

**A TIME SUCH AS THIS**  
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September 27, 2009  
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Esther 4:13**

*Perhaps you have come to royal status for just such a time as this.*

In early spring on the Jewish holiday called Purim, Jewish children scratch the name HAMAN on the bottom of their shoes and stomp him to death all day long. If you know the story of Esther you know why. If you don't, you're about to hear a condensed version.

The story of Esther is about a brave and beautiful Jewish woman who risked her life to save her people from a massacre. God isn't mentioned by name in this book or story—not even once. And yet the story of Esther is included among the sacred books, which could mean, I suppose, that just because we don't hear or say the name of God doesn't mean God is absent in our stories or our lives.

The collection of Jewish sacred books begin with a story of a mighty man, Moses, saving the Jewish people from Pharaoh's Egypt with the help of a mighty God. The story of the Jewish people in the Bible ends with a woman, Esther, saving the Jewish people without the intervention of a mighty God. What does that suggest?

Perhaps it's an evolution or maturation of religious understanding. Perhaps it's a reluctance to over speak God's name the way some Christians sprinkle the name of Jesus or God in every other sentence thus trivializing and taking God's name in vain. Anyway, it's an interesting observation: the contrast between the story of Moses and the story of Esther. What are we to make of it, if anything?

Once upon a time in Persia, in the third year of the reign of King Ahasueras (also known as Xerxes), the king threw a party for all the nobles and governors of the Empire, which was quite a few since the Empire included 127 provinces stretching from Ethiopia to India. The Empire included a great diversity of racial and ethnic groups. Esther belonged to one of the racial, ethnic minorities.

The king's party for the nobility lasted 180 days—half a year. (I'm sorry if you missed it!) Ahasueras must have felt a little guilty afterwards because he next threw a party for the peasants.

That party lasted seven days. At the height of the revelry the king decided to show-off one of his prized trophies, his queen, Queen Vashti. He ordered her to present herself and stand before his male guests.

Vashti refused.

The king, who was used to getting his way, was stunned. He asked his advisors what he should do.

Get rid of her at once, they said, otherwise when the wives of ordinary men hear about the queen's defiance they will get ideas of their own. But if you get rid of this freethinking wife of yours then all women, high and low, throughout the Empire will honor and obey their husbands and all will be well for us men.

So the king banished Vashti from the empire. He wrote a letter of banishment and had copies of it read and posted all around the empire.

For a while the king felt manly. But, by and by, Ahasueras missed having a queen to hang on his arm and to put on a pedestal. So the king's advisors arranged a contest and brought before him the most beautiful women in the empire.

A certain man named Mordecai heard about the contest and urged his orphaned cousin Esther to enter the contest. She did, and as you might guess, she won the king's favor. Ahasueras proclaimed Esther his new queen.

Ahasueras knew Esther was beautiful. He didn't know she was Jewish.

Soon thereafter Esther's cousin Mordecai overheard two of the king's bodyguards plotting to assassinate the king. Mordecai told Esther who told the king who immediately had the conspirators hanged. Mordecai's name was entered in the King's journal for good keeping.

Now the story takes a nasty turn.

King Ahasueras promoted a man name Haman to the highest position in his court. Haman was an Amalekite which doesn't mean much to us except that Amalekites hated Jews the way some Sunnis hate Shiites and vice versa.

Haman was not only an Amalekite; he was also vain. Everywhere he went subjects were required to bow before him. Everybody did. Well, almost everybody. One man refused to bow the knee to Haman. And guess who that one was?

That's right. Mordecai.

It made Haman furious. So he began to plot how to get rid of Mordecai and all his kin and kind.

One day Haman told the king about a certain minority group in the empire who practiced strange customs and who disregarded the king's laws. Such people, Haman said, should be destroyed and their worldly goods confiscated. With the king's permission, he said, I will order it done and I will pay the king a ton of money in advance.

Like so many rulers and governors before and after him, Ahasueras treasured wealth more than the lives of a few thousand people. So he agreed and sealed the order with his ring just like so many other government policies that kill by legal decrees, decrees signed in ink.

Haman was thrilled with his success. Haman drew "lots" which in Hebrew is PUR from which comes Purim. Haman drew lots out of a hat to find the best date for the massacre and then sent a letter around the Empire announcing that anybody could kill Jews and confiscate all their possessions legally on the 13th day of the month Adar.

When Mordecai heard the news, he covered his body with sackcloth, poured ashes on his head and then sent a message to the Queen. *Esther*, it said, *you must beg the King to stop this pogrom, this massacre, this holocaust.*

Esther was afraid.

She sent a message back to Mordecai telling him that there was a law that forbade any one, even the queen, from entering the king's presence without being invited. To do so would risk death. And to make matters worse, she had not been invited into the king's presence for thirty days. She told Mordecai that she felt horrible but there was nothing she could do.

Mordecai received her message and sent another back. If you fail to act, he wrote, do not think you will escape just because you live in the palace. You will be killed just like all the other Jews. And who knows, Mordecai continued. Who knows?

And here is the crux of the story. Here is where we are drawn in. Who knows, asked Mordecai of Esther. Perhaps you have come to royal status for just *such a time as this*.

Who knows? Who did know why Esther was where she was at that moment in time? Remember: God isn't a player in this story and God isn't talking. Who knew why Esther was in such a position at that time? Who knows? Esther would have to decide for herself.

And who knows why we are where we are today? Who knows why we are so well off, so influential, so healthy, so well insured by global standards? Who knows why in this world of so much poverty and oppression, we have come to virtual royalty.

Are we in a position to save lives—if not in a big and dramatic way perhaps in a small and inconspicuous way?

Well maybe I am, you say, but I don't want to risk what I've worked so hard to get. Yes, I could speak up when people demean people of color or Muslims or homosexuals or fundamentalists or Democrats or socialists or whoever! I could speak up but...

I could give more to strengthen causes I believe in but I don't want to forego my comfort. I could visit so and so, I could write a letter, I could ask serious questions of certain people or boards. I could...but maybe I'd ruin what I've worked so hard to gain.

Who knows why you have come to your place and position at this time? And who knows why we've become the church we are today with great wealth in our homes, great talents, skills, convictions, ideas plus great political and social connections? Who knows?

Facing the crisis of her life, Esther came of age and found her voice. She took everything into account and asked her family and friends to join her in a three-day fast after which she would go to the king even though it meant breaking the law and risking her life. If I perish, she said, so be it.

And part of Esther did perish then and there. The old Esther died; a new Esther arose. No matter the cost to her, she was determined to do the next right thing. Are you ready to do the next right thing?

How did things turn out for Esther and her people? Well, I've run out of time to finish the story but you can read the conclusion for yourself anytime you'd like.

Suffice it to say that to this day many Jews celebrate Purim as a day devoted to remembering their deliverance and a day on which they, as the Bible story puts it, "*open their hands to the poor.*"

Funny thing about that, about helping the poor on such a day. I suppose, if we understood how often we have been delivered from death in more ways than one, we too might be so grateful as to open our hands at every opportunity to aid the poor of which there are so many, not to mention so many different ways of being poor.

What are you hearing at this time? What are you seeing at this time? What are you going to do in such a time as this?