

December 9, 2018 - Advent 2

Women of the Old Testament - Esther: Confronting Hate & Convincing Kings ©

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Scripture: The Book of Esther

We have seen the women of Scripture involved in extremely complex situations and stories in this series. We learn a valuable lesson through the women of the Old Testament that our lives of faith become realized when we fully engage this life in this world, right here and right now. Things get complex quickly when we understand we are physical beings in God's created world, and our spiritual lives demand no separation from this world and all its complexity. Jesus literally embodies this truth, this feminine truth - which, by the way, was part of the problem with Jesus: he did not act like a man - that once we choose to follow God in God's world, there is no separation between the physical and the spiritual, between God and human, between the soul and the body.

The story of Esther takes us right into the heart of the greatest empire of the day, and one of the most powerful in the history of the world. King Ahashverosh, which is the Hebrew transcription of his Persian name, Xerxes 1, ruled the Persian Empire for about 40 years around 360BC. The Persian Empire reached from the furthest Eastern shores of India, across the Middle East, to all of Ethiopia. Xerxes essentially controlled all the countries that bordered the Indian Sea. The Persian army was the most advanced in the world at the time and many of the military maneuvers of Ahashverosh were used all the way up to World War 2.

Massive militaries and empires always have weak spots, and Ahashverosh's military machine did not deal well with small, well-organized insurgents, which is why the fall of the Persian empire began when Ahashverosh ran up against the Spartans of Greece. A small army of 300 guerrilla fighters brought down 10s of thousands of the King's soldiers there. But I get ahead of myself.

The point is that small events, and even a single person, can radically alter the direction of huge empires and great systems of power. This is what Esther does.

Esther ends up in the harem of the king because the king's first queen, Vashti, refuses to dance for the king and his visitors. He wanted to show off her exceptional beauty and talent. Vashti did not want to do that, so Ahashverosh executes her. Soon, he desires a new queen and puts out a search for the most beautiful women in the province in the capital city of Susa, which is now in Iran, and was the center of the Persian Empire. And so, Esther, a Jewish woman living in exile from Jerusalem, finds herself in harem of the most powerful man in the world.

It turns out that the resident Rabbi of the court, Mordecai, is also Esther's cousin. Mordecai uncovers an assassination plot against Ahashverosh and has Esther report it to Ahashverosh. She gains favor in the King's eyes and is thought of favorably by him.

The Jewish people are in exile at this time, and this story is one that repeats over and over for the Jewish people throughout history. For reasons that are never historically clear, there are always people who hate the Jews. When Kate and Rhiannon were in the synagogue preschool, there was a saying among the women who taught there about most of the Jewish festivals. The festivals of Judaism happen for one primary reason:

They tried to kill us; they didn't succeed; let's eat.

Now, before we go any further, the question that arises around the hatred of the Jewish people is almost always asked in the wrong way. The question that gets asked is, "*What did they do that so many people hate them?*" This is exactly the wrong question. The real question, the theologically correct question, is, "*What is wrong with us that we continually allow the hatred of the Jewish people and therefore anyone else who is not like us to flourish in such a way that we need to target them or some other group for destruction?*" We don't ask that question because, likely, we won't like the answer.

To stand against generational hatred, and to claim one's heritage in the face of the continual threat of destruction, requires faith in God and trust that God will fulfill God's covenant with His people. In the beginning of our story, Esther does not disclose that she is a Jew. But the Jews are very much in trouble in our story, because Mordecai, Esther's cousin, has triggered an international incident. Haman, the prime minister of the Persian Empire appointed by Ahashverosh, has commanded that all he see Haman in public must bow down to him in obedience and allegiance. Mordecai refuses, and in response, Haman calls for all the Jews to be killed.

¹³*Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. ¹⁴A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation, calling on all the peoples to be ready for that day. (3:13-14)*

Mordecai goes to Esther for help. She initially refuses because, first, she is a Jew herself, but no one knows, so she would survive the purge; and second, going to the king before he calls a woman to see him is punishable by death. In other words, Esther will likely die by confronting the situation.

This is a good place to point out one of the most surprising things about the Book of Esther. It is the only book in the Bible where God is never mentioned. No mention is ever made. Later, in maybe 600 AD, additions were made to the book that inserted the name of God, prayers, and conversations about God. But the traditional version, and the version we Protestants use, has no mention of God anywhere. There is no appeal to convince Esther in the name of God. There is no prayer for guidance. There is no angel, no burning bush, no voice from above.

I suspect that what is true for me is also true for many of you. As I go about my day, as I face big and small decisions, as I deal with other people, I do not hear the voice of God telling me what to do. I do not have a continual sense of the presence of God guiding me. I do not hear or see angels. I do not have people appealing to me to do things because God says I or we should do it.

