

First Scripture Reading Esther 2.1-10, 17, 3.1-6

Second Scripture Reading Esther 4.1-16

Third Scripture Reading Esther 5.1-8, 7.1-6, 8.11, 9.16

This is the only Sunday in the entire three year cycle of the common lectionary, that book of Esther comes up, so I wanted to be sure that we got as close as we could getting the full story of Ester as we could. If this is the only Sunday where Esther is given a voice, then let us hear what book of Esther is trying to say to us today. Esther has long been a controversial book, it barely mentions any practice of Judaism and the biggest reason it probably is almost completely absent from our lectionary is that it is the only book in the Bible which does not mention the Lord. Almost nothing about this book is normal, including the characters, the ridiculous foreign king is typical, but the anti-Semitic Haman bent on the destruction of an entire people, seems too close to figures from our own time. Even for the heroes of this narrative, neither Esther nor Mordecai seem particularly religious. As I said before the name of God is never uttered even once throughout this entire book, and it does not resemble any of the other books within the Old Testament. It does not recount the miraculous deeds of God, intervening to save the people of Israel, Esther is not particularly miraculous, it is not filled with prophetic utterings, nor is it the worshipful psalms, Esther is strange. Everything about this book is strange, the lack of a God who acts for or speaks to His people, the characters, everything.

Esther seems to be a book which contains a nice story of triumph for a persecuted people, but not on the level of Scripture. Where is God? What could this story possibly say to us today? This has been an incredible challenge for both Jews and Christians over the centuries, returning to this text anew. In fact the leading Jewish rabbis wanted to leave Esther out of their Scriptures

entirely, but only placed it among the others because of its popularity among the people. Even among Christians it has stood as this small and challenging book, where God seems to be absent. Some have tried to “fix” Esther by turning it into something it is not, by placing prophetic messages that just do not fit. Luther even remarked that he wished that the book of Esther did not exist. Esther is strange because we get these incredible human lows, the depths of their depravity but lack the glorious heights of God, we lack a triumph of grace. In Esther we are brought low into human existence and suffering, and we stay there. We stay there as the human characters move through the narrative, as God watches what they will do, what we will do.

The book of Esther opens with Xerxes, this king who has recently ascended to his father’s throne to rule a vast empire, which he did not build. He is the new king of Persia, which stretches from India to Ethiopia, but the image we get is of a man who is only concerned with his own appetites for luxury and lavish parties. He is the first imperfect character of a cast of imperfect characters. He is a spoiled brat who has stumbled into power and wealth, all of his actions are over the top, and to excess. He rules governed by his emotions and the whims of those around him. He likes parties, and his friends and beautiful women, it is all just there so he can have a good time. None of these qualities are what you look for in a leader.

When the story begins, Xerxes has just thrown a big party, that has lasted seven days, and we are told that they were drinking royal wine in abundance. Needless to say after seven days of drinking, Xerxes and his friends are not making great choices, either personally or for ruling an empire. So Xerxes and his drunken buddies get really riled up and decide it’s time to send for Vashti, his wife, the queen so that she can show off her royal crown. Given what we know about Xerxes and his appetites, we can assume it is not the crown that this drunken rabble really want to see. So Vashti refuses, but this angers Xerxes and his drinking buddies. They decide that once

their wives hear about the disrespect show to the king, all of the wives in Persia will follow suit. So they convince Xerxes to pass a law saying that all wives must honor their husbands no matter how high or lowly. Vashti is now not just a buzz kill of a wife but she is breaking a royal decree, so by law she has to go. With Vashti gone, Xerxes is finally the master of his own house, but that does not do him much good when he is the only one in it, so when he sobers up enough he decides it is time to find a new queen. He remembers what he decreed in a drunken stupor, and figures one great idea leads to another. So he comes up with another fantastic idea, a beauty pageant! And whomever wins the beauty pageant becomes the new queen.

