

B Lectionary 26 9.29.24

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22

Focus Statement: God puts us where we are most needed

I may have told you before that I have a spiritual discipline that I've had since seminary of finding a story or verse that frames that season of my life. In seminary, it was the story of Lazarus, in a cave, called to new life, trying to find the way out. At my first call in California, it was Miriam dancing on the far side of the Red Sea, still very much in transition, celebrating that the journey would continue. I tell you all this because for the past ten years, the story framing for me our shared ministry in this place has been Esther. And this is the only time in the lectionary we get the story of Esther. So, rather than focus on today's reading, I want to tell you a bit of an annotated version of the whole book and why I find it so meaningful.

Esther takes place during the rule of King Ahasuerus, believed by some scholars to be the Persian King Xerxes. During Xerxes reign, the Jewish people lived a tenuous existence in exile. They were not heavily persecuted, but they were certainly outsiders and second-class citizens, always at risk of greater persecution, as we'll see as the story unfolds. But back to Ahasuerus, who decided to throw a series of lavish banquets to show off his great wealth and power. And by lavish, I mean lavish. The first banquet, for all his officials and ministers, lasted one-hundred and eighty days. The second was a seven-day banquet for everyone in the capital city. This seven-day banquet spared no expense. "There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings tied with cords of fine linen...couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of marble, mother-of-pearl, and colored stones. Drinks were served in golden goblets... [and] drinking was by flagons, without restraint—without restraint, it's

in the bible, chapter one, verse eight—for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired.” This party, in other words, was a rager. On the last day, when the king was, and again I quote, “merry with wine,” he commanded his wife, Queen Vashti, to put on her crown and parade before the guests. To which Queen Vashti was like, hard no. There’s no way I’m doing that. And she “refused to come to the king’s command.” This went over as well as you might expect for a petulant and fickle all-powerful king. So King Ahasuerus not only had Vashti banished, but, following the advice of his officials, he made a decree to his whole kingdom that all women will give honor to their husbands and every man should be master in his own house.

King Ahasuerus was pleased with his officials’ advice and his new decree, but he also needed a new queen. So his officials advised him—here notice a theme of the king not having any real ideas of his own—his officials advised him to have beautiful young women from across the kingdom brought before him, so he could choose his favorite to be the new queen. One of the young women brought before the king was Esther. Esther was “fair and beautiful,” but she also had a secret. Her real name was not Esther, it was Hadassah, because Esther was a Jew, raised by her uncle Mordecai. Esther went before the king but, following Mordecai’s instructions, she didn’t let anyone know her background or their relationship. And that is how Esther, the niece of the Jew Mordecai, ended up the king’s new queen.

Once Esther was in the palace, Mordecai came to the front of the court everyday to see how she was doing. One day, while sitting at the king’s gate waiting for news of Esther, Mordecai

overheard two of the king's servants discussing a plot to assassinate the king. Mordecai told Esther, Esther told the king in Mordecai's name, and the two servants were caught. The whole event was recorded in the king's records, but nothing else came of it. Remember this event though, because it will be important later.

At this point of the story we introduce our villain, the highest-ranking official in the king's court, Haman son of Hammedatha. Haman was quite taken with himself, for the king ordered that everyone bow down to him as he passed. And because the king ordered it, everyone did. Everyone, that is, except Mordecai. Mordecai refused because, as a Jew, he bowed only to God. Well, Haman would have none of this disrespect. But Haman was so arrogant that he decided, "it was beneath him to lay hands on Mordecai alone." So Haman went to the king and convinced him that he should issue a decree to have all the Jews across the kingdom killed because they "do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them." As we saw earlier, Ahasuerus was quite open to suggestions from his officials, and he made the decree just as Haman recommended.

When Mordecai heard about the decree, he went to Esther and asked her to intervene on the Jews' behalf. At first Esther was like, I can't. Remember Vashti, the order that men are the head of their household, Haman's random "kill all the Jews" decree, Ahasuerus was not known for being particularly rational. Esther reminded Mordecai that people were put to death for approaching the king without his invitation. But Mordecai insisted, Esther you have to try. "Do not think," Mordecai told her, "do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews." And besides, Mordecai went on, "perhaps you

have come to royal dignity for such a time as this.” Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this. Let me just pause here really quick and share with you that this is currently my very favorite verse of scripture. Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this. Perhaps, as ill-equipped and unqualified as you may feel, you are in the exact right place, the exact right person, with the exact skills that the moment requires. Maybe you are here, in this place, in this time, because you and only you were made for this. I have this verse taped to the wall in my office so that on hard days when I don’t know what to do next, I can look at it and remember that, even though I may not know the reason, perhaps, I, we, all of us are here, in this place, in this moment, are God’s hands and feet in the world, for such a time, for such a place, for such a moment as this.

