

October 30, 2022

The Bible Story Journey: Esther

Last week we heard some of the stories of Daniel: stories told during the Persian Era among the Jews who lived scattered about the empire, far from their homeland. Today we have one more story from that time, with the same purpose: comfort and encouragement to exiles. The story of Esther encourages faithfulness to God in the face of persecution and threat. But, for all that, it's not a grim story. It's a tale with clear-cut heroes and a clear-cut villain, and the heroes win. It's a little like an old-fashioned melodrama – “Dirty Work at the Crossroads” or “The Perils of Pauline.” In fact, in the Jewish tradition, this story is the centerpiece of the feast called Purim, during which the story is treated like a melodrama. As the story is read, every time the villain's name is pronounced – “Haman” – all the listeners are supposed to Boo and Hiss and shake noisemakers. So we're going to do that today. But because Methodists have gotten domesticated since our early days, we're going to need to practice first.

Now, it happened during the years of the Persian Empire, that the king of that empire, King Ahasuerus, held a banquet for his officials, a banquet he enjoyed so much that he just kept it going. For about six months. Finally, he decided it was time to get back to work, and he was so proud of his resolve, that he held a week-long party to celebrate returning to work. At that party, he decided it to bring out his queen, Vashti, to show off her beauty to all his friends. He sent word to Vashti.

Queen Vashti replied, “Tell that drunken old poop I'm not a pet monkey or a piece of art to put on display.” And she declined his invitation.

King Ahasuerus was stunned. Hadn't he *said* she was pretty? What more do women want? His friends at the party looked very serious. “O king, you can't let this sort of uppity behavior go unpunished. What if our wives heard that the queen of Persia disobeyed her husband? Once you let women have their own opinions, that's the end of civilization!”

“What should I do?”

“You must remove Vashti from the throne and replace her with someone else. I know! You can have a big contest and bring all the prettiest girls in the kingdom to your court, so you can pick one for your next queen. There can be an evening gown competition, and –”

“Ooh! That sounds fun!” said Ahasuerus.

So messengers went out looking for pretty girls for the king to consider. Now, as it happened, right there in the capital city of Susa, there lived a Jewish man named Mordecai, who was raising his orphaned cousin Esther, who was very beautiful. She was also meek and bashful. She blushed easily and was a very good listener in the sense that many men like, which is that she never interrupted them while they were talking. So it was no surprise that she was taken up with all the other beautiful young women of the empire to compete in the queen-stakes. Now these were the rules of the competition: all the women had six months in the palace to get ready. During that time, they were permitted whatever beauty treatments or cosmetics they wanted, along with whatever clothes or jewelry they wanted to wear. Then, in their chosen finery, they would appear before the king. When they were shown into rooms filled with clothing and

jewelry, the other young ladies squealed with delight and hurried over to try everything on, but Esther stood uncertainly by the door.

The eunuch in charge of the rooms, a man named Hegai, approached her. “Don’t you see anything you like?” he asked.

“Not, really, no,” she whispered.

“What would you *like* to wear?” he asked.

“You’d think I was silly,” she said.

“Try me.”

“Just a plain, undecorated dress, maybe in a soft pink?”

Hegai smiled. “Girl, something like that would look stunning on you. And jewelry?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never worn jewelry,” she admitted. “Do I have to? It looks so *busy*!”

“Girl, I like you. Before you go see the king, come to me. We’ll set you up.”

Well, whether because of Hegai’s fashion advice or Esther’s own attributes, she was the king’s favorite, which is how it came about that a Jewish girl became the queen of Persia. Of course no one knew she was Jewish. Before sending her off to the palace, her cousin Mordecai had warned her to tell no one who her people were.

As for Mordecai himself, he went every day to the palace gates and waited outside, hoping to catch a glimpse of his cousin or even to get a message to her somehow. And it came about that one day while he waited outside the gates, he overheard two of the king’s servants meeting in secret, plotting an assassination. Mordecai reported what he had heard to the guards, and when the matter was investigated and found to be true, those servants were arrested. The guard took Mordecai’s name and said he’d be hearing from the king, but nothing happened.