And this is where Esther comes into the story. She is the younger cousin of Mordecai, whose great grandfather was taken along with the other leaders of the Israel into Babylon as part of the Babylonian captivity. After Babylon fell to Persia, the Jews remained under new foreign masters. They have been existing in exile, trying desperately to make lives for themselves, to move on from the bitterness of captivity, without losing who they are as Jews. They know that they were taken from Jerusalem, but for people removed from their homeland for generations, it is no more than a vague and distant memory. They have never seen it for themselves, but this identity is all that is holding this scattered people together in their exile. Esther is among these scattered people, without any family other than Mordecai, without any ties to her Jewish roots other than her adopted father. She is gathered up into this beauty pageant, but in the interview portion she leaves out that she is Jewish, so it is her own little secret. She goes on to win the pageant and is made queen, this girl who is a nobody without a mother or father, descendant of exiles, becomes queen of this kingdom which stretched from India to Ethiopia. She's made it.

For Esther this should be the happily ever after, the girl from humble roots with everything against her, has risen up from a nobody to become somebody. Xerxes is no prince

charming but since it is against the law for wives to say, well “no one’s perfect” what are you going to do? This is the dream that we all have, to work hard, have our dreams fulfilled whether it is to graduate or get a job and a career, to find someone to share your life with and then call it happily ever after. Every Disney movie tells us this is where the story is supposed to end. But that is not where Esther ends, the story is just getting started. This is not the whole story, as we learn when we get to where we think our stories should trail off, there is still more drama, there is still more conflict and crisis. No story that has even some semblance of reality ends with “happily ever after”, because anyone who has ever made it to the goal they set up for themselves, life goes on, your story goes on. But now we do not even feel like the authors of this story, we are now just along for the ride, going to places we never anticipated, going to places we do not really want to be.

After the beauty pageant, Esther is now queen and Haman, one of the king’s officials has convinced king Xerxes to pass another brilliant decree, that whenever he should ride his horse all should bow down before him. We can imagine that Haman relished in this new found power, until he came upon Mordecai who refused to bow down because he is a Jew. He was unable to bow down before any human, so Haman becomes infuriated at this one Jewish man standing tall before him. Haman decides that it is not enough to only have Mordecai pay for this, so he talks the silly king into passing another decree to destroy all of the Jews. He convinced stupid king Xerxes to extinguish the lives of all the Jews because he said they were a threat to the kingdom. He tells Xerxes, this people who refuses to assimilate, who have hung onto their identity as a people are a threat to your kingdom and must be completely destroyed. And Mordecai, the descendant of the leadership of Israel has become the catalyst for their destruction. His pride has

turned a personal feud, into the destruction of his people. It is because of his pride that Esther, the beauty queen, is forced to become the hero.

When Mordecai heard what was to happen, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes and went into the streets wailing. Mordecai is mourning the impending death of his people. But this act was also a practice which was also used to implore God to intervene. Mordecai is mourning the deaths he feels responsible for, all the while imploring the same God who let them go into harsh and bitter exile to save this people. While God is never mentioned, Mordecai is trying to get God to act for His people, Mordecai is trying to get Esther to act for her people. Esther sends a messenger to Mordecai to find out what is going on, and Mordecai tells her what is about to befall their people. He pleads with her, through the messenger, to go before the king. He begs her to do something about this, to act for her people. Esther responds by telling Mordecai that everyone in the kingdom knows that anyone who comes before the king who has not been summoned must be put to death, unless the king spares them, and it has been a month since Esther has been called. She may have won the beauty pageant, but not surprisingly her new husband has quickly forgotten about her. And she does not want to end up like Vashti. Suddenly, her “happily ever after” is no more, there is a threat to this life which has been carefully put together. She cannot even see the king, let alone make this request unless she is called before the king and there is no indication that that is going to happen anytime soon. Esther is asking Mordecai “who am I to take this on”. I am only a beauty queen, I am only the descendent of exiles, I am only a woman in a world ruled by either depraved or despicable men, I am only an orphan, I am only one person, who am I to take this on?

