

Sunday, September 27, 2009

Esther

Esther almost didn't make it into the Bible – did you know that? There's been quite a discussion about it over the years as well, but this book has remained part of scripture. I'm really glad about that – I think it's a great book. One of the best parts of this week for me has been the chance to read it again.

For me, the central question is this: What do you do when you – your life, your people, your integrity – who you are –
What do you do when someone is trying to destroy you?

And I guess the question that has to come before that is: where is your line....you know....where's the line for you that, once it's crossed, you feel personally violated and attacked and have to do something about it? Where is that line for you?

You know....you can put up with a lot....you can be quiet, you can say it doesn't matter, say there are more important things than this....but there IS a line, isn't there? When, for you, has that line been crossed, and you would simply have to say or do something no matter what the consequences?

These are serious questions. They arise in church life, in friendships, in romantic relationships, in politics....when has a line been crossed, and when it has, what do you do about it?

As I see it, the book of Esther, offers four different ways of handling the situation.

I'm going to spend the bulk of this sermon simply reading and telling the story. In some ways, it stands on its own.

As I do, though, please pay particular attention to 4 characters: Queen Vashti, Esther herself, Mordecai, and Haman.

The way I see it, each represents a different way of standing up and being counted. Different models of resistance, civil disobedience....singing the Lord's song in a strange land.

It begins in chapter one (funnily enough :)

The setting is Persia – a country where some Jews live, but this is not a Jewish country. Already pops out the question of how you behave when you're a minority in the place where you live.

King Ahasuerus is King of Persia. Vashti is queen. The king has decided to throw a HUGE conference for all the governors and prime ministers. He shows off his wealth. They party....and THEN – the king gets a great idea. This is how it's told:

Chapter 1: 1- 2:4

The following events happened in the days of Ahasuerus. (I am referring to that Ahasuerus who used to rule over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces extending all the way from India to Ethiopia.) In those days, as King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa⁷ the citadel, in the third year of his reign he provided a banquet for all his officials and his servants. The army of Persia and Media was present, as well as the nobles and the officials of the provinces.

He displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his majestic greatness for a lengthy period of time – a hundred and eighty days, to be exact! When those days were completed, the king then provided a seven-day banquet for all the people who were present in Susa the citadel, for those of highest standing to the most lowly. It was held in the court located in the garden of the royal palace. The furnishings included linen and purple curtains hung by cords of the finest linen and purple wool on silver rings, alabaster columns, gold and silver couches displayed on a floor made of valuable stones of alabaster, mother-of-pearl, and mineral stone. Drinks were served in golden containers, all of which differed from one another. Royal wine was available in abundance at the king's expense. There were no restrictions on the drinking, for the king had instructed all of his supervisors that they should do as everyone so desired. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in King Ahasuerus' royal palace.

On the seventh day, as King Ahasuerus was feeling the effects of the wine, he ordered Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who attended him, to bring Queen Vashti into the king's presence wearing her royal high turban. He wanted to show the people and the officials her beauty, for she was very attractive. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's bidding conveyed through the eunuchs. Then the king became extremely angry, and his rage consumed him.

The king then inquired of the wise men who were discerners of the times – for it was the royal custom to confer with all those who were proficient in laws and legalities. Those who were closest to him were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan. These men were the seven officials of Persia and Media who saw the king on a regular basis and had the most prominent offices in the kingdom. The king asked, “By law, what should be done to Queen Vashti in light of the fact that she has not obeyed the instructions of King Ahasuerus conveyed through the eunuchs?”

Memucan then replied to the king and the officials, “The wrong of Queen Vashti is not against the king alone, but against all the officials and all the people who are throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the matter concerning the queen will spread to all the women, leading them to treat their husbands with contempt, saying, ‘When King Ahasuerus gave orders to bring Queen Vashti into his presence, she would not come.’ And this very day the noble ladies of Persia

and Media who have heard the matter concerning the queen will respond in the same way to all the royal officials, and there will be more than enough contempt and anger! If the king is so inclined, let a royal edict go forth from him, and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media that cannot be repealed, that Vashti may not come into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king convey her royalty to another who is more deserving than she. And let the king's decision which he will enact be disseminated throughout all his kingdom, vast though it is. Then all the women will give honor to their husbands, from the most prominent to the lowly."

The matter seemed appropriate to the king and the officials. So the king acted on the advice of Memucan. He sent letters throughout all the royal provinces, to each province according to its own script and to each people according to its own language, that every man should be ruling his family and should be speaking the language of his own people.

