

For Such a Time as This

Esther 4:9-14; 7:1-6, 9-10 Crossroads Christian Church
Mark 9:38-50 September 27, 2015 Pentecost 18 B

As you know by now, once in a while I like to preach a book sermon, one that tries to give an overview of a whole book of the Bible. Esther is our choice for the day. Esther has rags-to-riches, intrigue, bravery, shady politics, romance, danger, betrayal, and comeuppance. And if that isn't enough, it has a beauty contest near the beginning of the book, and a necktie party near the end.

One thing that it doesn't have is any mention of God. It's a secular story in the Holy Book. But God is there in a behind-the-scenes sort of way, as we'll discover later. The Book of Esther is a story of the survival of a religious minority, the Jewish people, when their existence was threatened. This time it was during the period of the Persian Empire. Persia stretched from India to Ethiopia. They had conquered the Babylonians, who had tried to assimilate the Jews during the Babylonian Exile. The Persians were more enlightened, and allowed the exiles to return home. Some Jews, however, remained in Persia.

It begins with a royal party in Susa, a capital of Persia, the greatest superpower, the greatest empire in the world at that time. And this wasn't just any party, it was a blast bigger than the inauguration, the Oscars and Mardi Gras! The Persian king, called Ahasuerus in this story and Xerxes in historical record, used the party as a chance to show off his riches. And when he was showing off his possessions, he wanted to show off his most beautiful possession, his number one wife, Vashti. But Vashti wasn't in the mood to be shown off, or to be a possession. She refused. She was a strong and admirable woman, but that's not what the King wanted. Ahasuerus was furious. Nobody says no to the king, not even the queen. And it was a bad example! Women everywhere might get uppity, and people of lower classes might sass back to those in the upper classes. So Vashti was exiled, never to see her husband again, and a "man is king of the house" resolution quickly was added to the laws of the land.

This is where the beauty pageant comes in. They need a new queen, right? So some bright guy came up with the idea of inviting beautiful virgins in to be trained, pampered, and given makeovers, and the King would choose the new queen from among them. Now doesn't that sound like a great idea for a TV reality show? They could call it "The Bachelor King Guy."

Here Mordecai enters the story. He was a Jewish man from the tribe of Benjamin. His father, Kish, had been carried into exile by the Babylonians. Mordecai had adopted a cousin of his, an orphan girl, named Hadassah, or Esther, and raised her as his own child. Since she was becoming a beautiful young adult, Mordecai thought "Why not?" and entered her in the contest. "But," he warned his adoptive daughter, "don't tell them you're Jewish." He

knew what it meant to be part of an often-persecuted minority group. Esther thrived in her new environment in the palace harem. Her beauty and grace impressed everyone, and she became the top contender. Each young woman was presented to the king to spend the night. But nobody came back for a second night, unless the King called for her. When Esther's turn came, she was chosen. Ahasuerus knew that she was the one. So again, they threw a banquet in her honor. Esther was the new queen

All's good, so far, right? But Mordecai overheard an assassination plot against the king. Mordecai told Esther, and Esther passed on Mordecai's warning to the King who thwarted the plot. Now enters Haman into the story. When Jews hear the name Haman mentioned when Esther is read during the feast of Purim, they boo. You can too. Boo or hiss along when I mention Haman's name. Haman (boo) was a self-important court official that expected lower people to bow to him when he went by. Mordecai, a Jew who would not bow except to God, refused. Haman thought that it was beneath him just to have Mordecai killed, so Haman made an edict that all the Jews should be killed as disrespectful enemies of the state. Haman and his minions cast lots to pick the right day for their wicked plan, and chose one. Haman went to the king and said to him, "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction," and Haman said that he would pick up the tab. The king trusted Haman and gave him the right to kill the Jews.

The decree was published, and there was no way that the King could reverse his foolish decision. All the Jews went into mourning. No one could do anything about this terrible thing. No one? Mordecai told his cousin Esther that she must speak to the king. But nobody can speak to the king without his permission, Esther cried, and he hasn't given me permission to speak to him for the last 30 days. If anyone breaks that rule, they die." But Mordecai reminded her that when they would find out that she was Jewish, she would die anyway. "Who knows? Mordecai said, "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Esther asked that the Jews would fast for 3 days to give her spiritual support. On the third day she would see the King. When the king saw her, he offered to do anything she'd wish. So she set up a royal banquet, where the king and Haman would be the guests. Haman was delighted to get the invitation, but still was teed off by that insolent Mordecai. So Haman ordered a gallows to be built, and he would *tell* the king to hang Mordecai. The King, in the meantime, discovered the records that told of how Mordecai had saved the King's life, but Mordecai had never been properly recognized. "Then the king said to Haman, 'Quickly, take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to the Jew Mordecai who sits at the king's gate.

Leave out nothing that you have mentioned.’ So Haman took the robes and the horse and robed Mordecai and led him riding through the open square of the city, proclaiming, ‘Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor.’ Well, you can imagine how Haman felt about that, acting as a servant to the man he most despised. Haman ran home in shame.

But still Haman came to the Queen’s banquet. And there the queen told her story of how a terrible enemy had plotted to kill her people; every last one of them, including the Queen herself. And who is this enemy? The King asked. The words of judgment rang loud and clear. “It is Haman.”

So Haman was hanged on the gallows that he had constructed for Mordecai. But the decree had been made, and could not be undone, and the Jews were still at risk. So the King issued another decree that if anybody tried to kill the Jews, the Jews could defend themselves. Mordecai was recognized for his goodness, and became the new top advisor to the King. And the Jews established the Feast of Purim as a day to celebrate their escape from genocide.

So there’s the story, shortened down from its ten chapters. It has a little bit of everything for everyone, doesn’t it? It doesn’t take too long to read. Remember when I mentioned that God wasn’t mentioned in the story, but was in the background? Maybe God isn’t mentioned because religious Jews are very reticent to mention God’s name aloud. When Mordecai told Esther, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this,” he was hinting that this was God’s whole purpose in having this poor orphan girl become Queen of Persia. God had made her, God had guided her, now God called her to use her beauty, her wit, and her courage to face the King and overcome her people’s enemy.

God’s call to us may not be as dramatic as God’s call to Abraham, or to Moses, or to Esther, or to Paul. We may never be called to challenge a ruler or to change history. But there may be ‘a time such as this’ in your life, where God asks you to face a challenge to do the right thing. It may be by calling a bully to account on the school ground. It may be in not letting a racial slur go by. It may be in having to blow the whistle at work at some illegal, dangerous, or unethical practice. It may be in taking the children and leaving an abusive spouse. It may be in accepting a vocation.

There’s an old poem that became a hymn by James Russell Lowell, “Once to Every Man and Nation,” that speaks to these moments of decision. Its final verse goes like this:

“Though the cause of evil prosper, Yet to truth alone be strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong;
Yet that scaffold sways the future, And behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, Keeping watch above his own.”¹ Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

¹ James Russell Lowell, “Once to Every Man and Nation,” 1845