

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Esther

The Queen

We have moved on about 600 years from the time of Ruth and Hannah to a very different time in the life of God's people. The great kings - Saul, David, Solomon - have come and gone; Israel has divided into two kingdoms, north and south; and the northern kingdom has been overrun by the Assyrians around 700 BC. The little southern kingdom, now called Judah, has survived until 586 BC when Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonians, the Temple burned, and all the leaders of Judah have been taken into a 70 year Exile in Babylonia.

Near the end of that period, the ascendant Persians have defeated Babylon, and by 500 BC have extended their kingdom to the Indus River in the east (including all of what is today Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, to the border of India); to the Upper Nile and the borders of Sudan in the south; and to the Aegean sea and the borders of Greece in the west. Persian rulers, starting with Cyrus I, had allowed the people that were now called "the Jews" to return to Judah, and under Ezra and Nehemiah they had begun rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and what would be called "the Second Temple." The story of Esther belongs near the end of this period, probably around 480 BC, in the reign of Ahasuerus, often now known by his Greek name Xerxes. The Persian Empire would last 200 years until it was conquered in 330 BC by a Greek general named Alexander - the one we call "the Great." In that time, few Jews

actually returned to Judah, and substantial Jewish communities came into being in cities all over the Persian Empire.

1) *Living in Exile*

The question these "Diaspora" Jews struggled with - one that remains an issue today for Jews and all believers - is how much distinction and how much assimilation is proper for God's people living "in exile?" Prophets like Jeremiah had said "the word of the LORD is this: 'Build houses and settle down... seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you... pray to the LORD for it, for if it prospers, you too will prosper'" (Jer 29). But how do you do that - like Daniel and his friends, who decided to keep *koshra* and refused to eat Babylonian food, and would not bow down to the king? Or like Nehemiah, who rose to become "cup-bearer" to the king, and presumably sampled his food for him?

In the book of Esther, a Jewish girl named Hadassah - or Esther in Persian - finds herself selected as the new queen of Persia after the former queen Vashti is banished for failing to appear and perform at a banquet for the guests of a drunken Xerxes. Esther's older cousin Mordecai, who has raised her, tells her to keep quiet about being Jewish. Esther is selected by Xerxes from many other young women because of her great beauty; a trait she shares with many OT heroines of faith - Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Ruth. They all have what one commentator calls "the

liability of beauty" – then and now, it opens doors, but brings dangers - but in the OT, beauty is always used by God for good purposes, despite the behavior of the men who surround these beautiful women.

Mordecai's telling Esther to hide her Jewishness suggests fear, but in fact he himself is bold about his identity – when the villain Haman is made chief minister of Xerxes, everyone bows to him except Mordecai, who like Daniel will not bow down to anyone but the LORD. His refusal will later threaten calamity to the Jews, but for the moment Mordecai is honored when he overhears two officers plotting to assassinate Xerxes; he passes a message to Esther, who then warns the king.

Years pass, but Haman is still offended by Mordecai, and plots his downfall. Haman tricks Xerxes into signing a decree that will purge his empire of "certain people who are different and who do not obey the king's laws..." Haman plans to exterminate all the Jews he can find, and he casts lots to decide on a propitious date for the pogrom – 10 months ahead, on the 15th of the month of Adar - what to us is Feb/March.

As though being exiled from Israel and Judah was not enough; as though the destruction of the Temple was not enough; now Jews throughout the Persian Empire are threatened with annihilation. Where now is the LORD, the God of Israel? What now does it mean to be his "chosen people"? You don't have to ask why the book of *Esther* has been one of the most-read OT books for 2500 years!

2) *A Brave Decision*

What will God do? Mordecai is convinced that deliverance for the Jews will come from somewhere. But maybe this is why God in his providence has made Esther queen? He

sends her a message about the decree against the Jews. "Do not think," he says, "that because you are in the king's house, you of all the Jews will escape... If you remain silent now, you and all your father's family will perish. *But who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?*" The most famous words from the book of *Esther* make the decision before her plain: will she now stand up and be counted, and use her position to help her own people, the people of God?

Esther hesitates. She says Xerxes has not sent for her in 30 days – he has hundreds of concubines to choose from – and the law says she cannot approach him without invitation on penalty of death. (You might consider the parallel of deciding that *you* want to talk to the President of the United States, whom you have met once. Just see how far up the drive to the White House you get before the Secret Service threatens to shoot you!). But Esther realizes she must decide in favor of her people and not herself – so she replies to Mordecai that she and her maids will fast for three days before she approaches the king, and Mordecai and all the Jews should do the same. "If I perish, I perish," says Esther.

