

“You Are Exactly Where God Wants You to Be” Esther 1-8 8/28/16

The tension of living faithfully in an unfaithful culture has been a challenge for God’s people for thousands of years. Even today, millions of Christians in parts of the world controlled by radical Islamists, Hindu nationalists, and atheistic regimes face real persecution just for living out their faith. And Christians in our own country can experience social pressure when they insist on integrity where they work, or advocate for the compassionate treatment of all people in their communities, when they try to remain faithful to the biblical demands for sexual purity, or simply share their faith with those around them. Living faithfully continues to be a challenge for us.

The biblical book of Esther tells the story of some people who tried to live faithfully in very difficult circumstances. I think their example can inspire us and also give us insights as to how we can live faithfully today. The story takes place about 450 years before Christ. God’s people, Israel, had been defeated by the Babylonian armies and carried off into exile a hundred years before. When the Persians defeated the Babylonians, many Jews continued to live in exiled communities under Persian rule.

There is quite a bit of humor in the story, much of it directed at the Persian rulers, who are often made to look like a bunch of buffoons! I think that was done to encourage later Jews who were living under occupation.

It would have reminded them that those powerful Persians, and later Greeks and Romans weren't so mighty after all!

The story unfolds like a play. In Act I, King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, has invited dignitaries, government officials, and military leaders from all over his empire to come to the capital city of Susa, so he can show off his great wealth and power. This self-promoting display goes on for six months! (You have to wonder who was minding the store in the rest of the kingdom all that time!) At the conclusion of the festivities he throws a huge banquet for all the people of Susa lasting seven more days! The actual Hebrew word for this banquet is "drinking party," so by the seventh day, everyone was pretty soused. At that point King Ahasuerus decides to conclude the festivities by calling for his wife, Queen Vashti, to join them so she can be displayed to these drunken hordes. She declines the invitation, which throws the entire kingdom into chaos. (There is real irony here: The most powerful man in the world can't get his wife to come to a party!)

The king consults his counselors who warn that women all over the kingdom will rebel against their husbands if something is not done. They advise that the queen be deposed and that a royal order go out to the entire kingdom commanding that wives must give honor to their husbands. (I'm sure that worked out well!) Here's what happened.

²¹*This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan proposed;* ²²*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 1:21,22)* (This will not be the only time that Persian officials overreact to a situation!)

In Act II, a new queen must be found to replace Vashti. A kind of “Miss Persia” pageant is held, with the most beautiful young women in the kingdom being brought into the king’s harem and then prepared with beauty treatments-for a year! When they have been prepared, a different woman is brought before the king each night, so he can choose a queen from among them. One of these young women is a Jew named Esther, the adopted daughter of a man named Mordecai. (By the way, Mordecai instructs her to keep her ethnic heritage a secret, and she does.) Esther is described as “fair and beautiful” and quickly wins the favor of the eunuch who is in charge of the harem. He made sure she was well-cared for and properly prepared for her meeting with the king.

Here’s what happened next, “¹⁶*When Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus in his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign,* ¹⁷*the king loved Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favor and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of*

Vashti. ¹⁸Then the king gave a great banquet to all his officials and ministers—“Esther’s banquet.” He also granted a holiday to the provinces, and gave gifts with royal liberality. (Esther 2:16-18)

So, Esther rises in prominence, but it must have been very challenging to be faithful to her Jewish faith, while living in a royal court filled with pagan deities and values very different from her own. We’ll look at one of those challenges in a minute, but first the story tells us about an important development. A plot to kill the king is uncovered by Esther’s father, Mordecai. He gets word to Esther, who informs the king and the plot is thwarted. Word of Mordecai’s faithfulness is recorded in the king’s records.

Act III introduces the villain of our story, Haman, the second most powerful man in Persia. He was so powerful that everyone was commanded to bow down to Haman as the king’s representative. But, for reasons that are never clear, Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman. Haman is enraged, but rather than deal with Mordecai alone, he hatches a plot to kill all the Jews in the kingdom! ⁸*Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “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. ⁹If 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 3:8-9)

Haman portrays the Jewish people as a threat, saying that they have different laws and customs and therefore cannot be trusted. For whatever reason, the king agrees to this outrageous proposal, and an edict is sent out across the whole kingdom specifying the date on which this will be done. Word quickly spreads and the Jewish community is thrown into an uproar. Mordecai gets word to Esther, who was apparently insulated from knowing about this. He asks her to gain an audience with the king to plead for her people. She resists his suggestion, saying, ¹¹*“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.”* ¹²*When they told Mordecai what Esther had said,* ¹³*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.* ¹⁴*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.”¹⁵ Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶“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.”¹⁷ Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. (Esther 4:11-17)

This is the heart of the story. Unlike every other book of the Bible, Esther never mentions God directly! But God is at work behind the scenes, working out his will for his people. Esther is in Persia, not by her choice, but because her people are being held as captives. She is in the royal court, again, not by her choice, but because she was summoned to go there. And yet, as Mordecai notes, perhaps all of this has happened to her so that she can intervene on behalf of God’s people, Israel.

She dares to wait just outside the court, hoping that the king will see her and invite her in. He does. He is clearly enchanted by her and tells her he will give her whatever she wants, “up to half of his kingdom!” So she invites him to come along with Haman to a banquet she is holding that evening. There she will tell him her request. The king and Haman go to the banquet. During the meal the king asks, “What is your petition?” Whether Esther got cold feet, or just sensed that the time wasn’t right, she

delays asking, and invites the king and Haman to come to a second banquet the next night. They agree.

Later that night the king has trouble sleeping. He begins reading through the annals of his court and stumbles upon the record of the time Mordecai uncovered a plot against him. The king determines to honor him.

The next night the king and Haman go to Esther's second banquet, anxiously awaiting her request.

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ²On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." ³Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. ⁴For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king." ⁵Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" ⁶Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

⁷The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him. ⁸When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining; and the king said, “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?” As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman’s face. ⁹Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high.” And the king said, “Hang him on that.”¹⁰So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated. (Esther 7:1-10)

Now, there is a more to the story, but you can read that for yourself. The main point is that Esther, with the help of her father, Mordecai, finds a way to be faithful while living in an unfaithful society. And God uses her courageous actions to save his people through whom came the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ.

Allen Boesak, a courageous South African who stood against apartheid, wrote this, “We will go before God to be judged, and God will ask us: ‘Where are your wounds?’

And we will say, 'We have no wounds.'

And God will ask, 'Was nothing worth fighting for?'

God has placed you where you are for God's special purposes. You are not in those places by accident. I don't know why you are there, but God has placed you there for a reason. Ask God to give you eyes to see what you are being called to do- to act with kindness toward someone who is left out, to stand up for justice for those who cannot stand up for themselves, to begin ministries of compassion, or to share your faith with others. You are exactly where God wants you to be, to carry out God's work.

Like Mordecai said to Esther, "Perhaps you have come to Cross Keys Village or Gettysburg High School, or Gettysburg Hospital or Walmart or Gettysburg College or the Rotary Club, or wherever you are... for just such as time as this."