

For Just Such a Time as This      Esther (selected verses)      4/19/20

The biblical book of Esther is an unusual one. It is the only book in the Bible that never explicitly mentions God, although God is clearly at work in the background. As it tells the story of the deliverance of the Jewish people during their captivity in the Persian empire, it uses irony and over-the-top images to make their captors look like bumbling buffoons. To this day the entire book is read aloud with comic effect each year during the Jewish festival of Purim, which celebrates the events of the book. And, I believe Esther has something important to say to us in our situation today. So, let's get started.

The story takes place in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the reign of Persian King Ahasuerus, about 480BC. The King invites officials and nobility from all around his vast kingdom to the capital city of Susa, so he can show off "*the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and pomp of his majesty.*" The festivities last for 180 days! Then he holds an additional 7-day drinking feast in the royal court. We pick up the story in Esther 1:10.

DAVE: <sup>10</sup>*On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who attended him, <sup>11</sup>to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and*

*the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold. <sup>12</sup>But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs.*

BONNIE: *At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him. <sup>13</sup>Then the king consulted the sages who knew the laws: <sup>15</sup>"According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?"*

DAVE: *<sup>16</sup>Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. <sup>17</sup>For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.'*

BONNIE: (Memucan continued,) *<sup>18</sup>This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath! <sup>19</sup>If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. <sup>20</sup>So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his*

*kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.”*

DAVE: <sup>21</sup>*This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan proposed;* <sup>22</sup>*he sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house.*(Esther 1:10-13a;15-22)

And I'm sure that settled the matter everywhere! In his drunken stupor, the king calls for the queen so he can show her off to his drunken subordinates, to be subjected to who knows what. She understandably refuses, provoking a crisis that reverberates throughout the whole Persian empire. King Ahasuerus, whose great power and wealth took six full months to display, has been shown to be powerless against one woman! So, the queen is deposed and an over-the-top edict is enacted.

Well, now there is a vacancy in the position of queen. Court officials recommend an empire-wide search for just the right woman to fill the role. All of them will be brought into the royal harem for a year of preparation before being presented to the king for his final decision. That brings us to Esther.

BONNIE: <sup>5</sup>*Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite.* <sup>7</sup>*Mordecai*

*had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother; the girl was fair and beautiful, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter.*

DAVE: <sup>8</sup>*So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in the citadel of Susa in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women.*

BONNIE: <sup>9</sup>*The girl pleased him and won his favor, and he quickly provided her with her cosmetic treatments and her portion of food, and with seven chosen maids from the king's palace, and advanced her and her maids to the best place in the harem.* <sup>10</sup>*Esther did not reveal her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to tell. (Esther 2:5,7-10)*

So Mordecai's adopted daughter, Esther, is in the running to be the new queen, and gets off to a great start. She is a Jew, but on instruction from Mordecai, keeps that bit quiet. Keep in mind that although living in royal splendor had some advantages, Esther had no choice in this matter- she "was taken" into the royal harem. Well, the competition to be the new queen continues, and Esther wins, and is crowned the new queen. But this good news is followed by an ominous development. The king promotes an evil man named Haman to the #2 position in the kingdom. And the king

orders that everyone should bow down to Haman, but Mordecai wasn't having it. We're not told why, and there are several possibilities, but Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, which enraged him. Here's how he reacted.

BONNIE: *But (Haman) thought it beneath him to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, having been told who Mordecai's people were, Haman plotted to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus. <sup>8</sup>Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus,*

DAVE: *"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. <sup>9</sup>If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, so that they may put it into the king's treasuries." (Esther 3:6,8-9)*

Haman uses his rage at Mordecai to manipulate the king into ordering the genocide of the whole Jewish people, although he doesn't actually say who these disloyal people are in his request to the king. And he adds a huge bribe to seal the deal! The king tells him to go ahead and draw up the edict, which Haman does, specifying that on a certain day people

throughout the empire are to “*destroy, kill, and annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children.*” (Esther 3:13) And the edict is quickly sent throughout the entire empire, using the Pony Express system employed earlier.

Well, Mordecai gets wind of this plot and gets word to Esther, begging her to intercede with the King. But Esther sends word to Mordecai saying,

BONNIE: <sup>11</sup>*“All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.”*

DAVE: <sup>12</sup>*When they told Mordecai what Esther had said,* <sup>13</sup>*Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.* <sup>14</sup>*For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”*

BONNIE: <sup>15</sup>*Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai,* <sup>16</sup>*“Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor*

*drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.”* (Esther 4:11-16)

Esther stays true to her word. In a series of dramatic scenes, she approaches the king and is received by him, and then asks him to spare her and her people. The king clearly didn't know that the Jewish people were the ones being targeted, or that Esther would be included among those who would be killed. He believed he had been duped by Haman, who he commands to be hanged on the 6-story gallows Haman had erected for Mordecai- some poetic justice. Thus, the whole Jewish nation is saved through the courage and cunning of Esther. You should read the whole story on your own- although some parts may not be suitable for children!

I'm particularly intrigued by Mordecai's words to Esther, "*Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.*" (Esther 4:14b)

We are also facing a crisis- "just such a time as this"- locally, statewide, nationally, and all over the world with the Coronavirus! There have been great losses and hardships in many places, and there is still a lot of uncertainty about the future. Perhaps God has brought us to this

place and situation for “just such a time as this.” There is much in Christian faith to bring us comfort in such a time. We’ve looked together at some of those scriptures and sung some of those songs. But there are also opportunities to be God’s hands and feet during such a time. To open our eyes and hearts to opportunities to show kindness and love in our own neighborhoods. To help organize ministries of compassion in our larger community. To listen to those who are hurting or lonely or grieving wherever they may be. And, we could follow Esther’s example of engaging in spiritual disciplines like fasting, prayer, and Bible reading.

Many of you are aware of the work of our Strategic Planning Team, that had begun to share with us what they’ve been learning before we had to shut things down. Part of what they have been learning is that largely due to cultural shifts, numbers are going down in churches everywhere, including our own numbers. That means that we will need to find new ways to do ministry, if we are to be effective in this new world. This pandemic has speeded up that process, hasn’t it?

We are being forced into using new technologies in a whole host of areas. That’s a steep learning curve for some of us, but it’s vitally important! We’re using Zoom meetings for our staff, for committees, for small groups, for youth groups and confirmation. We posting faith-building activities for children each week on our website. We’re relying on



Facebook, our website, email blasts, and a podcast this week to communicate with one another. We're doing more one-on-one ministry than ever via phone and email. And many people outside of our membership are tuning in to these live-stream worship services. Might some of them want to become part of what God is doing here at GPC? I hope so!

Like Mordecai, I'd say that perhaps God has put you and me and GPC here for just such a time as this! I wonder what God will do through us.