

## Esther: Willing to Die for Her People

[Esther 3:8-11, 4:8-16](#)

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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The book of Esther reads like a pogrom in nineteenth century Russia. In 1881 alone there were approximately two hundred attacks on Jews in Russia, resulting in some forty deaths. The play "Fiddler on the Roof" testifies to the cruelty of the Tsarist regime and to the courage of Jewish families forced to leave their ancestral villages. And the Holocaust Museum in downtown DC testifies to the brutality of Adolph Hitler and his henchmen. I have seen the ovens at Dachau. I have seen the numbers tattooed on the arms of holocaust survivors, and with my Jewish friends I pray, "Never again."

But pogroms didn't originate in Russia in AD 1881. They began in Persia four hundred seventy-five years before Christ. Here is the story: The Persian King Ahasuerus, in a fit of drunken anger, demoted his queen. A few days later he elevated a young woman named Esther to take her place, not knowing that Esther was Jewish. At about the same time the king promoted a man named Haman to the number two position in the kingdom. Haman was a proud man; he loved to have people bow and scrape as he drove his chariot through the streets of the capital. But one man, Mordecai, Esther's adoptive father, refused to genuflect whenever Haman went by, and Haman, knowing Mordecai was a Jew, became so enraged that he talked the king into killing every single Jew in the kingdom. So, says the Book of Esther, "Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods." (3:13)

And if Esther thinks she is exempt from the fate of her fellow Jews, Mordecai reminds her that she too is in jeopardy: "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews." (4:13) In other words, someone is sure to inform on you, and you too will die.

I have spent a good deal of my life trying to avoid jeopardy. I'm part of the so-called silent generation, born 1925 to 1942, and one of our traits, we silents, is that we don't take chances. We tend to be flexible rather than forceful, to live with our problems rather than take aggressive steps to solve them. Avoidance is our middle name, but of course we cannot avoid jeopardy. We move farther out from the city and then learn from the Washington Post that gangs are steadily infiltrating our suburbs. We build guard gates and erect high fences around our neighborhoods but we cannot keep out cancer and heart disease. We save for a rainy day and then watch inflation or a bear market eat away at our portfolios. There is no security system so sophisticated that it can guard against every peril. There are no air bags so flawless that they can protect against every injury. There are no contracts so airtight that they can insure against every calamity. Esther was a queen; Esther had only to snap her fingers and all the resources of the kingdom were at her disposal; Esther was surrounded by thick castle walls and sturdy secret service agents. Yes, and Esther was in jeopardy because Esther was a Jewess.

And there is more than jeopardy here. There is also destiny: "Who knows," Mordecai tells Esther. "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." (4:14) Perhaps you are the right person in the right place at the right time to rescue your people from Haman's holocaust.

As an aside, you will be interested to know that God is never mentioned in the Book of Esther. The absence of any mention of God almost blocked Esther's inclusion in the pages of Scripture. That her story made it in is due to the clear implication that God had orchestrated events so that Esther was destined to save her people.

Shakespeare said that there is a "divinity that shapes our ends." Any reader of the Bible knows that he was right, that every one of us is being shaped at this very moment for a destiny of which we may be only dimly aware. The Apostle Paul told his Ephesian friends, "We who first hoped in Christ have been destined to live for the praise of his glory." (1:12 RSV) So all of us have come, if not to royal dignity, then to the kitchen or classroom, the cubicle or workbench, the office or laboratory, to do something good for God. Is a colleague reaching out to you for help? Is a member of your family heading toward ruin unless you intervene? Is a cancer eating at the vitals of your company, and you can do something to heal it? Perhaps you, like Esther, have come on the scene for just such a time as this.

In spite of the jeopardy, sensing her destiny, Esther accepted the responsibility. And I do not know of a finer, more courageous pledge than Esther's: "I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."

But why should she perish? Is she not the queen, and don't queens have certain prerogatives? Ah, but Persian law dictated that anyone, the queen included, who stepped into the king's presence without an invitation could be summarily executed. In spite of this, Esther said, "I will go to the king, and if I perish, I perish." Before that moment Esther may have thought herself invincible. But when she turned the knob on the king's door she gave up her royal prerogatives and became simply Esther the Jewess. When she stepped through that door she allied herself with every Jewish man, woman and child under sentence of death.

Which leads me to say that Esther is every inch a Christ-figure. For when Jesus came into this world, he too gave up his royal prerogatives: "He emptied himself," Paul writes, "taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." Unlike Esther, however, Jesus might have avoided the jeopardy. The devil offered him a pain-free road to royalty: "All these kingdoms I will give you if you will fall down and worship me." But had Jesus accepted the offer, there would be no atonement, no redemption, no salvation for his people. Had he accepted the devil's terms he might wear a crown, but he would reign over an empty kingdom. So he rejected the devil's shortcut and set his face toward the cross. And along the way Jesus told us, "If any want to become my followers, let them

deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Esther took up her cross. Will you take up yours?

When he served as this country's ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson toured Africa. On his return he said, "What impressed me most is the record of missionaries there. Against every conceivable danger, it is they who brought education, and healing, and human caring to that continent. This was their legacy, and a trail of gravestones. My God, the gravestones, they are everywhere. It is as if they meant to say, "We are here to stay. We have come to do some good. And we will see it through."

When the history of this church is written, how will it read? Will it say, "During the interim between pastors they hunkered down inside this lovely sanctuary?" Will it say, "They chose not to volunteer their time and talents because things are a little uncertain right now?" Will it say, "They held back on giving their money until the new pastor came, with the result that important ministries could not be funded?"

Or will it say, "They brought education to their children, and healing to their families, and caring to their community. By their sacrificial giving they said, "We are here to stay. We have come to do some good. And we will see it through!"