

Queen Esther

We're wrapping up our series on Wisdom literature today. Last week we talked about women who lead, and today, I'd like to take a look at an example of a woman in the Old Testament who led, albeit reluctantly. Her name was Queen Esther. The theme of God's people struggling to survive in a sophisticated, alien culture is a common one throughout the Bible, and it's central to the Book of Esther.

Today is the only Sunday in the three year lectionary cycle when we hear from this relatively brief book, and so, I want to draw your attention to probably the best-known verse in Esther, even though it doesn't show up in what we'll read this morning. The verse I have in mind comes from the middle of the book. Mordecai, a Jew living in the Persian capital of Susa, is addressing his family member Esther, who has become the queen. He sends word to her, "If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14).

Put another way, "Who knows? Perhaps you've come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." This verse is the key to the story of Esther, and is a key to the story of each of us, and to the story of every one of the people of God. Esther is a fairly short book – only ten chapters. If you get a chance this afternoon, sit down and read it. It is unusual in that the book doesn't mention God at all. Not even once. It makes one wonder, "why would a book like this be in the Bible?" Before we get into that, I want to get you up to speed with what's happened so far in the story.

Mordecai the Jew

Mordecai, a Jew in the court of King Xerxes, reveals a plot to kill the king, but is left unrewarded. The king has to choose a new queen, and Mordecai arranges to have his relative, Esther, selected. She becomes Xerxes' favorite. Haman, the Prime Minister, has already put into place a plan to wipe out the Jewish people. Esther's cousin Mordecai urges her to intervene. Esther is reluctant, because she knows the risk of approaching King Xerxes without being summoned is a move that could cost her her life.

One night the king remembers that he has done nothing to honor Mordecai for saving his life. He asks Haman what should be done for a man the king wants to honor, and thinking the king is referring to him, Haman proposes a parade, fitting the honored man with royal robes. Haman, who has already started to plan the execution of Mordecai, is humiliated when Mordecai receives the honor from the king. That brings

us up to today's lectionary passage. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, and 9:20-22. **Read Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22.**

Vile Haman's Plot

This is the turning point in the story of Esther. Xerxes and Haman have been invited twice to a banquet prepared by Queen Esther, and we heard "the king again asked, 'Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted,'" (Est. 7:2). That seems a little odd, doesn't it? Xerxes is willing to offer his queen up to half of his kingdom. It seems like a common sense thing to do would have been for Esther to just ask for the lands the Jewish people lived in – except the Jews were spread all throughout the Persian Empire, which ran from India in the east, to modern-day Egypt and Sudan in the west.

So instead, Esther begs for her life, and the lives of her people. "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life – this is my petition," she says, "And spare my people – this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed, and annihilated," (verses 3-4a). Xerxes is outraged. He asks, "Who has dared to do such a thing?" (verse 5), to which Esther replies, "This vile Haman!" (verse 6).

We skipped some verses there, but if you go back and read them, you find that the king steps out in anger, and Haman is left alone with Esther, and begins begging her for his life. The king returns and assumes he's attacking the queen, and orders Haman to be executed. We're told, "Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king said, 'A pole reaching to a height of fifty cubits [about 75 feet] stands by Haman's house. He had it set up for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king.' The king said, 'Impale him on it!'" (verse 9). And that's what they did. I don't think I need to elaborate on that. It would have been pretty gruesome.

Wisdom in Action

Esther then obtains a royal decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves if they are attacked. They do so, and Mordecai and Esther proclaim that day as a great festival for the Jews. Even today, Jewish people continue to celebrate this holiday as the feast of Purim. So why is it in the Bible?

Well, it helps provide historical background to the Jewish people. We don't hear about God in it – Mordecai and Esther both talk about fasting as she prepares to go in to see Xerxes without being summoned, and we assume they pray while they fast, but we don't know – the Bible doesn't tell us that. It explains how Purim came about, which is a time when they give gifts and care for the poor in their communities. And I think, we can recognize God is actively involved in all the coincidences in the story – even though He isn't mentioned.

Esther's story isn't just about a heroic act, but about wisdom in action. She didn't rush into the presence of King Xerxes recklessly. She fasted, and asked others to fast with her. She navigated the political dynamics of the Persian court with tact and precision, and demonstrated uncommon wisdom.

Coming into Royal Dignity

And she wasn't perfect. Mordecai wasn't a perfect person, either. But they were in the right place, at the right time, and were willing to be used – even if unintentionally – for the greater purposes of God. Do you think, when the events recorded in Esther first happened, that Mordecai said, “Esther, you need to do this so you can be famous, and so your story gets recorded in the Bible and told to billions of people for the next 4,000 years?” Or Esther may have said, “Mordecai, I'm going to do this so that I can be remembered in history as the savior of the Jewish people?” I don't think they had those thoughts.

They were imperfect, run-of-the-mill people. What we really have here is an old story that is the Word of God for His people today. Each of us are ordinary, run-of-the-mill people, who have come to royal dignity. Esther came to hers through marriage to Xerxes. Each of us came to ours through our faith in Jesus Christ. Through water and the Spirit, we are made God's children, and co-heirs with Jesus Christ.

And none of us are perfect, either. Look at Esther's story. There's no mention of prayer. Sometimes we fail to pray. There's no mention of God. Sometimes, we forget to mention God, and what God is doing in our lives. But at some point, each of us arrives at a moment, perhaps many moments, when we face threatening decisions that requires holy courage – uncommon wisdom – on our part, that impacts not only us, but also other people around us.

For Such a Time

Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian, is well-known for her work during World War II, where she and her family hid Jews from the Nazis. Her work in the underground movement was dangerous. Do you suppose when she was hiding Jewish people away from the Nazis she thought, “I'm doing this so I can become famous after the war?” Not likely. She saw a need that her neighbors had, and she met them in the need. Like Esther, she had to act with both courage and wisdom. When her family was arrested and sent to concentration camps, Corrie suffered greatly, losing her father and sister.

Yet, in the midst of this horror, Corrie used uncommon wisdom to bring hope and light to those around her. After the war, she traveled the world, sharing her message of forgiveness, even toward those who had persecuted her. Corrie's life reminds us that following Christ involves forgiveness and reconciliation, healing the broken, and extending grace where it seems undeserved.

What about our lives, and the moments in which God might be calling us to act “for such a time as this?” God has placed us here – He’s placed you, as an individual, here – for a reason. Are you willing to step into the role which He’s calling you to – even if it’s uncomfortable or risky? God gives each of us opportunities to meet a variety of neighbors’ needs.

Those opportunities appear at home, at work, at church, in community service and public citizenship. No one is left without an opportunity. In the Gospels, Jesus tells us to love God and neighbor. We have a lot of neighbors, friends! Are we showing them that we are loving them through “such a time as this?” Esther’s story teaches us that God’s timing is always right, and that He equips us with the wisdom needed to fulfill our purpose. May we, like Esther, be ready to step into the role God calls us to with uncommon wisdom and boldness, trusting that the Holy Spirit is working through us to bring greater glory to God.

Prayer: O God, our Guide and help in alien and contentious places: as Esther worked courageously for the deliverance of Your people, strengthen us to confront the oppressor and free the oppressed, so that all people may know the justice and unity of Your realm. Amen.