She dresses in royal robes, and approaches Xerxes' throne room. He sees her standing in the courtyard, and extends his golden scepter towards her as a sign of welcome. "What do you want?" he asks. Relieved but still composed, Esther asks the king to attend a banquet she will give, and to bring Haman too. Xerxes agrees, and when he is well-wined at dinner, he asks again "What do you want?" By now Esther is working on a clear plan – she invites the king to bring Haman to yet another banquet. So Haman goes home full of himself – "I am the only one beside the king that the queen has invited!" he boasts to his family and friends. But he is still enraged every time he sees Mordecai, and complains

to his wife – who suggests that at the next banquet, Haman should ask Xerxes to have Mordecai executed – and meanwhile prepare a gallows ready for him!

Now a very unexpected event occurs – the “hidden God” at work again, it seems! – and Xerxes, awake at night, is browsing the royal histories. He rediscovers the story of Mordecai’s warning that saved him from assassination, and asks his wise men what honor was bestowed on Mordecai. “None,” they say. Next day Xerxes asks Haman, “how should I honor a man who has done me great service?” “A royal robe, a royal horse, a procession through the streets,” says Haman, thinking this is about him! So it is that Mordecai is honored, and Haman infuriated at this Jew whom he now hates with a passion.

But now Haman must hurry to Esther’s banquet. The queen is ready for the showdown. She falls at Xerxes’ feet, weeping. “Spare my people,” she begs. “Someone is trying to destroy me and all the Jews of your kingdom – we are facing slaughter, destruction, annihilation!” “Who would do this?” demands the king; “Him – Haman” cries Esther. Xerxes rushes from the room in fury, turns to look back, and sees Haman prostrate at Esther’s feet. “Will he even molest my queen while I am in the house?” he screams! Haman is taken out and hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

Esther pleads once more: “O king, spare my people – reverse Haman’s decree of destruction against the Jews!” Xerxes issues a second decree, permitting Jews to assemble and take up arms to defend themselves on the 15th of Adar. And they do, and they kill thousands of their would-be destroyers. Esther, now in quite another mood, demands that the bodies of the 10 sons of Haman whom the Jews have killed be hung from a

gallows in public. A great celebration is then held, and a new Jewish feast is created for 15th Adar – it is called *Purim*, to remember the *pur*, the lot, that Haman cast to find a propitious day to kill Jews. Mordecai is honored, and takes over Haman’s role as chief minister. He is “held in high esteem by his fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people, and for the welfare of all the Jews.”

3) *Good Queen Esther*

So of course Esther becomes a Jewish heroine for the ages, and her story is read with joy and celebration year after year. One scholar claims there are more ancient manuscripts of the book of *Esther* than any other OT book! Purim is celebrated to this day. It is one of the most popular of Jewish holidays, because it has no defined religious component – it is not established by *Torah*, it is not a “holy day,” it requires no religious observances or prayers; like Hannukah, it is a day simply to celebrate being Jewish, and surviving.

So the book of *Esther* – the *Megillah* readings – are read aloud, and it is one time in the Jewish year when people in the synagogue are encouraged to hiss, jeer and stamp every time the villain Haman appears in the reading! Perhaps because the name of God is not mentioned in the book – although he is the unseen presence throughout – the rabbis have always reckoned that “on Purim, everything is allowed,” including much to eat and drink. Gift-giving and merriment are the order of the day, as well as giving gifts to the poor. And there is frivolity – eating “hamantaschen” cookies in the shape of Haman’s hat, men dressing as women, burning effigies of Haman. Then there is *Hadassah* – Esther’s Jewish name – which persists in the US today as the name for the *Women’s Zionist Organization of America*, founded in 1912 to assist the Zionist dream of a Jewish homeland, and now mostly

devoted to medical and nursing assistance to the State of Israel.

For Christians who read her story in their OT, Esther remains a story of courage, and of identifying with God's people, at whatever risk to yourself. It remains a classic tale of how "the hidden God" who is not even mentioned or named, is at work in his providence to bring about the salvation of his people - all the time exercising his sovereignty, while never taking away the personal responsibilities and decisions of his people or their enemies. Esther is an example of a person whose faith emerges only when "the chips are down" and a decision must be made - who do you stand with?

And the book of *Esther* contains one of the best lines in the whole OT: "Who knows but that you have been put in your position for such a time as this?" Mordecai's question echoes down the years to every one of us. Where have we been put? Why all this preparation? Why the circuitous route of our lives to this point? What about all the blunders, the missteps, the failures, the hidden faith and identity, the sins? Does God really have a plan and a purpose for my life?

If you have never asked those questions, it's a good time to start! But if you have, then the answer lies within the question: "*Who knows but that you may have come to your position for such a time as this?*" Lord, show us what you want each of us to do, here and now, and then give us the courage and the strength to do it - whatever the cost to us! Because that is what your Son Jesus did for us - stand with us, identify with us, face annihilation with us - at whatever cost to him. Help us to trust him, and like Esther, trust you in our moments of decision.

Let us pray...