

Christina Litwiller  
Salina Mennonite Church  
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Scripture: The Book of Esther

## For Such a Time as This

The Bible is filled with stories of power. Power inherent, power bestowed, power usurped, and of course, power misused as seen a few weeks ago in the story of King David and Bathsheba. The story of Esther is a unique story of power. In it we are given the opportunity to witness a woman using her power to save her people. Esther is an orphan, a Jew, and a woman. In terms of her cultural system, she is among the least. But she is also young and beautiful. These qualities lead her to a very different place in the system. She is now the queen. Esther learns that even though she did not have the power to choose her circumstances, she does have some power in them.

Each of us has some kind of power, but recognizing one's own power is not always easy, Esther's story invites us to consider the power we do have, and how we can use it wisely, even if there is risk.

*Prayer: God, issues of power are complicated. Help each of us to understand our own power and the spaces in which we might have influence. Guide us and strengthen us to use our power wisely and for the good of your kingdom. Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

The last time I preached on the book of Esther, we watched a video from *The Bible Project*.<sup>2</sup> Today, I'll tell you the story in a slightly different way.<sup>3</sup> As you hear the story, take note of who carries power and how the power shifts in different circumstances.

Long ago, in Shushan, the capital of the Persian Empire, there lived a foolish king named Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, who ruled over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. One night in the midst of a great party King Ahasuerus called for his wife, Queen Vashti, to dance before all of the assembled guests. She refused.

"How can a wife refuse to obey her husband?" asked the king's advisors. "If your wife refused his Majesty's order, then all of the wives may refuse their husbands all through the kingdom! Your Majesty, you must punish her!"

The foolish king listened to his ministers and banished his wife from the kingdom. But after a time, he became lonely, and decided to take a new queen. The prettiest girls and women of the 127 provinces were brought before the king, that he might choose one who pleased him. And he chose the beautiful Esther.

Now, Esther was an orphan, a Jewish woman in the care of her cousin, Mordecai, who had adopted her into his family as his daughter. Mordecai had instructed Esther to keep her Jewish heritage a secret, so she told no one. Still, he worried about her. When Esther was chosen queen, Mordecai stationed himself at the palace gates to keep close to her. And there he heard two of the gatekeepers plotting to kill the king. Quickly he informed the king of the plot, and his deed was written in the book of Chronicles.

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<sup>1</sup> The prayer and parts of the sermon are adapted from Week 9 of "Seeking Justice Together" from *Current*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Watch: Esther Bible Book Overview Video | BibleProject™](#)

<sup>3</sup> Betty Lehrman, *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible*, Volume Four: Old Testament Women, Michael E. Williams, editor, Abingdon Press, 1993, pp. 156-159.

At this time in Shushan the king's most trusted advisor was named Haman. He was a wicked man, who demanded that all bow down to him. The only one who refused to bow was Esther's cousin, Mordecai.

"Why do you disobey the order?" Haman asked.

"Because I am a Jew," Mordecai explained, "and I kneel only to God."

This made Haman so angry that he plotted to kill all of the Jews in all of the king's provinces. (Talk about an overreaction!) He cast lots, known as *pur* in Hebrew, to determine on what day he would have the Jews put to death. The date chosen was the thirteenth day of Adar, the twelfth month. Then Haman told the king, "There is a certain people who do not obey your laws. Let an edict be drawn for their destruction, and I will pay the king's treasury 10,000 talents of silver."

Ahasuerus agreed, and word was sent throughout his kingdom that on the thirteenth of Adar all of the Jews were to be slain.

When the Jews learned of their fate, there was weeping and wailing. Mordecai put on sackcloth and ashes. He sent messengers to tell Esther all that had happened. He begged her to ask the king to change his decree.

Now, in those days a queen was not allowed to just go and talk with the king. She had to wait to be summoned, just like everyone else. And if she appeared before the king without being sent for, she risked her life, for if the king did not wish to see her, he could have her killed immediately. But if he held out his scepter to her he would listen to her request.

Esther told Mordecai that she could not appear before Ahasuerus. "But you must," Mordecai told her, "or all of your people will be killed. And perhaps you, too, will die. You are the only hope for the Jewish people. Perhaps you have been made queen for such a time as this."

Esther was afraid. She fasted and prayed for three days. At last she knew what she had to do. "I will go to the king and plead my people's case, even though it means breaking the law," she decided. "And if I die, then I die."

She approached the king's throne. He looked up at her. Her heart beat wildly. Then he held his scepter out to her. "Your Majesty," she asked, "would you grant me a great favor?" She held her breath.

"Anything you wish, my queen, even if it be to half my kingdom," he replied.

"Would you and your advisor Haman do me the honor of attending a banquet with me?"

"Anything you wish," the king replied.

Now, when Haman learned that he had been invited to dine with the king and the queen, he felt even more important and full of himself. As he passed Mordecai at the gate, he was even more angered that Mordecai refused to bow to him. So he hurried home and had constructed a gallows on which he planned to hang Mordecai the next day.

Night fell. The king couldn't sleep. He called for his book of Chronicles. Perhaps some reading would settle his mind. In the annals he found mention that Mordecai the Jew had saved him from an assassination plot.

"How did I thank this Mordecai?" he asked the chamberlain.

"The man was never honored in any way," came the answer.

"Never honored? Hmmm ... Who is about at this hour?"

The chamberlain spotted Haman. "Your advisor Haman, your Majesty."

"Send him to me."

Haman appeared before the king. Ahasuerus asked, "How would you honor a man who has done a great deed for his king?"

Haman thought the king meant to honor him. “I would outfit him in the finest clothes and parade him through the streets on our finest horse,” he answered.