And that's how Esther got to be queen. Esther is a Jew, but the king doesn't know that. She was an orphan, raised by her uncle Mordecai...a faithful Jew. He encouraged her to enter this beauty contest. She – along with many other young girls, were collected into the King's harem. This is how the contest proceeded:

Her uncle Mordecai used to walk around in front of the palace to see how she was doing. He overheard a plot to kill the king...he told Esther, who warned the King, and the assassination plot was thwarted. Great!

THEN the King promoted a man called Haman to his next in command. Haman was very VERY full of himself. The position went to his head, and he loved that everyone in the kingdom was ordered to bow down to him when he entered a room or walked by. He loved that. Everyone bowed down...everyone except Mordecai. As a Jew, he believed you bow to no human only to God and so he refused. This infuriated Haman...he'd walk down the street, and thousands would bow down, but all he saw was that one little stubborn Jew who...who...just stood there.

He reacts this way:

He convinces the King to make this a law. The king does so, not realizing that his own beloved wife, is one of them.

Mordecai discovers that there is a decree for the annihilation of the Jews, and sends a message to Esther. YOU HAVE TO SPEAK UP. Speak to the king...ask him to change his mind.

Esther, after fasting and prayer, dares to go unbidden to the king she's risking her life to do so.

Chapter 6 is worth reading because it's so funny...Haman makes a complete fool of himself...but we'll skip now to the final banquet Esther has requested.

7: 1-6

So the king and Haman came to dine with Queen Esther. On the second day of the banquet of wine the king asked Esther, "What is your request, Queen Esther? It shall be granted to you. And what is your petition? Ask up to half the kingdom, and it shall be done!"

Queen Esther replied, "If I have met with your approval, O king, and if the king is so inclined, grant me my life as my request, and my people as my petition. For we have been sold – both I and my people – to destruction and to slaughter and to annihilation! If we had simply been sold as male and female slaves, I would have remained silent, for such distress would not have been sufficient for troubling the king."

Then King Ahasuerus responded to Queen Esther, "Who is this individual? Where is this person to be found who is presumptuous enough to act in this way?"

Esther replied, "The oppressor and enemy is this evil Haman!"

And that's how the people were saved from being massacred.

What did you think of the way the 4 characters handled their crises?

Vashti – who could not be ordered to appear before her husband and his friends at their party...and who knew that her decision would mean certain banishment, if not worse....She was being asked to let her body be used. In return, she got to be queen, to enjoy a roof over her head and food on her table.

Are there times when you would say no I will not stand for his, even if it meant the loss of income, security and status? How far would you compromise yourself and your integrity for food and shelter? Please be clear here – I am NOT saying don't do that – the risks and dangers are real. Who knows what had gone on for Vashti before this – what kind of last straw this was for her...whether she had an escape plan...we just don't know.

Mordecai – who did his resisting by simply doing nothing. All he did was refuse to bow down. Just a passive resistance. It's amazing how you can get exactly what you want by doing nothing. That approach can be tyrannical and abusive....but it can also be a good way to foil a tyrant's power. Just don't react. Just don't play the game. I think it's very funny to watch Haman get angrier and angrier....at one man who is just sitting there. When would that be a good strategy???

Haman: Lots of people react this way. When HIS line was crossed, (which meant the moment anyone didn't acknowledge him as a very important man) when his line was crossed, he over reacts, blames not just the Jew who's irking him, but every Jew in the country....Not only blames them but has them marked for death.

NO talking to him about it, no dialogue, negotiating, no dealing with Mordecai one on one....no. A violent, overreaction that causes irreparable harm to many people who have nothing to do with the original argument.

He just can't take anything that hints or suggests that HE is not in control, important, he who must be obeyed. His response is massive blame. All Jews must die

Finally Esther herself: Hers is a kind of mixed model, I find. On the one hand, she buys into the system – enters the beauty pageant, hides who she really is, and learns to use deception and political games to get what she wants. Some people would argue that you have to play the system if you want to make change. If you want to have any power at all. I guess for me, the question is always, “When am I using the system and when it it using me?” It's subtle.

Nevertheless, Esther, part of the system but in a powerless way, uses the means at her disposal to gain some power. She was one of an oppressed group – living among them, but unknown to them as one of “those” people they despised.

She could have kept quiet

She could have kept hidden

But she chose to expose who she really was to help save her people.

She knew it probably meant her own death

She used her position of privilege; she worked the system, devised an intelligent plan using backroom politics to do so.

Do you celebrate this? What does it mean for the story to celebrate Haman's death? What does it mean that the system doesn't fall?

