

Esther: Queen for a Day?
November 8, 2009

You're not usually going to hear a sermon focused on Esther. Her story only made it into the lectionary (the three year cycle of Sunday readings that takes us through most of the Bible) in the last 6 years. And it wasn't a story I ever heard in Sunday School.

In fact, the only reason I ever knew Esther's story growing up was because I was a reader – and I was fascinated with all kinds of kings and queens. One day I found a book in my library called *Behold Your Queen*, an embroidered version of the biblical account, and I LOVED Esther's story – I read it over and over.

The time was the Babylonian Captivity. The Babylonians had fallen to the Persians, but Jews were not yet allowed to return to the Holy Land. The King, Ahaserus (known to history as Xerxes) invites some of his subject kings to a banquet. Now, this was a week-long affair, and one night, after a few bottles of wine, he starts bragging about his queen, Vashti, how she's the most beautiful woman in the entire world. And to prove it to them, he summons her to appear so he can show her off to his guests.

Her answer? “No.”

Well, this created a crisis! For the king to be treated by a woman, any woman, that way was unthinkable. For his wife to disobey a direct command – this was intolerable! The fears of all the men were that all the women in the land would refuse to obey their husbands – “Queen Vashti didn't obey her husband, why should I obey you?”

So Ahaserus acts swiftly. He divorces her. But he's a bit depressed by the whole incident, and so some of his advisors tell him to hold a beauty contest throughout the entire empire, to find the most beautiful, modest (and obedient!) woman and to make her the new queen.

Hadassah (which means “Myrtle”) lives in a distant corner of the empire. She's an orphan girl who lives with her guardian, her cousin/uncle Mordecai (the word used just means a male relative – it could be either). Now remember, there was NO ONE with less influence, power, or autonomy than an orphan girl with no brothers. Hadassah wins the contest, and she's taken to Susa to marry the king.

Mordecai goes with her, and goes to the palace gate each morning to make sure that she is cared for, and to keep his ears open to see what is going on in the court. Because he is there he over hears a plot among some servants to poison Ahaserus. And by getting word to the proper people he saves the king.

Esther delights Ahaserus with her beauty and modesty, and becomes a favorite.

But there's yet another player in this story – Haman the Amalekite. He is Ahaserus' number one advisor, the go-to-guy, the man who makes it happen. And he expects

people to treat him with proper respect and deference. But there's one man who refuses to bow his head when Haman passes through the palace gate each day, and it sticks in his craw. He finds out that this guy is a Jew named Mordecai. Every day it makes him madder and madder and he becomes obsessed with this "stiff-necked Jew."

The Amalekites were one of the peoples who had lived in the area we call Palestine/Canaan, and who had fought with the Jews over land, particularly when David was expanding his kingdom. There was bad blood between Jews and Amalekites. So anyone refusing to bow would have bothered Haman, but when he finds out this guy is a Jew, he goes ballistic. He convinces Ahaserus there is an undesirable element in the kingdom, a group of people plotting to overthrow his rule, to take control, and to destroy all he and his father had built.

"Who are these people?"

"The Jews, your majesty."

"Well, get rid of them, you take care of the details."

So Haman writes a decree in the king's name and gets it sealed, declaring that in one month's time it's going to be open season on all Jews. The king's loyal subjects are commanded to kill them, every man, woman, and child. The decree makes it illegal for the Jews to protect themselves. They are to be wiped off the face of the earth for good.

There was a tradition among the Persians and the Medes that once a law had been decreed and sealed with the king's seal, it could not be revoked, even by the king himself. Haman, confident of victory, wants to take care of Mordecai himself, and he hires a contractor to build a gallows 70 feet high (I suspect there's a little embroidery there by the biblical writer). *He'll* take care of that stiff-necked Jew – by breaking his neck!

The Jews were in shock and panic when they heard the decree. Mordecai sends a message to Esther, "You must do something to save them!"

"What can I do? I'm not allowed to approach the king unless he calls me!" Anyone who did that faced immediate death unless the king held out his scepter to pardon them. She might have been the queen – but she had no more power than the little orphan girl.

Mordecai tells her, "You have to do something to try to save your people – Don't think you're safe because you're in the palace. Someone will find out. Someone will reveal who you are. And who knows, perhaps you wound up in the palace for exactly such a time as this."

So Esther fasts and prays for three days to prepare herself. Her reign as queen may be very short. She puts on her best dress, and all her make up, her most dazzling jewels, and orders her servants to accompany her to the throne room. When they try to talk her out of it, she tells them she must do what she must do, "and if I die, I die!"

The king is astonished to see his humble little wife at the door...the guards are poised to cut her down, but Ahaserus holds out his scepter to save her. "Esther, my beauty, what can I do for you? Ask for half the kingdom – it's yours."

"All I'd like, your majesty, is for you to come to dinner in my rooms tomorrow night, and to have you bring the councilor Haman as a guest."

"Done," says the king.

