

Esther's Dilemma

April 28, 2024 AM Sermon
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Esther 4:1-17

This morning, our Bible passage follows the theme story from the GEMS this year. The girls have been studying the book of Esther. So The Scripture reference is from Esther 4:1-17. This picks up the story of Esther right in the middle of the action, and although the story is familiar for many of us, I want to set it up before we read today's passage. Esther is not someone who would expect to accomplish great things in life. She doesn't grow up in a setting where anyone would encourage her to dream big. As a Jew she is a minority in the Persian empire. As an orphan, she's been lucky to grow up in the care of her relative Mordecai. And as a woman, she has her gender working against her status too.

When the day comes for King Xerxes to search for a new wife after being refused publicly by Queen Vashti, Esther has little choice but to participate in the beauty contest to find a new queen. The empire needs someone who can please the king and not rock the boat. So Esther is gathered up with the other young women into the palace compound. It's not hard to imagine what modest hopes for a home and a family these young women give up as they adapt to a totally different way of life.

Somehow, Esther pleases the king more than all the other young women. And so she is made queen, all while keeping her Jewish ethnicity a secret as Mordecai instructed. Time passes. The King elevates a man named Haman to the place of highest honor on his court. Everyone must bow to Haman at the King's gate. Haman enjoys his prestigious place, and all of the King's courtiers bow before him. But Mordecai refuses. He will not honor Haman this way. Flying into a fury to match his pride, Haman vows revenge. Not only Mordecai but all of the Jews will pay for this insult. Haman persuades Xerxes that a nameless people group is threatening the kingdom, even offering to finance their genocide. Without missing a beat Xerxes agrees. "Keep your money," he tells Haman. "Do with the people as you please."

So the lot is cast to determine the day when the Jews will be destroyed: eleven months. Jews in every province of the kingdom have eleven months before they will be murdered and their property plundered. All who hear it in the citadel of Susa are bewildered. And the Jews throughout the kingdom go into mourning. This is where we pick up the story today.

Near the end of Shakespeare's Hamlet, Hamlet uncovers and thwarts an ordered attempt on his life. And Hamlet comments to his friend Horatio, "There's a divinity [that] shapes our ends / rough-hew them how we will." (Act 5, Scene 2). Or less elegantly: There's a God-shaped direction to our lives, however haphazard and halting our actions seem. These phrases could stand as short summaries for the book of Esther. Although we never see God's name in Esther, although he is never given direct credit for anything that happens, Esther's coincidences and unlikely reversals point to a divine hand working behind the scenes. Perhaps the writer of Esther went to writer's workshops that stressed "showing rather than telling": One function of Esther's story in the Bible is to paint in bold strokes that God is always at work, even when we don't see him explicitly named. That's strangely comforting for people living in times of confusion or upheaval, where God's presence is believed, claimed, sought, and assumed; but human perception of what he is up to feels uncertain at best.

So this morning, putting on lenses of faith, what hints about God's work do we see in Esther's dilemma? I'd like to look at three aspects of how Esther navigates the crisis in this chapter together. First, God gives Esther help as her responsibilities unfold. Second, God helps Esther see when it's time to prepare, and when it's time to go. Third, God gives Esther courage fueled by her faith.

First, God gives Esther help. There are trustworthy people around her. Mordecai and Hathak each have roles to play to help Esther and the Jewish community. Mordecai helps by sounding the alarm. He's like a prophet. His rough clothes, ashes, and loud cries present the plight of his people in an unforgettable way. There he stands in the public square, hair disheveled and wailing; protesting the decree against the Jews; identifying with his people destined for destruction. And when he can get a message to Esther, he reports the crisis to her. He helps her see its basis and urgency, and helps Esther determine what she must do.

Then, Hathak. Did you notice that Hathak has no words of his own in this passage? But he plays an essential role as a messenger. When Esther sends Mordecai a change of clothes, he refuses them. So Esther delves deeper into the problem and sends Hathak. Hathak is clearly trusted with knowledge of Esther's Jewish background and able to carry sensitive information to Mordecai. Because of Hathak, Mordecai and Esther can

communicate. Hathak returns to Esther and brings back Mordecai's details: a copy of the decree and the amount of money Haman offered. This confirms for Esther that this crisis is grounded in fact and allows her to make an informed next step.

These two men help Esther gain clarity about the seriousness of the situation and her role in it. For Esther recognizes her fragile position as queen. She acts decisively only when she can see that a brave next step is needed for her people. She hasn't been to see the king for 30 days - not exactly a sign that she's in his good graces. How is she to know if will welcome her visit? Esther isn't looking for a hero's glory or a martyr's end. When Mordecai first charges Esther to go to the king, she answers with a protest of her own. "What do you think I can do about it? There's a law that keeps all uninvited guests including me out of the king's court." Mordecai doesn't mince words. Through Hathak he helps Esther see that she has no good options. She's facing a double-bind. If she goes to the king she will risk her life. If she doesn't go to the king she will...risk her life. "If there were ever a time for breaking the law, this is it," Mordecai says. And then he points Esther's gaze to unseen purposes and providence in a desperate time. "Who knows?" he says. "Perhaps you have been brought to your royal position for such a time as this."