So...where is the line for you? When has it been crossed? When is the time to deal with it?

Like Vashti, like Mordecai, like Haman, like Esther????

How to be faithful when you and your people, your integrity, your life, the life of anyone's people...the life of the earth....

When the line has been crossed. How to be faithful.

May God bless you as you think about these things.

Amen

Suggestions for praying with the book of Esther:

1. *Breath-prayer*. Be still, close your eyes and become aware of your breathing. Slow down the rhythm of your breathing until you feel still inside, and distracting thoughts are in the background. On each breath in, lift your heart to God and say God's name as you understand it (e. "Creator God", or "Spirit of Life" or "Almighty One"). As you do this, allow yourself to feel God's presence entering you, filling every part of you, and giving you life. Each breath, God's gift of life, and hope and strength ... flowing through you. While breathing out, say "give me courage like Esther". Repeat this with each breath, until you feel a sense of relaxation in your body, and peace and resolve in your inner being.
2. *Imagination Prayer*. Become quiet in your being, take deep breaths until your inner being is still. Imagine yourself in Esther's place. You know someone is plotting to destroy you and your people. You alone are in a position to do something, but to do so you will have to risk your safety and reveal a painful truth. What feelings do you have? Stay with those feelings as long as you need to ... Then, if you can, recall a similar situation you have faced in the past ... when you were aware of evil disguising itself as good; when you could see what others could not. Remain with that memory and the feelings it evoked as long as you need to. What did you choose to do? What was the result? Would you do it differently now? Offer this all to God. As you imagine and/or recall, read prayerfully Esther's prayer of lament

(Apocrypha The Second Book of Esther 14:4-19)*

"O my Lord, thou alone art our king; help me who am alone, with no helper but thee; for I am taking my life in my hands. Ever since I was born I have been taught by my father's family and tribe that thou, O Lord, didst choose Israel out of all the nations, and out of all the founders of our race didst choose our fathers for an everlasting possession, and that what thou didst promise them, thou didst perform. But now we have sinned against thee, and thou hast handed us over to our enemies because we honoured their gods; thou art just, O Lord. But they are not content with our bitter servitude; they have now pledged themselves to their idols to annul thy decree and to destroy thy possession, silencing those who praise thee, extinguishing the glory of thy house, and casting down thy altar. They would give the heathen cause to sing the praises of their worthless gods, and would have a mortal king held in everlasting honour.

"Yield not thy scepter, O Lord, to gods that are nothing; let not our enemies mock at our ruin, but turn their plot against themselves, and make an example of the man who planned it. Remember us, O Lord, make thy power known in the time of our distress, and give me courage, O King of gods, almighty Lord. Give me the apt word to say when I enter the lion's den. Divert his hatred to our enemy, so that there may be an end of him and his confederates.

"Save us by thy power, and help me who am alone and have no helper but thee, Lord. Thou knowest all; though knowest that I hate the splendour of the heathen, I abhor the bed of the uncircumcised or of any

Gentile. Thou knowest in what straits I am; I loathe that symbol of pride, the headdress that I wear when I show myself abroad, I loathe it as one loathes a filthy rag; in private I refuse to wear it. I, thy servant, have not eaten at Haman's table; I have not graced a banquet of the king or touched the wine of his drink-offerings; I have not known festive joy from the time that I was brought here until now except in thee, Lord God of Abraham. O God who dost prevail against all, give heed to the cry of the despairing: rescue us from the power of wicked men, and rescue me from what I dread."

... and add your own words as seems right to you.

3. *Prayer of Action.* Continue to learn about structures of oppression and injustice in your own community and the world. Like Esther, we sometimes have to risk our own comfort in order to confront them. Unlike Esther, we have brothers and sisters all over the world who are also willing to put themselves on the line for justice. Be intentional about making connections with others who can uphold and strengthen you as you work and pray for God's will to be done.

* The term 'Apocrypha', a Greek word meaning 'hidden (things)', was early used in different senses. It was applied to writings which were regarded as so important and precious that they must be hidden from the general public and reserved for the initiates, the inner circle of believers. It came to be applied to writings which were hidden not because they were too good but because they were not good enough, because, that is, they were secondary or questionable or heretical. A third usage may be traced to Jerome. He was familiar with the Scriptures in their Hebrew as well as their Greek form, and for him apocryphal books were those outside the Hebrew canon. The generally accepted modern usage is based on that of Jerome. The Apocrypha as here translated consists of fifteen books or parts of books (the second Book of Esther being one of them).