

“Courage in God’s Absence”
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

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This summer my best friend Molly came to Michigan visited us. At night we sat down to watch tv together and did the dance of trying to figure out what shows we were both into and what kind of show would be enjoyable for us both. I had previously recommended the British show Fleabag to Molly and she still hadn’t watched it. I was so determined that she would enjoy it that I said I would rewatch the first episode with her to get her started, and then she could keep watching when she went home. Well, we started watching the episode, and it had been over a year since I last saw this show, but it seemed more confusing than I remembered. There was a lot characters that were not introduced that just seemed to be randomly interacting with each other and there was a LOT of tension. It felt almost like we were walking into the middle of a story. Molly was NOT enjoying the show. Eventually I looked up Fleabag to refresh my memory. I probably should have done that before the episode started because due to a mixup on our streaming service, we didn’t show Molly the first episode. We showed her the final episode in the first season. I felt horrible. It was the climax of the show, and she now knew too much and was too confused to be enticed to go back and start again.

I’m telling you this because sometimes we accidentally do this when we read scripture in worship. We read just one section from a larger story and it might intrigue us, or kind of make sense, but it also might be really confusing and give away the climax to the story. At least that is what happens when you try to take just a section out of the Book of Esther without knowing the rest of the story. We need to know the rest of the story!

Esther is an incredible book. It is often skipped over because it only appears in our rotation of scriptures that we use in worship one day out of every three years and it only includes these verses we read aloud. I don't think that's enough! It's one of the wildest books of the Bible! It has drinking and sex and murder! It is an incredible story about taking a major risk in order to save and protect the greater good. We need more stories these days about protecting the greater good over protecting the individual!

Today I want to tell you the book of Esther. I could read more chapters from the Bible, but instead I will do a slightly abbreviated retelling. This retelling comes from the Bible Project, an incredible video and podcast series online that is free for all and has rich retellings of different books of the Bible. Our Monday Bible Study group should take note. Without further ado, this is the book of Esther.

Esther takes place 100 years after the Babylonian exile. While some Jewish folks returned home, like many communities who have been exiled, many did not return. The Book of Esther is about the Jewish community in Susa, the capital of the ancient Persian Empire. Our main characters are two Jewish people, Mordecai and his niece Esther. Then there is the King of Persia, who is something of a drunken pushover in this story, and the Persian official named Haman, who is the cunning villain.

The book opens with the king of Persia throwing two elaborate banquet feasts that last a total of 187 days. It is all for the grandiose purpose of displaying his greatness and splendor. On the last day of the banquet feast, he's really drunk and he demands his wife Queen Vashti appear at the party to show off her beauty. She refuses and so in a drunken rage the King dumps Vashti and makes the silly decree that all Persian men should now be the masters of their own homes.

Then he holds a beauty pageant because he wants to find a new queen. This is like a really bad soap opera. But it's right here that we're introduced to Esther and Mordecai. Esther hides her Jewish identity and enters the beauty pageant - and wins! And the king is so obsessed with Esther that he elevates her to become the new queen of Persia.

After this, and even more serendipitous, is the fact that Mordecai just happens to overhear two Royal Guards plotting to murder the king. He informs Esther, who in turn informs the king and Mordecai gets credit for saving the king's life.

We're next introduced to Haman who works for the the King. The king elevates Haman to the highest position in the kingdom and he demands that everybody kneel before Haman. Well when Mordecai sees Haman, he refuses to kneel, which of course fills Haman with rage, and when he finds out that Mordecai's Jewish, Haman successfully persuades the king to enact this wild decree to destroy all of the Jewish people. To decide the date of the annihilation, Haman rolls a dice. Eleven months later, on the thirteenth of Adar, all the Jewish people will die. Haman and the king then have a drinking banquet to celebrate their really horrible decision.

So the focus now turns to Mordecai and Esther who are the only hope for the Jewish people. They make a plan that Esther's going to reveal her Jewish identity to the king and ask him to reverse the decree. But approaching the king without a royal request is, according to Persian law, an act worthy of death. In a key statement, Mordecai says he's confident that even if Esther remains silent that deliverance for the Jews will arrive from another place. And then Mordecai wonders aloud, he says "who knows "maybe you became queen for such a time as this". "Such a time as this" is a phrase we still use a lot today in reference to the urgency of justice. Esther responds with bravery and she proposes to go to the king with her amazing words, "If I perish, I perish."

In what unfolds, we watch the ironic reversal of all of Haman's evil plans. Esther hosts the king and Haman at a first banquet and she says she wants to make a special request of both of them at an exclusive banquet the following day. Haman leaves the banquet totally drunk and he sees Mordecai in the street. He fumes with anger. He orders that a tall stake be built so that Mordecai can be impaled upon it in the morning.