In response to Mordecai's command that she go to the king, Esther issues commands of her own. "Go," she finally tells Mordecai. "Gather all the Jews in the Citadel of Susa to fast for me. I and my maids will fast as you do. Eat and drink nothing night or day for three days. When this is done, I will go to the king. And if I perish, I perish". Mordecai has played a role; Hathak has played a role; now it's Esther's turn. Mordecai clarifies the problem; Hathak communicates it; and Esther will respond.

We live in a culture that especially celebrates the self-made woman or the renaissance man—the person who seems to excel at everything and do it alone. But if we relentlessly pursue that kind of total independence, we can miss out on something: the interdependence that's both a gift and a necessity. The gift of interdependence is especially critical in moments of crisis or challenge that are beyond any one of us. Seeing ourselves as players in God's story, not as writers or heroes of our own stories, can open us to the responsibilities and roles that are truly ours to hold. It lets us see and value the contributions of others too.

Second, God helps Esther see that there's a time to fast and pray, and there's a time to go. After recognizing that action is necessary, Esther gets to work. She calls for community spiritual support. She commands Mordecai, who up until now has been commanding her, to go and gather all the Jews for a three-day fast. As their stomachs growl and their heads throb, they will feel in their bodies the reality of their dependence on God. And when the time for fasting and prayer is complete, Esther will go to the king. The people will fast and pray, and then she will go. The community will offer Esther the spiritual support that she cannot provide for herself. And she will go, she will appeal for them in a way they can't for themselves. Esther holds a hefty responsibility; one she can only carry with community support.

One of my friends from seminary lives and works in her native Egypt teaching the seminary students in Cairo. A number of years ago, she preached on this passage in Grand Rapids before going home. This was around the time of the Arab Spring and home wasn't an especially safe place politically or religiously, but she and her husband felt both equipped and called to be there. She told those gathered at Alger Heights Church that night, "You pray, and we will go. We won't go unless you pray; and because you pray, we will go." Her call has stuck with me.

LaGrave members, each of us has a role in the church community of this time and place. Some here teach children or lead youth. Some study and some sing. Some serve in the community; others serve on council. Some of you have served actively throughout your lives and now find that your best gift to the life of the church is your prayers. Please, don't ever think that is small. Soon-to-be graduates, new parents, council members and synodical delegates, teachers and Bible study leaders rely on your prayers. Church, you pray; and they will go. Who knows? Maybe Esther imagined the whole fasting cloud of witnesses walking with her into the court of the king.

That brings us to number three: God gives Esther courage fueled by faith. Anyone presented with a declaration of war, a law calling for the annihilation of their people would stare down despair. You can easily envision the initial despair of the Jewish people in this story. You can hear in Esther's own words, "If I perish, I perish," a sense of resignation in an impossible situation. But God's people have also been given some agency; agency to meet the moment as God's image bearers and his children, even if what they can do feels small. The act of putting on sackcloth and ashes is a small drop in an ocean of calamity. But it is a small act that points out what is wrong. It's an act of resistance against something both intolerable and uncontrollable. It's a sign of a vulnerable appeal for help. For God too has a role to play.

Aware that God too has a role to play, you might hear Esther's words another way. You might hear in them notes of realistic faith. You might hear a grieved but certain assurance in Esther's voice that her life is held; that her times are held; that her people are held; that the tasks that she undertakes are held... For God is working a long arc of his plan. God's careful attention to his people and the long arc of his saving work is called providence. When his people face crises, they are neither forgotten, unseen, or unimportant to him. Whatever the current upside down reality is, it is not beyond his grasp as he works to restore all things.

Feelings of hopelessness and despair are human. But because our faith is founded on a God who is with us by his Spirit, who directs history to his own good ends, we ask his Spirit to replace our spirits of despair and to establish us in grounded faith, hope, and love. We wrap these virtues around us each day. And wearing no terse virtues we act with whatever agency we have to build on the foundation of the good news in Jesus; that God's long purpose is to reconcile the world to himself through Christ.

Esther takes up hope. Esther takes up the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting. And Esther takes up the courage she has to go to the king. She'll approach something like the Holy of Holies in an ungodly context, where to enter the presence of the king might mean her death. But this capricious human king will receive her when she comes, extending his scepter to her as a sign of favor.

We serve a Sovereign King who, unlike Xerxes, is neither vengeful nor capricious. We serve a Creator whose purposes work in ways we cannot see toward ends we cannot imagine. We serve a Savior who risked and surrendered his life for us, who extended his arms over us in blessing at the cross, and whose resurrection has defeated everything that would finally threaten us. And because of all this, we will keep praying and keep going, that his kingdom may come and his will may be done. Amen.

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