Instead, I gather here with you on Sundays, and maybe the middle of the week. We might have a meeting or might see each other in the grocery store. We do what we can to keep our faith present in our lives and we put some kind of trust in what we have learned and are learning, and then we act in the best way we know how. God may never enter into the discussion or even our minds when we do what we do.

The only potentially theological statement that occurs in the Book of Esther comes from Rabbi Mordecai, when he is trying to convince Esther to act to save her people. In that conversation, Mordecai says to Esther:

'Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.

¹⁴For 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.' (4:13-14)

Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this...This is a powerful statement. But it is stated in the unknown. Like the prophet Eli who lived in a dark and blind time in Israel, what is known about God is very hazy and uncertain for the Jewish people of this day and age. Mordecai is a good pastor here. He does not make declarative statements because he knows his vision is also shaded. He does not know the future, and nor does he know whether Esther will do anything at all. But he questions and puts forward possibilities. At the very least, hope is a possibility and good outcomes are a potentiality, even in this insane situation.

That, it seems to me, is a quite a faith statement in and of itself. And it seems convincing to Esther as well, who calls upon the Jews in Susa to fast with her for 3 days in preparation for the attempt she will make to save her people by convincing Ahashverosh

to reverse the hate-filled decree of horrible Haman. Like so many of the women we've looked at before this, Esther does stuff. She puts her life on the line. Esther confronts the hatred of Haman, who wants people to bow down to him whenever he walks by, and craves the favor of his king. Haman is mortally obsessed with presenting himself in the best possible way. Ahashverosh begins to suspect something is up, and when he learns that Mordecai the Rabbi is the one who saved him from assassination, the king has Haman lead the donkey that carries Mordecai through the streets in celebration of Mordecai's allegiance and heroism. This is what English literature students call 'a great reversal'.

And then at a second banquet that Esther sets up for Ahashverosh and Haman, Esther calls out Haman in front of the king, comes out as a Jew, and saves her people from destruction. This is why Esther is considered a kind of second Moses, and there are little clues throughout this story that she would be well considered as a pre-Christ, pre-Messiah, figure as well. Again, I would remind you, at no time have we heard the name of God spoken in any way anywhere in this story.

What we see in this story is not how well we can use the word God and put it into a theological statement or rule of behavior that we must follow. Rather, what we see is how faith enacts in the world, even in the face of death and persecution. This isn't a story about God asking people to do things. This is a story about people fighting to have the freedom of faith, of people who rely on what they have been taught to carry through in their actions in the world. Esther, then, is not some passive character: she's an active agent who changes the history of the world by acting on the deepest values of her faith.

As Yoram Horzany puts it,

The real miracle in the story is Esther herself...the more Esther fully inhabits her capacity as an independent political agent capable of influencing human affairs, the more fully God's will is brought to bear in history.

Esther's own choices and actions - undertaken without any explicit command or instruction from God - make her the principal instrument of God's will in this story. In Esther...we see God's miraculous action in history, an action that aims toward the redemption of his people, and through them the redemption of the world. ¹

This is an active faith, even at the risk of death. Esther literally changes the world for the sake of God's people, without ever a mention of God. Faith, for Esther, is a verb. She is 'faith-ing' her way through this spectacular confluence of events. She is not speaking about God. She is not reciting creeds or covenants or lists of behaviors that people have

¹ From "The Miracle of Esther" by Yoram Hazony. Article in First Things, March 2016 issue

written for us to recite in order to prove our allegiance to the God of Creation, History, Wisdom, Prophecy and Salvation. No, she just does the thing. She knows herself to be an independent, active agent with the capacity to make decisions in this world right now. And that is, perhaps, as Mordecai might say, by design. God created independent active agents with the capacity to make decisions in this world right now. It makes 'faith' into an action word, not a noun that names a thing.

My advisor and mentor at Luther Seminary put it this way in an essay on Esther:

*...do we, that is, on a day to day basis think of faith primarily as functioning as a noun in our lives or as a verb. If it's a noun, then our faith is primarily about what we should believe. Creeds, catechisms, statements and formulations of faith, and so on. Faith understood primarily as a noun stresses the **cognitive dimension** of our faith.*

*Which is why I think reclaiming faith as a verb is really important. Faith understood this way is more **active** than cognitive, as it stresses living our faith in the way we treat others, in how we raise our children, in how we spend our money, vote at elections, care for those in need around us, and more. Faith understood as a verb is about our daily activities and practices and stresses acting on our faith rather than just thinking about it.²*

So, perhaps, and there is really no way to know this except on the other side of the doing of the thing itself, perhaps, you and I have come to this place in history for just such a time as this. Who knows?

Amen.

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/11/is-faith-a-noun-or-verb/>