

August 28, 2011

Faith: For Such a Time as This

Esther 4:6-14; Romans 12:1-8

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Over the next few weeks in our Sunday sermons we're going to be focusing on three different Christian virtues that the Apostle Paul mentions when he writes his first letter to the Church in Corinth (one of the books now in Holy Scripture). In the 13th Chapter he mentions the three virtues of *faith, hope and love*. We are not going to consider them in Paul's order, because in two weeks, on September the 11th, I want us to think about *hope*. Next Sunday we will think together about *love*. And today we begin by thinking together about *faith*, doing so with the help of a story that we find in the pages of Holy Scripture; the story of one of the greatest heroines in scripture who has a book within the Bible named after her. We're going to do so with the help of Esther, a disadvantaged young person, a disadvantaged orphan child, coming from the wrong race, the wrong religious background, who by faith found herself caught up in the plans and purposes of God which were far bigger than she was – found that, though she seemed to live an insignificant life, her life was given significance by being placed within this greater sphere: the activity of the Lord God Almighty. And in believing that, she responded to it with courage and with faith, so that God took her and used her for his mighty and wonderful purposes.

We pick up Esther's story in our second reading in Esther 4, verses 6 through 14. We read there, that Hathach, one of Esther's servants, went out to Mordecai (her cousin who was to her like a father, having raised her when she had been orphaned), and met him in the city square in front of the king's gate, the primary place of business in ancient cities in those days, and . . .

Mordecai told him all that had happened to him and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Suza the capital city for their destruction that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people. Havack went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Havack and gave him a message for Mordecai saying all the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called there is but one law. All alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.

When they told Mordecai what Esther had said Mordecai told them to reply to Esther: 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 relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.

I don't usually spend a whole sermon telling a story, but that is what I'm going to do today. For some of you this is a familiar story that you've heard many times. Others of you may say 'Good grief! I've read the Bible all my life but I've never seen this particular story or read it within the pages of Scripture' – Esther is a little, hard to find book buried in the middle of the Old Testament!

Esther's story begins with her childhood, with her becoming orphaned, at which point she was taken in and cared for by her cousin, much older than she, a man by the name of Mordecai, a minor government official in the land of Persia. The story is set somewhere between four and five-hundred years before the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ. At that time a man by the name of Ahasuerus was the king of Persia. History books call him Xerxes the first. So Ahasuerus the king, wanted to celebrate the glory of his kingdom, and so he holds a party, a great party for six months throughout the length and the breadth of the empire for all the officials in every region. And this party goes well, and then comes to an end, at which time the king calls for a final celebration for one extra week in the capital city of Suza, for all the officials working in the capital, (like Washington). He throws a party for them as well, a week-long celebration

During the week, the king hosts his own gathering in one part of the palace, and the queen whose name is Vashti has another party in her part of the palace, just for her women friends. So the men are in one place and the women are in another. And there is plenty of food and there is plenty of wine and the scriptures say (1:10), rather delightfully, that after they'd been drinking without restraint for some time, their hearts were 'merry with wine.' And when their hearts were merry with wine the king hits on what he thinks is a bright idea, which is to show off his wife Vashti and all her beauty to these men who have all drunk far too much. So he sends a summons to her, to the women's party, and says, "Vashti come on over here. I want to show you off to all of these men I'm so proud of you." But Vashti says she's going to have nothing to do with this; she knows how much wine the men have had! She simply refuses to do it, which sobers up the men rather quickly.

The King is furious, and seeks advice, since the queen's disobedience is highly public. And the advice is (1:16-18) that unless draconian measures are taken then women throughout the empire will rise up in rebellion against their husbands (...not a good thing!). And they act pretty quickly, and decisively. The king divorces his wife, sends her off to the harem where she spends the rest of her life. Strips her of all her royal authority. And the decision is made pretty quickly that he needs to marry again, he needs to find another queen. But how? Well, they hit on the brilliant idea of having a beauty contest throughout the

whole of the empire (sort of like 'America's Next Top Model' – except the prize is to become a queen!); they're going to have this beauty contest and bring to Suza beautiful women from across the empire, and these women are going to be introduced one-by-one to the king. And when he sees the first one that he truly loves, instead of winning just a million dollars, becomes the queen of all of Persia: just like that.

