***, it needs to be said... Because...

Mordecai's role was to help interpret for Esther what God was doing, and what the bigger picture was. Esther didn't have to try to figure this out on her own—and clearly she shied away from it at first. She needed Mordecai to

interpret what God was doing, and explain to her the bigger picture. And **we** need people like that. Who help us interpret where and how God is at work in our lives and circumstances; who speak truth into our lives that helps us to take action where action is needed, or, they to help us listen, when listening is needed. Who are willing to speak truth into our lives that encourages us to play our part, our role, in God's story of grace and blessing.

Now, we probably won't be put a place where we are called to save an entire people from genocide, but who knows whether or not our actions, especially courageous action taken in spite of difficult or fearful circumstances, won't result in blessing or justice or healing for someone, at some point.

This is courage: the ability to act in spite of fear or uncertainty. CS Lewis: "Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at its testing point."

One last encouragement from Esther: Though God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, it is abundantly clear that God was very present, and active. Even if we aren't told it in as many words.

Perhaps Esther was written this way to remind us that God is the true King who is still on the throne, and working out his purposes in history, even when not

named or spoken out loud; even when world leaders or their advisors try to posture themselves as the one before whom others should bow down.

For us, today, these are challenging times, challenging days to live in. We can become distressed about the way things are going. It may feel like the world right now is chaotic and troubling; or frightening. Yet in the bigger picture of God's kingdom, God's will *is* being worked out, sometimes—or perhaps most of the time—behind the scenes, under the radar. The Creator and Redeemer *is* ordering our lives, and the world, even if God's name isn't being mentioned. It doesn't mean God isn't there. It's just that God doesn't always care about major publicity, the way kings and other rulers do. God simply wants people to be in relationship with him, in love. And to act when action is called for.

The book of Esther asks, "Is there hope in history?" The answer is...

Psalm 75:3, which you heard (a great verse for your fridge, or bathroom mirror, computer screen, or steering wheel): God says, "*When the earth totters, with all its inhabitants, it is I who keeps its pillars steady.*" God is holding everything together, and working all things for good, even when we can't see it.

Let's sing a song that expresses our willingness to play our part in God's redemptive purposes: Take My Life and Let it be Consecrated