That night Ahaserus has trouble sleeping, and so he has a servant read the palace log book to him, the record of what had happened, and he's reminded of the foiled plot to poison him. "What was the name of that man who warned us? Mordecai? Oh, yes. What did we do to reward him?"

"...Nothing, your majesty."

"Oh, that won't do."

The next morning Haman comes in thinking of how he is to be honored by eating with the Queen that evening and Ahaserus asks him, "Haman! What should I do to honor someone who's been invaluable to my government?"

Thinking the king means him, he pretends to modesty and says, "Well, your majesty, I would take one of the gorgeous robes you yourself have worn and put it on him. And I would take a ring from your own hand and put it on his finger. And I would take a horse from the stables which you yourself have ridden, and let him ride it through the streets, and I would have one of your own high officials act as a squire, leading them through the city, shouting, 'Behold the man the king honors!'"

"That's a great idea! Go find a man at the gate named Mordecai, and do that for him. Oh! And YOU be the squire!"

Well, obviously, he's not happy. But the king has commanded him. And he knows he has the queen's dinner that night...and a 70 foot gallows in his front yard. So he grits his teeth, and he does it.

He goes home with a sore jaw. But he puts on his best clothes, and goes to the palace thinking, "Finally, I'm about to be treated as I deserve."

At dinner Ahaserus looks at his wife and says, "Esther, this is great. How can I thank you? What can I do for you? Ask whatever you want, and even if it's half my kingdom, I'll give it to you."

Esther answers, "All I want, your majesty, is a chance to live, and to save the lives of my people."

“What do you mean?”

“I am a Jew – when you condemned these loyal subjects, you condemned me. We aren’t even permitted to defend ourselves.”

“Whose idea was this?”

This wicked Haman, who sits at table with you and plots to kill Mordecai whom you have honored.”

“Take him out, hang him on his own gallows.”

The decree for destruction cannot be revoked – but Ahaserus does modify it to give the Jews the right to defend themselves. He manages to at least change genocide into civil war. And eventually he does give them a day to exact their own revenge on their neighbors. The commemorations of these events are the holiday of Purim, usually observed in the spring, in March or April.

Now, you need to know, that not only did it take Esther a long time to break into the lectionary, it nearly didn’t make it into the Bible at all. The Rabbis who made the final decision of what would be considered *Ketuvim*, inspirational writings, argued about whether or not Esther should be included, because not once does it mention or refer to God. Modern historians point out that among the historical documents we have from the Persian period and Xerxes’ reign there is no mention of an embarrassing banquet, a beauty pageant to find a new queen nor a civil war begun by decree. It doesn’t mean it didn’t happen, but we need to keep in mind that Esther is *inspirational* writing, not history in our sense of the word.

Why was Esther kept as scripture? Some rabbis consider Esther to be the prime example of the providence of God, the acts of God hidden in every day, normal occurrences. It is a reminder that even when we cannot see or understand, God is working for our good, for our protection, for our life.

Esther is seen as expression of the truth that God uses the most unlikely people in extraordinary ways – A girl chosen for her beauty, not her brains, with no power of her own, saves her people from extinction. What might you do if you were willing to take a risk? Test a few rules? Go deep in prayer and reflection for strength beyond your own?

Esther’s story is a reminder of a theme we often forget, but which is consistent throughout scripture, that God is the One who turns things upside down – who sews clothes for the sinners who should die, who chooses younger brothers and foreign wives to live out the promise of faithfulness, who uses a nation of slaves to proclaim the responsibilities of faithfulness and the grace of loving-kindness.

God’s realm is the place where the lowest are the greatest and the worst receive mercy; where the last ones receive the same wages as the first; where it is our very weakness and

vulnerabilities, our broken hearts and wounded spirits that give us the strength, the courage, the will to move forward into abundant life.

I'll admit it, there are days when I don't want to know. Like Esther hidden in her palace, I think I can just live my life and not worry about people who are choosing between heat and food, or whose insurance won't cover the one medication that might save their lives. I don't want to know about the folks who are working a full time and a part time job and yet are living in their car because they can't put aside enough for rent AND a deposit. I don't want to know about what war is costing us in terms of jobs and the economy and the state of our souls. How can I possibly make a change here? What can I do that won't just be a band-aid?

Alone we are weak. But God can still use us. Anne Sexton writes:

*God does not need
too much wire to keep Him there,
just a thin vein,
with blood pushing back and forth in it,
and some love.*

*As it has been said:
Love and a cough
cannot be concealed.
Even a small cough.
Even a small love.*

*So if you have only a thin wire,
God does not mind.¹*

Together we can live out the witness to God's vision of community. Our own strength, courage, influence may not be much. But God can use us to change the world.

¹ For all of this poem, please see *The Awful Rowing toward God*, p.78. Copyright 1975 by Loring Conant, Jr. Executor of the Estate of Anne Sexton. Found in *Behold: Arts for the Church Year*. Pentecost 2, 2006 (Year B) September 3-November 26, 2006, p.11
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