

“From Mourning into a Holiday”

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

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Every year, typically in March, Jews celebrate a very festive holiday. And I mean, *very* festive! There is a celebratory meal, gift baskets of food sent to friends and family, gifts of charity to the poor, costumes and masks, parties and parades, special pastries (*hamantaschen*), a very participatory reading of scripture, and special prayers. The holiday is called *Purim*. It commemorates the saving of the Jewish people from a Persian official who wanted to kill them all. The story is told in the book of Esther.

The story takes place in a city called Susa about 500 years before Jesus. Susa was the capital of the great Persian empire that, at its height, stretched from eastern Europe all the way to the Indus valley. Susa was in what we call the country of Iran, not far from the Tigris River and the Persian Gulf. Jews had been living there for a couple centuries; the Assyrians and, later, the Babylonians had repopulated Jews there after they conquered the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The Jews living in exile were fruitful and multiplied; they eventually came to comprise nearly 20% of the population of Persia.

The story begins when the Persian king throws a series of pompous festivities over a period of six months. He’s trying to impress his government officials, the army, the nobility, and the governors of all 127 provinces, by showing off all the wealth and splendor of his kingdom. At the end of six months, he hosts a royal banquet that lasts a whole week. The wine is flowing with abandon. On the last day, the king orders his wife, Queen Vashti, to be brought before these drunk men, wearing the royal crown. Some interpreters think that she was expected to wear *only* the royal crown. But Queen Vashti says *no*.

That did not go over well. The king is embarrassed and enraged. His officials urge him to do something; they are afraid that women all over the kingdom will start following Vashti’s example and refusing to comply with the wishes of their husbands, and wouldn’t *that* be horrible! So the king issues a decree. He sends word throughout the entire kingdom, all 127 provinces, declaring that “every man should be master in his own house.” Then the king appoints commissioners throughout the entire kingdom “to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in the citadel of Susa.” There they would be given cosmetic treatments to enhance their beauty even further, and then they would be brought before the king. The girl “who pleases the king” would become queen instead of Vashti.

Enter a young Jewish girl named Esther. She was an orphan. She had been brought up by an older cousin named Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter. Mordecai’s great-grandfather was one of the Jews who had been “carried away from Jerusalem” by the Babylonians in the sixth century BC. Esther was “fair and beautiful.” So when the king’s edict is proclaimed, Esther is taken into the palace and placed in the harem. There she wins the favor of the eunuch in charge; in addition to giving her cosmetic treatments and food, the eunuch also gives her seven maids from the king’s palace

and gives her the best place in the kingdom. But the eunuch does not know that Esther is a Jew.

Esther spends the next year of her life in the harem. For six months she is treated with oil of myrrh, then for the next six months she is treated with perfumes and cosmetics. Every day Mordecai comes near to check on her. Eventually the day arrives when Esther is to be brought to the king. The custom was that the girl would be presented to the king in the evening, and would be sent back in the morning. If the king “delighted in her,” she might be summoned again. “Now Esther was admired by all who saw her.” When she went to the king, “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.” The king threw a great banquet and declared a holiday. Persia had a new queen. But only Esther and Mordecai knew the *whole* truth: Persia’s new queen was a *Jew*!

One day, later on, Mordecai overhears two Persian palace officials plot to kill the king. Mordecai tells Esther; Esther tells the king; there is an investigation; the men are found guilty, and hanged.

Later still, the king appoints an official to be his right-hand-man. His name is Haman. Now if you were Jews, you would all be booing and hissing right now, for that is what they do in the synagogues, whenever Haman’s name is mentioned. Haman is the *real* villain of this story. The king decrees that everyone, great and small, is to bow down before Haman, whenever they are in his presence.

But Mordecai, who serves at the king’s gate, refuses to bow down to Haman. As a faithful Jew, he would bow down to no one other than the Lord God. The other servants notice that Mordecai is not bowing down; they ask him about it; he explains that he is a Jew. They try – and fail – to persuade him. So then they tell Haman about Mordecai’s refusal to bow down. Haman is infuriated. Haman decides not to punish just Mordecai – but the entire Jewish people. He begins plotting how to destroy them all.

