

10th May 2020

Esther 4:1-16

Mother's Day – Standing with Courage

Today we take a glimpse of Queen Esther. It is a powerful story made of the stuff of best-selling novels; Drama, romance, and intrigue.

It is a story of racial hatred, God's Sovereignty, opportunities, courage, faith, guidance and deliverance.

Talk about "Ethnic Cleansing", that is exactly the threat the Jews faced. But they were saved at the eleventh hour by the courage of a beautiful woman who seized the day.

Esther appeared on the scene after queen Vashti had virtually disappeared behind the royal back drop. Esther became the queen of the immensely rich Persian King Ahasuerus, after what was basically a beauty contest.

Ahasuerus ruled over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia in 475B.C. known as the Persian Empire. His winter palace was in Susa, an ancient city in Iran about 320k east of Babylon, now known as the Babel province in Iraq.

In the book of Esther, the name of God doesn't appear once, but His presence is evident on every page, by His providential care for His people, and His sovereign plan for mankind.

Esther:

Esther is an unlikely heroine. As a mirror image of the Hebrew people in exile, Esther is herself an orphan, without identity. She appears to be rescued when she is taken in by her cousin, Mordecai, who becomes her foster parent. But even this respite is short-lived when she is tapped for the king's harem, and taken from the safety of his home in Susa, and thrust into the intrigue -- both political and sexual -- of the Persian royal court.

Add to this list that she is a Jew, another drop in status as an outsider in Persian culture -- especially in the royal city of Susa. She is a resident alien, a foreigner, and a member of this peculiar tribe that Persians barely tolerate.

Throughout it all, as orphan, foster child, and consort, Esther must decide whether and how to reveal her Jewishness within the dominant Persian culture. Early chapters show Esther and Mordecai at times hiding and other times revealing their Jewishness in varying contexts. This requires wise judgments with each new circumstance. As the plot takes twists and turns, we realize that the expression of religious identity is not static, but always dynamic and responsive.

As queen, we might expect Esther to be aware of her own power and to exercise it. Yet, at least up to this point, Esther has not identified herself as a player in the king's political circles. She has not weighed in on policy, or leveraged her position to manoeuvre others into power, or even strategized to produce a male heir, always the quickest path to power for women at court. She makes none of these power plays.

When Mordecai calls upon her to act on behalf of her people, we can easily imagine her saying "Who? Me? I don't have any power or authority. I'm just an orphan Jew who doesn't even belong at court, faking my way through each day.

Can't some passionate prophet step up and do it? Or maybe one of Yahweh's priests?" It's clear that she has never thought of herself as having the agency to effect change or make a difference.

Mordecai makes a case to Esther that she must step into this particular historical moment. Her personal history intersects with the Jews' corporate history at this particular time, in this particular place. In fact, says Mordecai, maybe her personal history has led her precisely to this moment, "*for such a time as this,*" v14, because as a Jewish woman who is also Queen Esther, she is in a unique position to save her people.

When the king decrees the destruction of all Jews, the crisis comes to a head. Esther's own Jewishness, so carefully hidden at court, now comes into play. Is she most deeply a Jew? Or a cousin? Or a Persian queen? Or simply another woman whose life is determined by others in power? Who will she decide to be?

Mordecai Mourns: v1-3

In chapters 2 & 3 Mordecai saved the king's life by tipping him off to an assassination plot. But his service went unrecognized, with the King promoting a man named Haman to be his grand officer instead.

Mordecai then got into trouble for refusing to pay homage to Haman. Haman is furious at the slight. He is the evillest man in the whole story. In fact, he managed to get King Ahasuerus to issue a decree, not just against *Mordecai*, but *the entire Jewish people!*

So, chapter 3 ends with Haman and Ahasuerus fixing the date of the Jewish genocide for a day some 11 months future. The city is in uproar, but with Haman and Ahasuerus sitting unruffled, having a drink!

Mordecai is afraid, he tears his clothes - and puts on sackcloth and ashes. Now, if you saw this, you would immediately realize something is wrong. On top of this, he is crying loudly and bitterly. And he is doing this through the city as far as the King's Gate, where he stops because the law prohibits him from going further. Mordecai, the mentor and surrogate father to Esther is in distress, fear, and mourning.

In fact, v3 indicates that the Jewish people's response to this edict is, understandably, a response of "*great mourning in every province.*" And notice, too, that the people are following the example of Mordecai and they are all putting on sackcloth and ashes, weeping, and lamenting.

Esther Responds: v4-12

"Esther's female servants and her eunuchs came and reported the news to her, and the queen was (in great distress) or overcome with fear. She sent clothes for Mordecai to wear so that he would take off his sackcloth, but he did not accept them." v4

So, we can see that she is "overcome" with fear. And - she doesn't even know what's wrong yet! All she knows is that Mordecai is in mourning outside of the King's Gate. And she probably wants to know what is wrong, so she sends a change of clothes, probably so that he can be granted entrance to come share with her what is wrong, but he refuses the change of clothes.

But Esther still needed to find out what was going on. It seems that she and everyone around her are out of touch with everyday people because the entire city of Susa had been in confusion after this edict! Why did no one in the palace and no one serving the queen know of what could be wrong with Mordecai?

So, Mordecai relays to Esther through her servant all that had happened so far, including giving her a copy of the edict ordering the execution of the Jews.

Now - let me ask you - if you were Esther, how would you respond to this situation? Some of you might be thinking, "Hey - I'm in a great position. Of course, I'll approach the king and intercede on behalf of my people." That's exactly what Mordecai was asking of Esther.

A couple of interesting things to point out about this dialogue that I don't think are immediately obvious:

Mordecai had a written copy of the edict. Having a written copy of anything in this time was highly unusual, much less a commoner. So, it is likely that Mordecai was not your everyday Jew. He probably served somewhere in the king's court and had access to the law.