At some point in your life and in the life of this church we are all challenged, the happily ever after we have worked so hard to create is threatened. And we all end up asking who am I,

who are we to do anything about this? We encounter poverty, hunger, injustice in our communities and around the world and we ask who am I to take this on? We know that these things need to be addressed, we assume by someone who is not us. We look on these problems and say I am not smart enough to understand let alone deal with these problems, I can barely afford to take care of my family let alone figure out how to take care of other families. We ask what can I do about the conflicts of this world? What can this church do about the problems in this community, we are small and just trying to keep the lights on? Who are we to take this on?

Mordecai responds to Esther's doubts and our doubts, he tells her that she will not be spared, that she will share the fate of her people. I am not sure how convincing this would be, as people we are pretty talented at saying whatever tragedies are out there are just out there. In this country, in this state, in this community, on this street, in my house, in our church, we do not have to be a part of the problems out there. We can easily content ourselves with our small space and let the world turn around us.

But then Mordecai goes on to say that if Esther refuses to act deliverance for the Jews will come from another place. This is the one veiled reference we have to a God who wills for the people of Israel to survive. God's providence, God's will, reigns, so maybe you have become queen for such a time as this. Maybe all of your plans, all of your strategic planning meetings have only been so that God can work through you today. Maybe who you are, is the one God will work through to bring deliverance for your people. Maybe the answer to the question that Esther asks, the question we are constantly asking ourselves, is, the one whom God is calling and sending. Who you are is defined not by who you belittle yourself to be, but sanctified as the one whom, by your baptism, becomes part of God's holy work in the world.

We do not know how God will deliver this people, but Esther must act with profound hope that she is participating in God's divine will for her people. We must act with profound hope, even when we are as unsure as Esther and Mordecai that we have discerned our role in God's plan, even when we know there is a possibility of failure. Mordecai and Esther were sure of the survival of their people, even if Esther failed to sway the king, even if Haman succeeded, both say, God wills for His people to continue. Regardless of their success, God's will reigns, His people will survive. Even as the Church goes through difficult times, we profess that God continues to be with His people. God continues to guide His Church.

After you get to the place you work so hard to achieve, you have this calling, this great calling which requires more than you think you can give, more than you can sacrifice, because it requires putting your dreams on the line. You are confronted with a choice, and the most heroic choice you can make is to place everything you have worked so hard for on the line. You have to throw yourself into it entirely. From offstage God responds, and we cannot keep silent, we must respond in some way to this calling. This is the choice of your life, the life of the church, we must respond to this. This is the heroic moment for Esther, where she decides she has no alternative, she says if I perish, I perish, I must intercede, I must take up this calling.

So Esther, knowing how much Xerxes loves parties, goes into his court and after her life is spared, she requests that the king come to a party she is throwing him. There is no surprise when the king loves this idea, and at the end of it he asks her again what is her request, he will give her half of his kingdom at her request. So she asks him to come to another party, an even better party, she really knows her audience, and bring Haman. This idea sounds great to the king, have another, even better, party and bring his friend along it all sounds great! After two days of partying the king asks Esther for her request, and this is when Esther pleads for her life and the

life of her people. She finally reveals the secret she guarded so closely, she threw her lot in with her people and if she is going to perish, now she really will perish. She has thrown away everything she has accomplished, this is the moment when it is all put on the line. The king becomes infuriated with Haman and he meets his demise.

The people have been delivered but the story is still not over. Esther is now a powerful woman, she rose to a position to deliver her people, and now she has all of the power of the king at her disposal, and God is waiting to see what she will do. The story takes a hard and dark turn, we are told that a decree went out for the Jews to kill all of their adversaries, and they killed over seventy five thousand people believed to be enemies of the Jews. It is hard for us to look back on brutal stories from these ancient texts and have empathy, but it is even harder to look back and find the Word of God in the close of Esther's drama. You wonder whether she could have made different choices, whether she could have done something differently. Maybe, God just walks away at the end, content to be left out from the story seeing Esther's choices. This story is being played out in our lives and the life of this church. The drama, the real end is what you do with the grace poured out by God, how do you use that grace you have received? How will you be a steward of the blessings you have received? How as a church blessed with grace, coming through crisis, will we choose to use this grace?