

A Gutsy Lady

September 26, 2021

In all the three years of the common lectionary, the Book of Esther is listed in the readings only once and that is today. So, her story is not as well known as many of the other stories of Old Testament women are.

Esther is a young woman noted for her beauty and sexual attraction to King Ahasuerus or Xerxes. She comes from obscurity to rescue her people from annihilation.

King Xerxes ruled the world from India to Ethiopia. After he banished Queen Vashti from the land because she failed to appear when summoned, he needed to find a new queen. He ordered that the women from his 127 provinces be brought before him so he might choose the loveliest as his queen: an ancient world beauty pageant, and he chose Esther.

Xerxes did not know that Esther was an orphan or a Jew in the care of her Uncle Mordecai. Mordecai urged Esther to marry the King even though he was not of her faith or her people.

In the King's employ was a wicked, sucking-up man named Haman. Haman plotted to kill all the Jews in all the King's lands, seeing these foreigners as troublesome aliens who would never be loyal subjects. Sound familiar?

Haman set a date for the mass executions. Then, in good sucking-up fashion, he slithered up to the King and said, "Dear king. It has come to our attention that there is a certain ethnic group in your kingdom that considers themselves above your laws. Although multiculturalism and ethnic diversity is an otherwise good thing, a rule is a rule. Allow me to help my king by destroying them."

This sounded good to the King. He agreed and ordered that on the 13th of Adar, all Jews would be slain. Dispatches were sent out to all the provinces.

Needless to say, the Jews were distressed by this horrible news. Mordecai told Esther of the plan and begged her to help. Who knows, he said to her, "Maybe you have been put in the palace for such a time as this."

Now in that realm, palace protocol said you had to have permission to see the King. Even the Queen had to ask permission. If she showed up unsummoned by the King, she could be put to death. Esther reminded Mordecai of this rule and that she could wind up a dead queen if she bothered the King. His response was that this is the only hope her people had.

Esther was very afraid. She was in a very precarious position. Being a queen gave her no security even though as queen she was in a place of privilege. As a Jew, she was one of the oppressed. She lay awake in torment for three days. Finally, she decided that she would approach the King saying, "If I perish, I perish."

Esther entered the throne room. She was terrified. Yet the King bid her to speak. "Dear King," she said. "Would you grant to me just one little favor?"

“Just name it,” said the King. “Even half my kingdom . . . whatever. She obviously had caught him in a good mood.

“Would you and your trusted advisor, Haman, do me the honor of attending a great dinner with me?” The King agreed.

Haman, when he learned of the invitation, was now full of himself. He was in tight with the King. When he passed Mordecai, he told him to get ready to swing from a rope by morning. They had clashed from the get go.

Esther spent the whole next day wondering how she was going to talk to the King about Haman’s plot to kill all the Jews. The banquet was a great success, but Esther could not bring herself to speak to the King about her people.

At the end of the evening, she said the food and wine were so good and the conversation so scintillating that she was going to give another banquet the next night and would the King favor her by attending. Again he agreed.

There is nothing like a good meal and a little wine to put people in a good mood, and so at dinner the King blurted out: “Esther, you are such a great queen. Tell me, what would make you happy?” Esther finally had the courage to say: “Dear King, there is an evil man in this palace who wants to kill me and those whom I love. Let me and my people live. That’s all I ask.”

The King was outraged. “Tell me who this scoundrel is.”

“He’s over there,” Esther said, pointing at Haman.

Haman was shocked. He didn’t even know Esther was Jewish. He was even more shocked when the King ordered him taken out and hanged on the very gallows Haman had been preparing for old Mordecai.

The order to kill the Jews was rescinded and that’s how the people of Israel were saved, an event they celebrate to this day with great joy in the Feast of Purim.

Esther was a heroine, though a reluctant one. She did a great deed for her people, but she took small, hesitant steps on the way. As a woman, she was powerless even though she was queen. Yet she used what power she had, maneuvered skillfully within the limits imposed upon her by her culture, and she did a great thing.

Fortunately, most of the good that God needs from us does not require martyrdom, but small unspectacular deeds: having the courage to speak up, to advocate for the poor and marginalized, to work for justice, to say an encouraging word, to care for the environment, to be present.

The mantra for many seems to be, “What do I have to do to get along?” rather than “What does the Lord require of me?” It’s too easy to let ourselves off the hook when in little, ordinary, unspectacular ways the Kingdom of God is being defeated or advanced through us, the battle is

being lost or won on the basis of what we say or what we neglect to say, when we fail to speak in the face of evil or injustice.

And perhaps the words of Mordecai are words for us: “Who knows that you are here for such a time as this.”

A few years ago, a young teen learned about what was happening to our environment and that those in power were not doing anything about it. She studied the issue and became energized to do something. But she was young, had no status or prestige or position, no observable power or credibility or financial resources.

But Greta Thunberg used what power she had to call attention to the issue. She began to skip school on Fridays to sit alone in front of the Swedish Parliament with a sign translated: “School strike for climate.” She was willing to be vulnerable and put herself in the public eye, although as someone with Asperger’s, that was not easy.

She was soon joined by others and soon began a worldwide movement of students going on strike on Fridays for climate change. Thousands participated and the activity on social media exploded. She was no longer alone. And then she found her voice and the courage to use that voice to speak truth to power. She spoke to leaders in parliaments, at climate summits and the United Nations. She sharply castigated them saying: “You did not act in time.” She generated worldwide attention and support. Another gutsy lady using what she had to make a difference.

Can you image doing that at age 16?

For such a time as this? Frederick Buechner said, “The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Do not follow where the path may lead, instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

May you find that place.

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