Knowing this, it is likely that Mordecai knew what Esther is about to share with him - that the law prescribes death for anyone who approaches the king unsummoned - unless the king chooses to make an exception. I'll repeat that Mordecai *knew* he was asking Esther to possibly give her life in service of her people.

Lastly, there is a possibility that the king would *not* make an exception for Esther. He has proven to cave to pressure in the past, he has grown distant and disinterested in the queen, and, as we shall see later, his power is limited because he will not step forward and attempt to override an edict that is clearly wrong.

All of this is to say that the gravity of what Mordecai is asking of Esther comes out in her response.

Here it is:

V10-12 Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold sceptre to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

But it is highly likely she is telling things to Mordecai he already knows - and she knows that he knows. Esther is gripped by fear and her response in the face of great fear is similar to how many of us respond - it's by looking at **my** immediate situation, thinking about **me**, and trying to figure out a way that **I** can escape this feeling of fear, this feeling of being out of control of my situation. In this moment, Esther's view of God is limited and blinded by crippling fear.

Let me ask the question- are you fearful today? Despite the uncertain circumstances we face we can have confidence and courage to face tomorrow. As those that have trusted in Christ - you've handed yourself, your life and your future into the hands of Christ - here is what Scripture has to say: God loves you. God is good.

Did you realize that God was at work long before you were born to orchestrate the events that would bring you to faith in Christ when He did? God reached into your life, when you alone, fearful, without hope, and in Christ He gave you confidence, hope, and a church family that walks alongside you through the good times and the bad times of this life. God has brought you to this position that you are in today.

Here's a truth for you - "*God works all things together for the good of those who love Him...*" Do we believe that? Here's something else God says - "*He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it.*" God did not save you and that was the end of things, but instead that was the beginning of things for you. You are redeemed from fear and sin and death into a life of serving God and making a difference with His truth. **God did not just save you from something - God saved you for something.** God saved us from sin and death to be an amazing part of His good purposes. And in addition to that, He gave us a church family that walks with us through everything.

That brings us to the truth that we find in this passage of Scripture and the great turning point in Esther's heart and mind...

V13-16 When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

What does Mordecai do? He reminds Esther of the truth that God has promised to be faithful to watch over His people, to guard and protect them, and to deliver them from destruction at the hands of the people that would take them captive. This was something that was prophesied long ago and Mordecai put his faith in God to do what he said he was going to do. He reminds Esther of this truth and tells her that it is very possible that she has a huge part to play in God's plan of deliverance for her people. Remember, if there was any doubt about whether she could die in Mordecai's mind before, there is

none now. She clearly made the law known to him and he now urges her with God's truth, telling her to move forward, maybe even at the cost of her life.

Let me ask you something: How do you respond to people approaching you with truth? How do you respond to a challenge from someone - particularly when they are brother or sister in Christ - who really does care for you and is trying to get you to see the bigger picture? Do you look for the wisdom and truth of what the person is saying and see them as sent by God to remind us of what is true? I think many times we dismiss what others have to say as their mere opinion, when in fact God could be using them in our lives to grow us, or to remind us of a God that is much bigger than just us. God uses brothers and sisters in Christ to help us combat fear and to remind us of what is true. Let's take a look at how Esther responds to Mordecai bringing truth to her.

This is a profound change in Esther. At this point, she could have cordoned herself off and ignored Mordecai's appeal to the truth and given into fear. Instead, she says - *"If I'm going to move forward with this, I'm going to need everyone's support, especially God's!"*

So, she instructs Mordecai to round up all of God's people in Susa and have a hard fast for three days. As you research fasting in the Old Testament, it is almost always accompanied by prayer and seeking God, especially times when God's people need deliverance. What's even more amazing about this situation is that Esther not only has the Jews do this, but she leads all of her female servants in the palace do the same things - some which are almost assuredly not Jews.

So, Mordecai reminded her of the truth and pointed out that God had very likely placed her in this position for such a time as this. The reminder of the truth transformed her from a coward, someone who was paralysed by fear, to someone who is a leader, leading her people and others to fast and seek God's help for what she is about to do. And here is her plan in the last part of verse 16.

Esther now steps forward, though she initially resists Mordecai's request, knowing she risks her own life if she approaches the king on her own initiative. She takes the risk to speak up for her people, even though it could mean her own death. Deliverance comes through claiming her faith publicly. The king responds favourably and the Jewish people are saved (Esther 5:1-8, 7:1-2).

Esther's brave leadership is enshrined in history through the annual **festival of Purim** in Judaism.

God used many people in the story of Esther to completely change her outlook and it changed the course of history for the Jewish people. Now, how much more would us leaning on one another to reach a city with the message of Gospel would change the course of history for the city of Yarra Ranges Shire Council and surrounding areas? Do you believe that God has a plan for you in sharing your faith and living for Him? Do you believe that God is not done with The Church of Christ Montrose, but plans to continue using each one of us to reach the people God has placed in our lives? Who knows - maybe God brought you to the place you are today and relationships with the people in your life today for such a time as this?

Esther's struggle with identity and risk raise critical questions for Followers of Jesus today, including these:

- How do we maintain our witness of faith in a culture dominated by material consumption and political tactics and extremes?
- What power does any one of us really have to make a difference?
- What kind of risks are we willing to take on behalf of those vulnerable and threatened?
- Which of our identities ultimately shape our lives? Am I first and foremost a parent? An Australian? A Christian? An employee?

This text can fire our imaginations *"for such a time as this."* For some of us, the courage of faith will fuel us to take risks in our families, suburbs and neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, and our places of influence to speak a word of life.

Prayer