Now about that time, King Ahasuerus promoted one of his counselors to Grand Vizier, second in the kingdom. This man was very strong-willed and very sure of himself and very intimidating, none of which the king was, and he rather liked having someone else to run the kingdom and deal with unpleasant things. This man’s name was Haman. As for Haman, he rather liked running the kingdom, but what he *really* liked was being flattered and deferred to by all the others at court and people bowing to him as he passed in the streets. So it infuriated him that there was one man, who was always at the palace gates, who didn’t bow to him. It was Mordecai the Jew, of course, who never bowed to any human being.

“Doesn’t he know who I am?” said Haman. “Doesn’t he know that I can have him executed?” But, the more he brooded about that horrid, uppity Jew Mordecai, the more he decided that just killing *him* wouldn’t be enough. He went to the king.

“O King,” he said, as he entered the throne room.

“Haman!” said the king. “How’s the kingdom going? Got everything under control?”

“Not exactly,” he replied. The king frowned. He didn’t like hearing about problems. Haman explained, “There is a race of people who live in your kingdom who are dangerous. They

live in their own communities, follow their own laws, refuse to eat good healthy Persian food, and most of all, don't show proper respect to your government. I fear they are planning a revolution, and probably controlling the media. We must stamp them out."

"Must we?"

"Yes, sire, we must. I'll draw up the papers for you to sign."

"If we must, we must," murmured the king. Soon the deed was done, and a date was set when all the people of Persia were called to take up arms and execute any Jews that they found: men, women, and children.

When word of the coming slaughter was announced, all the Jews of the land put on sackcloth and ashes and began to pray. Esther, living a secluded life in the queen's luxury rooms, did not hear about the new order, but when she heard that Mordecai was in mourning clothes, she arranged to meet with him privately. Mordecai told her about the edict. "Don't you see, Esther! You're our only hope! You must talk to the king and get him to withdraw his order!"

Esther said nothing.

"Who is to say that it was not for this very reason that you were made queen! You must be strong now and speak to the king!"

Softly, Esther said, "So now I must be strong? How am I supposed to know how to do that? When have I ever been told to be strong before? Not once in my life. I've been told to be pretty. I've been told to be obedient. I've been told to let you tell me what to do. Now I'm supposed to be strong? I don't even know what that means."

"All you have to do is speak to the king," Mordecai said.

"So now I must speak up? And how am I supposed to know how to do that? When have I ever been encouraged to speak up? When has my opinion ever mattered? When has my voice ever been listened to? But now I'm supposed to speak up? What if I can't?"

"Listen to me, Esther –"

"No, you listen to me. Did you know that anyone who enters the king's presence without an invitation forfeits his life? That's right. Unless the king holds out his scepter to admit me to his presence, then I commit suicide just by entering his room. And the king hasn't summoned me in months."

"I didn't know. But Esther, this is for your people! You have to –"

"Don't tell me what I have to do. I understand what's at stake. But you understand that just the thought of going before the king uninvited makes me feel sick and faint, and if that sounds cowardly to you, ask yourself who made me that way. I'll think about it. You tell the Jewish women to pray for me for three days, and I'll let you know what I decide."

"Esther, you're being a silly girl!"

"No, I'm being the queen of Persia and making up my own mind. You're dismissed. Guards?"

At the end of three days, her knees shaking and palms sweating and on the verge of fainting, a terrified Esther walked uninvited into the king's throne room. All the courtiers gasped with outrage, but King Ahasuerus lifted his scepter and bid her welcome. "What is it, my queen?" he asked.

"I . . . I wanted to ask if you . . . you and . . ." – she couldn't say his name – "you and your chief counselor . . . him, over there . . . would come to dinner in my apartments this evening." She finished her speech miserably, knowing that she had failed. She just couldn't bring herself to say it.

"But of course!" replied the king. "We'll be happy to come. Won't you, Haman?"

Haman was delighted. A private dinner with the king and the queen! And why had the queen included him? There could be only one explanation: she was attracted to him.

That night, at dinner, the king pressed Esther further. "Come now, my dear, surely this isn't the only thing you wanted to ask me," he said.