So the beauty contest is organized. The women are to be prepared with all the best modern cosmetics for one year before they come in to see the king. Contestants come from all over the world; and one of these is a local girl, a young Jewish woman by the name of Hadassah (whose more common name used in Scripture is Esther). Esther is entered into this competition by Mordecai, her cousin who has raised her since childhood, who says to her, 'there's only one thing you must not do, you must not share with anybody your Jewish background. Keep that quiet.' Esther enters into the competition, goes into the palace, is there with all these women prepared with cosmetics, and because she's a wonderful person she finds herself in favor with all the servants who treat her well and want her to win the competition.

Finally her moment comes, her day comes. She comes in before the king, and as you may guess, he's pleased. He's overjoyed. She is the one that he wants. And so this orphaned, disadvantaged, Jewish young girl all of a sudden finds herself living in the palace as queen of the greatest empire on earth.

The king calls for another holiday. An amnesty. People are forgiven for all their crimes against the kingdom, and everybody is rejoicing. Except for some of the king's enemies who think that this is a perfect time to assassinate him, to put him to death. In fact, among those who do not relish what the king is doing are two thugs by the name of Bigthan and Teresh who plot the scheme to assassinate the king (2:19-23). They're about to carry out the deed but their plot is discovered by none other than Mordecai. He discovers the plot, reports it to Esther, word filters up through the palace channels to the king, and the plot is thwarted, and the king's life is saved. And this event is recorded in the Chronicles of the Kings of Persia; and then it is forgotten.

Mordecai goes about his own business as if nothing much has happened. He's a relatively minor official in the government, but side-by-side with him is another person working in the government who is climbing the ladder, whose name is Haman. Haman doesn't mind who he steps on in order to get to the top. He's going to climb to the top, and in time he actually does! He becomes the king's right hand man, the most important person in the nation. Indeed, he almost feels as if he is the king as the king bestows on him honor after honor.

One of the honors the king bestows on him is a decree that when Haman passes through town people are to respond as Haman is almost the king himself: everybody must stoop down before him and do obeisance to him. And because people are afraid of him, because this is the king's decree, almost everybody does this. They bow down before Haman. Except for one person. That one person is Mordecai, who will not bow down before any mere mortal in

such a fashion; because he is a Jew he will not do it. He refuses. And his refusal begins to filter out to others, including Haman who becomes furious. He becomes so angry that he wants to put Mordecai to death. But he realizes that quick retaliation will not look good, so he hatches a more detailed scheme, not only to bring Mordecai to his death, but all of Mordecai's people, the Jews, too. (Possibly the first time recorded anywhere of a deliberate attempt to slaughter all the Jewish people).

Haman hatches the plot to kill every Jew throughout the empire, and he knows he needs the king's authority for it to take place. So Haman puts his plan together and he takes it to the king, and says to the king: "Oh king, as I look across your empire, things are going well; but there is an unruly people in your empire who have a law of their own. They are a problem waiting to happen. But they've done rather well, they've prospered. My recommendation is this: that on the 13th day of the 12th month you issue a decree that everybody across the empire can rise up and with impunity and put those Jewish people to death (a pogrom), plunder all their property and place all of it in the king's treasuries. This should relieve our tax problems for this year." And the king signed off on it! Making it a decree that could not be changed.

And so the word goes out throughout the length and the breadth of the empire that everybody has the right to rise up against their Jewish neighbors on the 13th day of the 12th month and kill them, and plunder their property. And all the Jewish people are filled with terror, bereft of all comfort. They put on sackcloth and ashes, the traditional clothing to indicate grieving. And, no doubt they pray to God for help (though God's name is not mentioned explicitly). And amongst those who put on sackcloth and ashes is none other than Mordecai (Esther's cousin who raised her as if she were a daughter). And he does so in a public place. He does so at the gate of the city, the place where business was conducted in many ancient cities. He puts it on in this public place and makes quite a show of himself. In fact, word of his action filters up to the palace, and something needs to be done before Esther is publicly embarrassed.

So Esther sends a message down to the city gate, with a bag of new clothes, and says something like, "Mordecai; you're not dressed appropriately for your daily work. Put on these new clothes. Don't draw attention to yourself like this." (her tone was probably rather like that of a teenager with a parent saying, you know I'm just sort of embarrassed that you're around me right now." Mordecai replies that embarrassment is a minor issue, and asks if she has heard about the decree. He sends the message and a copy of the decree to Esther in the palace and lets her know that on the 13th day of the 12th month all Jewish people are going to be put to death. And he urges her to go and talk to the king about it.