“Good,” said the king. “Do this for my subject Mordecai.”

Haman was furious, though he dared not tell the king. In the morning he paraded Mordecai through the streets, and still his anger grew.

That day the queen’s banquet would be held. Esther wanted to tell the king about Haman’s evil plot. She tried, but she couldn’t find the words. Her mouth went dry and her hands shook. Instead she asked the king and Haman to continue the feast the next day.

At the second banquet the king asked, “Esther, what is your wish and your request? Even if it be to half the kingdom, it shall be granted.”

Esther stood up straight and took a deep breath. “Your Majesty,” she began, “there is an evil man who wished to kill me and all my people. Let my life be granted, and grant me the lives of my people. That is my request.”

“Who is this evil one?” thundered Ahasuerus.

“There,” she pointed, “your adviser, Haman.”

The king was furious. He ordered Haman hanged from the gallows built for Mordecai. And Mordecai was made chief adviser to the king.

As for the decree, it could not be changed. But a second decree was issued in which the king allowed the Jews to fight against any who threatened them. On the thirteenth of Adar, there was fighting and bloodshed throughout the kingdom. Perhaps, too, there were places where the people lay down their arms and embraced each other, but of that we do not know.

We do know that when, on the fourteenth of Adar, the Jewish people were still alive, there was feasting and joy. And to this day the festival of Purim commemorates the foolish Ahasuerus, the wise Mordecai, the evil Haman, and the beautiful Esther, who with her bravery helped to save her people.

Let’s consider a few concerns we have with this story and a few lessons we can take away from it.<sup>4</sup> One concern is that God is not directly mentioned in the book of Esther. Apparently, the story was retold in slightly different ways in various ancient Christian and Jewish communities. Protestant churches have generally translated Esther from a Hebrew version. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians use a Greek edition of the story that also goes back to the original Hebrew text. The Greek version contains two lengthy prayers, one by Mordecai and one by Esther.

The Hebrew version included in our Bible hints at the presence of God working behind the scenes. Mordecai has faith that relief and deliverance will come for the Jews from another place if Esther doesn’t act on their behalf. Esther asks all the Jews to fast, and while not specifically named in the text, we assume she asks them to pray, before she goes to see the king.

Another concern about this story is the moral and ethical ambiguity we find in it. It’s filled with drinking, anger, sex, and violence. The people who are saved from annihilation, turn around and kill all those who wanted to kill them. The heroes of the story violate Torah commands.

While Esther is lifted up as a model and hero, perhaps Vashti provides a more exemplary model. Vashti refuses to cooperate with the king’s command that she appear at the banquet to show off her beauty. By contrast, Esther accommodates herself to the prevailing culture, using her beauty and shrewdness to win the security she seeks for her people.

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<sup>4</sup> Some of these points come from Eugene F. Roop, *Ruth, Jonah, Esther, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, ©2002, Herald Press, Scottsdale, PA, pp. 161-164, 197-198.

This story shows that God can and does work in the mess and moral ambiguity of history. Esther and Mordecai are not put forth as pure, moral examples; not all of their behavior is endorsed. They are put forth as models of trust and hope when things get really bad. God uses the faithfulness of even morally compromised people to accomplish his purpose.

The point of the story is that despite exile, “God’s Absence,” and Israel’s moral compromises, God has not abandoned his promises. We too, are asked to be willing to trust God’s providence even when we can’t see it working. We find hope in the fact that no matter how bad things get, God is committed to redeeming the world.

When reading about Esther, it’s important to understand her life circumstances. Esther was vulnerable in three ways. In a culture where family provides protection and identity, Esther is an orphan. In a culture defined and controlled by men, Esther is a woman. In the powerful Persian Empire, Esther is a Jew.

As expected for a culturally vulnerable person, the events that define Esther’s life are not ones she chose. Esther struggles with problems facing minority or subordinate persons of groups living in many times and cultures. Minority communities lack political, economic, religious, and cultural standing. To gain some measure of security and satisfaction, they must always make their way within the majority culture. They must decide when to stand up for themselves, when to resist, and when to accommodate. This has been the Jewish struggle throughout the ages. Living as a minority community, dependent on the attitude and actions of the majority has often kept Jews in a precarious position.

Systems today, as in the Persian Empire, can be unjust and complicated. Often many are oppressed for the benefit of a few. Power is not distributed fairly, and change is hard to effect. Each of us has some situations in which we are the minority and others in which we are the majority. Each of us has a sphere of influence; some situations in which we have some power to work for improvement of someone’s situation and even our own. Perhaps Esther’s story invites us to consider the power we do have, and how we can use it wisely, even if there is risk.

Life is messy. People are complicated. Experience suggests that no action of a person or group can be reduced to a single motive, such as merely self-interest or purely religious faithfulness. Christians act and have acted in response to the prompting of the Spirit, but seldom only for that reason. We witness a miracle each time God takes our complexly motivated actions and moves us a step closer toward shalom, the wholeness and peace that is God’s purpose.

Esther is often given as an example of courage. We have many fears: fear of the dark, fear of heights, fear of failure, fear of loneliness, fear of new situations, fear of illness. We need courage to try new things, address personal fears, and admit mistakes. It takes courage to stand up for what is right, especially if you must stand by yourself.

This story helps us realize that God can use us even with our own moral ambiguity, ethical failings, and mixed motives. This story helps us remember that God is present with us and in our situations even when we can’t see God working. This story encourages us to find hope in the fact that no matter how bad things get, God is committed to redeeming this world. This story challenges us to recognize our own power and to carefully consider the spaces in our own lives where our voices or our actions influence others, even in small ways.

May God help us use that influence for good.