Mordecai said these words to Esther, and she realized she had to try. But Esther was smart, she knew she couldn’t just go before the king and call out his second in command. So, she played on his, and Haman’s, vanity. She went before the king and invited him and Haman to a banquet in their honor. Both men were tickled by the invitation and enjoyed a fine night of drinking and celebration. At the end of the night, the king asked Esther what she wanted. Whatever it is, said the king, “even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” My desire, said Esther, is for you to come to another banquet tomorrow night, so that I can honor you again. Haman and the king were honored by the second invitation and agreed to return the next night.

When he got home that night, the king couldn’t sleep. To distract himself, he started reading old records. He came across the report of Mordecai uncovering the assassination

attempt and realized he'd never done anything to honor Mordecai for saving his life. So the next morning, the king called Haman and asked him, "what shall be done for a man the king wishes to honor?" Haman thought, the king definitely wants to honor me. So he told the king, you should dress the man up in royal robes and parade him through the city, while someone goes before him shouting, "thus shall be done for a man the king wishes to honor." The king said to Haman, that is a great idea, go to that for Mordecai. And that is how, on the day of Esther's second great banquet, Haman found himself riding through the city streets in a parade in honor of the man he was trying to kill for disrespecting him. When Haman got home from the 'Mordecai is awesome' parade, his wife remarked, you are in big trouble. You are literally in the process of building giant gallows to hang the man the king just had you parade through the street in honor. This is not going to end well for you. And while Haman and his wife were still talking, the king's servants arrived to take Haman to the banquet that Esther had prepared for him and the king. Dun dun dunnn...

And you heard in our reading what happened next. Esther revealed Haman's evil plot to King Ahasuerus, throwing the king into rage. And in a great reversal of fortunes, King Ahasuerus had Haman hung on the gallows he built for Mordecai and turned over all of Haman's power to Mordecai. And to this day, the Jewish people celebrate the festival of Purim, a holiday for "feasting and gladness...sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor;" to remember how, thanks to Esther's courage and ingenuity, "the Jews gained relief from their enemies... [and they were turned] from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into holiday."

I told you at the beginning I love the story of Esther and it's become a frame for me for our ministry together, and here's why. Because Esther is an incredibly unlikely hero. She was a woman keeping her identity a secret while living essentially as a captive as the queen of a fickle and petulant king. She didn't have any power, and she knew it. She knew that if she did anything to displease him she could end up even worse off than Vashti. She knew it, and it scared her at first. Remember when Mordecai approached her and begged her to intervene, her first response was no. No, I can't. I don't have the power, the authority, the ability, to do the thing you are asking. But to her concerns Mordecai responded, all of this is true. All of this is true and, and I left this part out of the retelling, but it's in there, all of this is true and it's not really up to you. Mordecai told her, "if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise up from another quarter." God won't be stymied by your inaction, but... But, "perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this." Perhaps you are the person for the job. And you'll never know unless you try.

The story of Esther is about having the courage to take the risk of failure and try something hard. To trust against all reason, the words of another who says, maybe you can do this thing. And here's something else you may not have noticed about Esther that I think makes it a particularly helpful book. God is never mentioned in it. Esther is one of only two books in the bible where God is not an active character. God is never name-dropped, but it is hard to read Esther without seeing God's presence, in the words of Mordecai, in Esther's discernment of how to proceed, in the weird convergence of events that had to come together for Esther's gamble to work. God isn't front and center, but God is certainly behind the scenes, knitting together all the pieces that lead to salvation. And that makes Esther a

more relatable story for me. Because I've never gotten Moses's burning bush or Jacob's dream or Samuel's summons in the night. For me the voice of God sounds more like Mordecai, more like someone else in my life saying, maybe you're right, maybe it's not you God is calling. But what if it is? But what if it is? What if you are the person in the place for the work? Why don't you just trust and try and see what happens? And I'll tell you from my own experience, the gamble hasn't always paid off. But sometimes it has. Sometimes it has, and when it does, it's pretty amazing. And so, dear people of God, to whatever concern is itching in your head and in your heart this day, let me ask you this question. Perhaps you too have come to this moment for such a time as this. Thanks be to God. Amen.