It's at this point that the Scripture passage we read earlier comes in. Esther gets Mordecai's message. She thinks about it, and her immediate reaction is 'no, no, no, no! I'm not going to get involved in this at all.' Because, even though she is the queen she cannot go in to see the king without being invited; if she goes uninvited and the king is not happy, it's 'curtains' for her, it's all over for her, even though she is the queen.

So, Esther sends a message back and she says “this is all too risky. I can’t do this. I haven’t been in to see the king, I haven’t been summoned for 30 days. My life is at stake here. I’m not going to do it.” And Mordecai sends a profound and challenging reply. He says

“Don’t think for a moment, not a moment that you are safe in the palace just because you are the queen. No, no, no! When the 13th day of the 12th month comes, you and your family are going to find yourselves being sought out and out to death, as well. But, who knows, perhaps you have come to royal power for just such a time as this.”

Esther gets the message and she thinks about it. And this is the moment where her life changes, where she realizes she’s not just a fortunate young woman who happened to ‘luck out’ by winning a beauty contest and is now the queen. None of this happened by accident. She realizes that her life has been caught up in something far bigger than herself, far more important than herself, and that Mordecai is right. That here she is, in the great sovereign will and purpose of God, at a place where nobody else is able to do something, at a moment that will change the course of history, and even if she fails, if evil wins, this moment will change the course of her life for good –because she will know that she has done what is right and what is important. And so she sends a message back to Mordecai and she says, “I’ll do it!. And if I perish, I perish.”

It is as if, hundreds of years before the Apostle Paul writes his letter to the Romans (our first reading), that she understands the words of Romans chapter 12 and verse 1: “*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice wholly acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship.*” That is, offer up your lives for the purposes of God so that your lives are wholly God’s. And when you do this, when we do this together and individually, individually and together each of us doing it in different ways from one another, God will do amazing things with our lives.

So Esther rises up in faith, in faith, not only believing in this greater purpose but taking action (and faith is always a mixture of those two things together. Not just what we believe in our heads but what we do with our hands and our feet together). She takes action; she acts in trust. She says to Mordecai, “*If I perish I perish, but I will do this. Call all the Jews together. Have them fast for three days and on the third day I will go in and I will see the king.*”

The three days come, the three days go. Esther stands before the king’s door, the door to the throne room, the doors are thrown wide open, the king sees her and he is in a good mood. He holds out the golden scepter and he says “Esther, Esther come on in. What is it that you want?” (He is in a really good mood!) “Up to half my kingdom I will give it to you.”

And because he is in a good mood Esther decides to tease him just a little bit and says, “Oh king, what I really want is for you and your right hand man Haman to come with me to a banquet which I have prepared for you. It’s almost ready now. Come with me and I’ll tell you then what I want.”

And the king says “All right Esther, I’ll go along with you but at the banquet will you tell me what it is that you really want?” And Esther says “Yes

I'll do that." So the king gets himself ready. He summons Haman, that nasty piece of work who has climbed the ladder and is now second in power. The king summons him to come with him, and the two of them have lunch with Esther. They enjoy this banquet together and the king says "Okay Esther, tell me now what it is that you want." And Esther really plays with the king. She says, "Oh king, why don't you come with Haman to another banquet that I'll prepare for you tomorrow and tomorrow I'll tell you." And the king says, "Tomorrow? You will tell me tomorrow?" To which Esther replies, "Yes, tomorrow I will tell you." And they go their separate ways.

Haman is as excited as he can be that he's been invited to this dinner. He is now not only the king's favorite but he is the queen's favorite as well. Nothing could be going better for him. He cannot wait to go home and call all his friends together and tell them about all the honors that are being bestowed on him. And he does this. He's on his way home to do this when he passes Mordecai, still in his sackcloth and ashes, who does not bow down before him! And Haman is furious, feeling that everything is good, except for this man. He goes home and tells his friends all that is happening that is good. And then he laments about what Mordecai is doing. He tells them that he can hardly wait for the 13th day of the 12th month. To which they respond by asking why he needs to wait? He certainly has the power to do something now. Even though he's previously thought it was beneath him to kill the man, he could surely find a way to have the king issue a decree to put Mordecai to death as soon as possible. And Haman thinks that this is a wonderful idea. In fact, having planned that that he will go to the king to seek Mordecai's death the very next morning, he begins to build a huge gallows for Mordecai in his own back yard, and then he goes to sleep, at peace.