"Could you . . ." but her strength failed her again. "Could you come back tomorrow night for another dinner?" she asked lamely.

So it was arranged. Haman left that evening filled with glee at being object of the queen's affection, but his mood crashed as soon as he left the palace, for there by the gate was that horrid Mordecai, not bowing to him. "I can't wait for the slaughter," he announced upon reaching home. "I want to kill Mordecai *now*! You servants, start building a gallows. Make it as high as you can. Tomorrow morning I'll go to the king early and get Mordecai's death warrant."

Meanwhile, back at the palace, the king was having a restless night and finally at about two in the morning, he sent for a scribe to come read to him the royal archives to put him to sleep. As the scribe read, he came to the account of the time that Mordecai had saved the king's life. "I'd forgotten that," the king said. "What did we ever do to reward him?"

"Nothing, sire," said the scribe.

And so it came about that when Haman showed up at the court first thing in the morning, the king was waiting for him. "Ah, just the man I wanted to see. You always have such good ideas! What should I do for a man that I want to honor publicly?"

Haman had no trouble figuring out who the king meant. Who else could it be but him? "I would have him dressed in the king's own robes and placed on the king's own horse and led all day through the streets by a high official calling out, 'Thus it shall be done for the man the king loves to honor!'"

"That's perfect!" cried the king. "I knew I could count on you! I want you, and no one else but you, to do that today for Mordecai the Jew!"

It was a long day for our villain, and barely had he gotten back from his hour upon hour of calling out praises for the man he hated most in the world, when he had to wash off his dust, change his clothes, and hurry back to the palace for dinner with the king and queen. At least *that* would restore his sense of his own dignity and importance.

After dinner, the king asked again, “Esther, tell me what it is. You want to ask me something. What do you want? What can I give you?”

“My life,” she whispered.

“Your . . . what?”

“My life, and the life of my people.”

“Who threatens your life?”

Esther pointed. “He does,” she said. “I am a Jew.”

The king stared as comprehension broke over him, then turned to look at his chief counselor with an expression the man had never seen before. Haman turned white, and when the furious king rose to step out on the balcony for a breath of fresh air, Haman threw himself at Esther’s feet to beg for mercy. At least that’s what he meant to do, but he tripped and landed in her lap, just as the king returned to the room.

“What is this!” the king roared. “Guards!” The guards who were never far from the king rushed into the room. “Arrest that man! He assaulted the queen! I’ll have him flayed! I’ll have him fed to the birds!”

“Your highness?” said one of the guards, who like everyone else at court was no friend of Haman, “I just heard that he’s having a gallows built on which to hang Mordecai the Jew.”

“Is he, then?” said the king. “Well, we aren’t going to do that, but it would be a shame to waste a brand-new gallows.” And that was the end of Haman.

The rest of the story is fairly quick to wrap up. Apparently it was impossible for the king to rescind his original order, especially this long after it had been published, so what he did instead was to issue a companion order, giving Jews who were attacked the freedom to defend themselves by whatever means necessary, and a pardon for all who had to use lethal force in their defense. In the end, the scheduled day of slaughter became a day of victory and celebration for the Jews living in Persia, which is why it is celebrated to this day with parties and pastries and storytelling. And that’s the end of our story.

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Final word: The biblical story of Esther is an over-the-top melodrama with a cardboard-cutout dastardly villain, but the reality behind it is not funny. An immigrant population with its own language and religion, resolutely maintaining its distinctive traditions and not assimilating with the host nation has always been regarded with suspicion. The Jews did their best to keep their heads down, avoid confrontation, and above all observe their distinctive faith behind closed doors, but as history has shown us again and again, in times of crisis, nations look for scapegoats, outsiders to blame and punish, and the Jewish people have been a favorite target. And, as we have seen in our own country recently, they still are.

Which is why this story was told among the Diaspora Jews: there’s something satisfying in the tale of a meek, docile, obedient shadow of a girl who saved her people from genocide. By stepping out of the shadows, overcoming her fear, and placing her life on the line for others, evil was stopped. May it be always so.