

Pastor's Message – 10-3-2021  
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 20-22

Once upon a time, there was a king in Persia whose name was Ahaseurus, who we know as Xerxes. His queen was named Vashti, but whose name was actually Amestris. Once upon a time, there may have been two Jews named Mordecai and Esther who lived at the same time as Ahaseurus and Amestris, and the evil Haman - or maybe not.

The story of Esther is a combination of fact and fiction. King Ahasuerus in the Biblical Book of Esther is the historical Persian ruler Xerxes (486--465 B.C.), who ruled over a vast empire from India to Ethiopia (1:1). Many of the details in the book, such as mention of the efficient postal system (3:13; 8:10), the keeping of an official diary (2:23; 6:1--2), and the style of execution, are (added) all in accordance with Persian history. But the author of Esther has used such a setting to tell a story full of intrigue and suspense that probably stems from the second century B.C., when Jews were oppressed in the Hellenic Empire.

The king's wife, Vashti, disobeys and humiliates him; she is replaced on the queen's throne by the beautiful Jewish Esther, whom the king picks out from the company of his captured foreign concubines. Esther is the adopted daughter of the Jew Mordecai; and Mordecai falls into disfavor with the self-important Prince Haman, because he will not bow down to the egotistic prince. Haman vows revenge, not only on Mordecai; but on all the Jews. Indeed, Haman is a good version of an ancient Adolf Hitler; he determines that all Jews, including young and old, women and children, throughout the Persian Empire, are to be annihilated on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (3:13).

Esther alone can save her people (cf. 4:14).

Our Bible reading has all the makings of a blockbuster action thriller movie -- the kind that keeps you on the edge of your seat. It is the story of a reversal of fortunes, of political intrigue, and ultimately, the triumph of good over evil. What makes the story of Esther so memorable is that it reminds us that God is always at work in our world, even at those times when we do not perceive God's presence. And more importantly, Esther reinforces how God is able to put the right people in the right place at the right time.

Our story opens with young Esther becoming queen. What the king did not realize at the time was that Esther was Jewish. "Esther did not reveal her people or kindred" (2:10). God placed Esther in the right place at the right time, to carry out God's design. Esther would liberate her people much like Joseph saved his family from famine back in Genesis. She would rescue her people from certain destruction in much the same way as Moses led the people from slavery to the Promised Land. As queen, Esther would have the king's attention and would be kept informed of what was happening in the kingdom.

Esther's relative, Mordecai, was also in the right place at the right time. One

day he overheard two of the king's trusted guards plotting to assassinate the king. Mordecai told Esther, who informed the king at just the right time. An investigation was launched that ended with the two guards hanging on the gallows. Mordecai won the favor of the king for uncovering this plot and saving the king's life.

The next character who enters the story is quickly identified as the enemy. His name was Haman. He had devised a devious plot to kill all the Jews throughout the kingdom. As an advisor to the king, Haman was able to secure the king's approval without the king knowing exactly what he was signing. Haman tricked the king in order to gain his consent. As word reached the people of Haman's deed, they might have felt that there was nothing they could do to prevent the impending doom. "Wherever the king's decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes" (4:3).

When Esther heard about this plot, she called for a three-day fast in the hopes of receiving divine guidance in this most serious life and death struggle. In a time of national crisis, it is wise to call upon God, seeking God's will and direction. Even at those times when our lives seem out of control, it is helpful to step back and seek out the Lord's guidance. That's exactly what Esther had the people do -- pray with all their might, seeking God's direction.

To add to the intrigue, Haman developed such a strong dislike for Mordecai that he wanted to see him hanged. Haman began secretly plotting against the Jews and Mordecai, while the king continued to praise Mordecai for uncovering the plot to assassinate him. Esther's hope was somehow to convince the king of Haman's evil intention. If only she could expose him for what he truly was, perhaps then she could save her people. From the very beginning, she was well aware of the risk involved, "After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish," she said (4:16). There was a risk involved going to see the king and Esther knew it. So, she decided to host several banquets, just hoping for an opportunity to expose Haman's plot and save her life and those of her people.

On the second day of the banquet, the king again asked Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you." After a little too much wine, the king was willing to grant Esther "half of my kingdom." This was Esther's moment. This was what she was hoping for -- a chance to speak freely about Haman's evil scheme.

Even though there was a risk involved that the whole thing might backfire, Esther knew it was worth it to save the lives of her people, as well as her own life. In one daring move she requested, "Let my life be given me -- that is my petition -- and the lives of my people."