It seems like things can't get any worse for the Jewish people and for Mordecai. But all of a sudden the story pivots. It just so happens, that night, the king can't sleep. And he has the royal chronicles read to him for good bedtime reading. In their reading, he just so happens to hear about how Mordecai had saved the king's life. He had totally forgotten.

In the morning, Haman enters to request Mordecai's execution and the king instead orders Haman to honor Mordecai publicly for saving his life. So now Haman has to lead Mordecai around the city on a royal horse telling everyone to praise him. This moment in the story is the big pivot for the whole book. It's Haman's downfall and Mordecai's rise to power. Here's how it works.

The day after is Esther's 2nd banquet. The king and Haman arrive. Esther informs the king that first of all she's Jewish, and second of all Haman has enacted a decree to murder her, and to murder Mordecai, who saved his life, and to murder all of the Jewish people. Now the king's had a lot to drink, so when he hears this news he goes into yet one more drunken rage. He orders that Haman be impaled on the very stake he made for Mordecai. It's ironic and a grizzly way for Haman to go.

Haman's execution however, doesn't solve the problem of the decree to kill all of the Jewish people. Esther and Mordecai make a plan to reverse the decree. They discover that the King can't revoke a decree that he's already made. Instead, the king commissions Mordecai to

issue a counter decree. On the appointed day that all of the Jewish people were supposed to be killed, the 13th of Adar, now the Jews are ordered to defend themselves and to destroy any who plotted to kill them. Then Mordecai, Esther, and Jewish people everywhere hold banquets and feasts to celebrate this new decree. Mordecai is elevated to a seat beside the king.

Eventually the decree day comes. The Jewish people triumph over their enemies. First, they destroy Haman's family and then any other Persian officials who had joined in Haman's plot. Then on a second day, they get permission to destroy any who plotted against them throughout the entire kingdom. This results in joy and celebration as they are rescued from annihilation. The story then tells about how Esther and Mordecai established by decree this annual two-day feast of Purim to commemorate their deliverance from destruction. And the name of the feast comes from Haman's dice, "pur-im".

The book concludes with a short epilogue as Mordecai is elevated to second in command in the kingdom. We are told how with his royal greatness and splendor, the Jewish people thrive in exile. And that is the Book Esther. The End.

There is so much to love in the book of Esther, but did anyone notice something missing? Perhaps a character you were expecting to take part that you typically see make an appearance in other books in the Bible...? (It's God. There is no mention of God in the entire book of Esther.) People believe one reason God is absent from this book is it is about a people in exile who would have conformed to the culture where they lived, and that may not have looked like a traditional Jewish life.

For example, if it were today, it might mean staying up too late celebrating football games and missing worship the next morning, or otherwise participating in the wider culture before adhering to the strict rituals and traditions of your faith. But regardless of whether or not

God is evoked, this is a story of what it means to act faithfully, to work for justice, to use your power to protect people who are at greater risk than you are. Esther shows us that even if God feels absent, God is still moving us toward justice. The humans have a lot of agency in this story and work on behalf of God to do good.

It also shows us that even if our lives are not what someone else might call traditional, or if your life looks different than your neighbors or your family or your ancestors, you can still act with great faith - you still have a responsibility to care for others, to work for justice, to be courageous - knowing that God works through all kinds of people in all kinds of places, whether we recognize God's presence or not.

Finally, Esther is a great story about calling. We often think about calling as what we love doing or what our passion is. And that is one part that makes up our calling, or our individual purpose in life. Another part of our calling is a result of our circumstances. So some callings are shaped by virtue of being raised on a farm while others take root because someone was born in the heart of a city. Some callings are the result of what we are exposed to or our life experiences that we didn't choose - you see a lot of people who experienced loss as a child go into helping professions because they want to help others have a different experience than they did or perhaps they want to be the kind of helper someone was for them. They didn't choose that initial experience of loss, but they might feel a calling because of what they went through.

Esther wasn't interested in the king. She never wanted to be royalty. She was given the opportunity because of her beauty, something that was out of her control. And because she was given the opportunity to have a life of privilege and wealth, she found her calling to save her people. She was uniquely positioned, with the help of Mordecai, to be the agent of liberation.

Esther reminds me to look at where I am, what I have, and how my past experiences have shaped me when I am seeking to understand who I am called to be and what I am called to do. How might God be working in my life even if I can't always see it? Hopefully it will lead to less murder and mayhem than the book of Esther, but hopefully understanding my call as part of my cumulative experiences and the places I find myself in life, will lead me toward the same conviction to work for justice, to leverage my privilege, and to remain faithful no matter where my journey takes me. Amen.