Haman goes to the king and gives him counsel. “There is a certain people,” he said, “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. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction.” Haman bribes the king: if the king does as Haman suggests, Haman will put ten thousand talents of silver into the king’s treasuries. That was a *vast* sum of money, probably equivalent to *millions*, or perhaps even *billions*, of dollars, enough to fill the royal treasury to a very great extent. Haman himself wouldn’t have owned that much money; the idea was that he would seize the assets from all the Jews that were killed.

What was it the apostle Paul said – “the love of money is the root of all evil...”

The king agrees to the plan. Letters are sent to all the governors, telling them “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.” That day had been chosen by lot. The word for “lot” is “Pur;” hence the word “Purim.”

Jews throughout the kingdom hear the news. There is much weeping and lamentation. Mordecai tells Esther about the decree and charges her to “go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.” But if someone approaches the king without an invitation, the penalty is death. And the king hasn’t called for Esther for a whole month! Mordecai stresses to Esther what’s at stake. “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this ... you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Perhaps Esther is queen because of divine

providence. Maybe God *put* her in that position, precisely *because* of this impending crisis.

Esther tells Mordecai to have all the Jews in Susa fast for three days on her behalf. “After that,” she says, “I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.” So for the next three days all the Jews in Susa pray earnestly for Esther. On the third day she summons up her courage, puts on her royal robes, and stands at the entrance to the king’s court. This is Esther’s do-or-die moment. The king could either invite her in, or order her killed. His heart warms; he holds out his scepter; he invites her in. “What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom.” It takes Esther a couple days, but she eventually tells her husband that there is someone plotting to kill her entire people. “Who is he,” the king asks, “and where is he, who has presumed to do this?” Esther points her finger at Haman and says, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!” She reveals to the king that she is a Jew. She falls at his feet, “weeping and pleading with him to avert the evil design of Haman ... and the plot that he had devised against the Jews.” Haman begs for his life, but Esther has won the king’s heart. The king hangs Haman on a gallows that Haman had been preparing for Mordecai. The king issues a new edict, giving Jews throughout the kingdom permission to “assemble and defend their lives” against “any armed force of any people or province that might attack them.” And so the Jews are saved. “In every province and in every city, wherever the king’s command and his edict came, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a festival and a holiday.” Esther remains Queen; Mordecai becomes a very high official in the king’s court; and the Jewish people have a new holiday, an annual festival commemorating their salvation at the hands of Queen Esther.

So here we are, some twenty-five centuries later, and Jews around the world still commemorate this event, with an incredibly joyous festival. Of course, this was not the *only* attempt in history to exterminate the Jews. At various times, Jewish synagogues have been destroyed, Jewish books have been burned, Jews have been forbidden to observe their sacred customs and rituals, Jews have been forced to convert to other religions (including Christianity), Jewish funds have been seized, Jews have been prohibited from holding public office, Jews have been expelled from their homelands, and, periodically, whole Jewish populations have been brutally massacred. We all know about the Holocaust, but there have also been many other attempts to exterminate Jews between Haman and Hitler.

The unfortunate reality is that dominant groups have a tendency of not treating minority groups with fairness, dignity, and respect. It has happened to Jews, it has happened to Muslims, it has happened to Blacks, and Hispanics, and Asians, and countless other minority groups through the centuries, up to and including the present time. It also happened to Christians, in the early days of the church, when *we* were victims of stigmatization and persecution and death, because *we* were a minority group. In some parts of the world it has continued to happen to Christians in more recent years as well.

Yet sometimes, God sends people who can make a difference. Sometimes God puts a person in a position where they have the power to literally *save their people* ... if they have the *courage* to *act*.

Esther was one such person. Esther made a difference, a *profound* difference in the lives of thousands and thousands of Jews, because she was willing to stand up with courage and conviction for the welfare of her people. She did it at great personal risk. She could have been *killed!* Yet she mustered up courage, she didn’t flinch from her responsibility, and as a result she literally *saved* her people. May her story be a source of inspiration and strength for all beleaguered peoples today.

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