The long-held secret would now be told. The king was unprepared for what she would tell him, "For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated." The king was shocked; he knew nothing about it and asked, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" The person responsible

was nearby listening to every word. Esther told the king, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" The king had trusted his royal adviser to protect his interests and act accordingly. Haman must have felt uneasy as he stood there listening intently to the conversation. What Esther told the king would send him into a rage. Haman was guilty, no question about it. The king left in a fury while in a complete reversal of fortunes, Haman begged for mercy from Queen Esther. Haman was now fearful of his very life.

In a movie-like twist of fate, Haman was hung on the very gallows he had constructed for Mordecai. Esther had saved her people; they would not die. Esther was locked in a life and death struggle and took the necessary risks to win the release of her people. It was a moment of triumph that would be remembered for all time.

It may be a bit challenging to speak about the theology in the Book of Esther, since, you may be surprised to hear, it does not mention God at all. One reply might be that of Esther and Mordecai's trust in the God of Israel: their prayers for help and God's protection of the Jews are presupposed by the simple fact that the book is, after all, part of the Bible. It is the fact that the Book is in the Bible, which provides its theology. This is actually the case, but to jump immediately to that conclusion will keep us from learning one of the main lessons of Esther. We need to start from the fact that the book is, when read by itself, a religionless story of gender, ethnicity, and political struggle.

We must begin then with the fact that the story of Esther can be told with no reference to God.

The idea that God and God's activity in the world is hidden may make some people uncomfortable. It is natural to think that a deity who wants to be acknowledged, trusted, and worshiped would provide clear and convincing evidence of the activity which should earn that kind of respect. There are some who base their theology and their faith on the notion that God is in control of every facet of life – that God has a purpose for everything. But then, how can we know for sure that there is a God who sustains our lives and the social order if there is no observable evidence of divine activity?

Although Esther is not a religious book, perhaps we should center on the purpose of God that lies silently behind it. Throughout the story and, indeed, throughout the Bible, there is the conviction that the Jews form a special place in the plans and working of God (cf. Romans 9--11). Haman's wife tells him in 6:13 that he cannot prevail against the Jews, just as Mordecai is certain in 4:14 that deliverance will always arise for his people. And certainly, the past century of our history testifies that though the Jews have been hunted and persecuted throughout the earth, they cannot be destroyed. The question is: Why?

The Bible is clear about the answer. At the beginning of the history of salvation, God made a promise that through Abraham and his descendants, he would bring blessing on all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3) and thus reverse the cursed effects of our sin that has so corrupted God's good creation (Genesis 1--11). Despite

the continual disobedience and unfaithfulness of his chosen people, God continues, in the time of Esther, and still in our time, to bring about the fulfillment of that promise. When Jews are attacked, therefore, the people whom God has chosen to be his instrument are being attacked, and God's purpose itself is being attacked. "I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse," God told Abraham (Genesis 12:3). And God always keeps his word. The story of Esther, despite its secularity and vindictiveness, sets forth that view.

Further, we must realize that God's fulfillment of his promise to the Jews finally narrows down to one Jew named Jesus Christ, through whom God will bring his final salvation to the world. And so, our Lord tells us, "He who receives me receives him who sent me" (Matthew 10:32; cf. John 14:24). It is as we accept God's working through his chosen people, and finally through his only begotten Son, that we will know God's promised blessing of salvation.

Faith requires us to believe that God is at work in our lives and in the life of the world God created. People of faith whose eyes and ears are open, can see the times and places in which God has been at work. God has a wonderful way of placing the right people in the right place at the right time. We discover throughout the pages of the Bible how God has raised up the right people for the task at hand, at just the right time. Even at those times when it appears that God is absent, God is still at work behind the scenes to bring about His own purposes in ways that we might not expect.

The question we have to ask then, is how is God at work right here and right now? How has God called each of us at this time and in this place to bring deliverance to those who are in jeopardy, and who need the hand of God to change their lives and save them? How might God use each one of us in this time and place?

Christians are in this time, but not of this time. Believers in Jesus are in this world, but not of the world. We are challenged to take a global view, look beyond ourselves and our small corner of the world, and consider how the church should initiate engagement, like Mordecai and Esther, with secular powers around the world.

It could be politics or health care or race relations or economics or education or immigration or any of the issues of our time, and the Book of Esther inspires the people of God to take a stand. There is no mention here of Judeo-Christian values such as kindness, mercy, and forgiveness. No reference to the God of Israel, although the Persian king is mentioned 190 times. Missing entirely from Esther is mention of such basic religious practices and institutions as the Law, covenant, dietary regulations, or the city of Jerusalem.

What is clearly present is the evidence of God at work and the willingness of God's people to step out in faith, to risk: when the moment is right. People of God are called to pray, to listen for God's direction and then to stand together, in unity, and do what's right; trusting that although God may not be visible, God is at work and deliverance is at hand.