That night however the king does not sleep well. He wakes in the middle of the night and needs something to read. He asks his servants to bring him some of the chronicles of the kings of Persia. His own chronicles. What's gone on in his own reign? And he reads through a volume and comes to a place where he reads about those two thugs, Bigthan and Teresh, who plotted to assassinate him, and how their plot was thwarted by Mordecai. He says to his servants that he doesn't even remember the incident and asks if Mordecai was honored in any way. They tell him that Mordecai was never honored. And the king decides that something needs to be done to set this omission right: Mordecai had saved his life!

At that very moment the sun was beginning to rise. Haman had woken early because he wanted to come to the king first thing, and ask for Mordecai's death. So Haman enters the palace, and is brought to the king, and is about to open his mouth to seek Mordecai's death . . . but the king speaks first and says, "Haman, my good man Haman, I've got a question for you. What should the king do to honor the person with whom the king is greatly pleased, I mean greatly, greatly pleased?"

Haman thinks this honor is coming to him so he spares no words. He says "Well, I think you should take some of the clothes that the king himself has

worn. You should take the horse that the king himself has been seated on. You should take one of the king's finest, most noble servants, and have that servant clothe this person whom you seek to honor and lead him through the streets on the horse with everybody bowing down before him."

And the king says "You have spoken well Haman. Go fetch Mordecai. He is the one who I want to honor." Well, you can feel Haman's heart sink at that point, he can't get his words out. He obviously can't seek for Mordecai's death. The only thing he can do is say "Yes your majesty," head out the door, go get Mordecai, put on the clothes, put him on the horse, lead him through the streets. And this he does. And then rushes home to his wife Zeresh and tells her that things are not going as well as they were yesterday! He's in shock, at which point he is summoned – summoned to the second of Esther's banquets.

He arrives in time to find the king is there, and the queen is there. They have a wonderful feast together, and the king says to Esther "My dear, this is it. I've gone along with your game long enough. Tell me what is it that you want? Up to half my kingdom I will give it to you."

And Esther says, "Oh king, it's a sad story. I don't know when you did it, but you signed a decree that on the 13th day of the 12th month all across the empire people are given the right to rise up with your authority and put to death all my people the Jewish people. And my heart is grieving and sad and you must do something to stop this travesty from happening."

And the king, growing angry, asks, "Who made me sign this?"

And Esther replies, "Here is the man!" She points to Haman. The king is furious. His blood is boiling. He goes out into the garden to cool off. Haman grabs on to Esther's skirt, pleading for mercy. At which point the king comes back in, and seeing Haman says, "You advise me to sign this decree, and now you molest my wife? Take him away. What shall be done to him?" And the rest of the servants, who never liked Haman much anyway say, "Oh king, look out the window! Look towards Haman's house . . . see that structure going up there? It's a gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai." And the king responds immediately: "Take him. Hang him on the gallows he has prepared for Mordecai."

The story takes a few more twists and turns. Suffice it to say the Jewish people are saved. They are not always presented in a good light (the scriptures rarely cover over our human faults and failings). But the people are saved. And all because of one person, seemingly insignificant, for whom at one time, for a long time, it seemed life was completely going the wrong way, would add up to nothing. All because one person caught a grip of herself, and realized that her life was not lived in a vacuum but lived within the sphere of God's sovereign presence, a presence that our Lord Jesus Christ calls the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God. Lived within a sphere greater than herself, which if she saw herself and this is an act of faith within it, would give to her life a meaning, a purpose and significance that nothing and no one could take away: that would indeed be eternal. And by faith she embraced that vision and her place within it. By faith she did what she sensed God was calling her to do.

As Paul reminds the Romans the call for every single one of us is different. But to see our lives within this context, this sovereign context of the will of God – this *is* God’s call *for all of us*. All of us have won that beauty competition. All of us have become the royal children of the living God, placed on this earth and in this place for some purpose that God alone knows. But God calls us to seek and to discern this call, and then, frequently with great risk, to take a step to fulfill it; and to find, whether we perish or live, that in that step our lives have meaning – powerful, eternal meaning. This is what God wants for you and for me and for the church that bears His name.
Let us bow before God in Prayer.

Holy God, grant us grace not only to believe certain truths which we must believe because they are true but to act on them – find the courage to act on them and so to live by faith and find Your touch and Your call to give to our lives which at times we feel are so insignificant a significance that nothing and no one can take away. Amen.

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