

“Esther: More Than a Pretty Face”

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of Esther (when preached this was Easter 7A)

Primary Text: The Book of Esther (readings specifically chosen were 2:2-4, 15-18; 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22)

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The sermon for today references the entire book of Esther and the readings are provided from Chapters 2, 7, and 9. Four characteristics of Esther are: Beautiful, Believing, Bold, and Blessed. Yes, she was a very beautiful woman, but as we will see this is only one of the aspects used by God to save the Jewish people, thus the title of the sermon, “Esther: More Than a Pretty Face.”

The Book of Esther is certainly an interesting one. For one, it is one of only two books in the Bible (the other being the Song of Solomon) which does not use the specific name of God even one time (which would be YHWH for the OT). Partially because of this, there has been some debate throughout history whether it should be included in the Canon of Scripture. We, as Lutherans, generally don't hear much preaching from the Book of Esther. No readings from its 10 chapters appear in our assigned texts for the three year lectionary. She does, however, have a Commemoration Day on the Church Calendar (May 24) so we do hear from this book today.

Back in 2018 we studied the Book of Esther in our Wednesday Night Light Bible Study. I had never really studied it in depth, so it was an eye-opening experience and I gained new appreciation for it. If you have not read through this book (it is not that long), I would encourage you to do so. Although God is not mentioned by name, His “seal” is certainly all over it as we see how God orchestrated events to save the Jews from being wiped out.

And in terms of “story”, this book really has it all. A heroine who is a beautiful orphan who ends up in an influential position to save the day. The kind and faithful cousin that raised her. A rich and powerful king who falls for our young maiden. And, of course, a scheming and evil villain drunk on power and revenge. No wonder, Esther has been made into several movies over the years!

The Setting of Esther is the early 5th Century BC. Prior to its events, Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians and many Jews were carried off into exile. The Persians had overtaken the Babylonians as the main power in the region, and they had allowed the Jews to begin to return from exile. But many Jewish people at this time remained in the Persian Empire. During this time the Persians were locked in a struggle for dominance with the Greeks. The Persian King in the Book of Esther is known by two names (and depending on your translation how he is named): his Greek name Xerxes and Hebrew name Ahasuerus.

Esther was orphaned. Her elder cousin Mordecai raised her in one of the Persian capital cities of Susa, where he apparently worked for the government. Esther is her Persian name, her Jewish name was Hadassah-which in English is “Myrtle”. The first thing that many people think of in terms of Esther is that she was beautiful. And she certainly was. So beautiful, in fact, that King Xerxes made her his queen. How did this happen?

As was typical for Middle Eastern rulers of the time, King Xerxes did have a harem. But before Esther, he did have one queen named Vashti. There is a lot of feasting in the book of Esther. In chapter one we see the king throw a huge party, one that lasted for seven days and had an open bar! In alcohol-fueled exuberance, he summoned Queen Vashti to come and show off her beauty to all the men gathered at his party. She refused. The king was obviously not pleased. Following the counsel of his advisors, Vashti was “fired” as Queen.

But after some time passed, which included some military defeats in the Greek campaign, Xerxes was feeling down: no victories, no queen. His advisors hatch another plot to cheer him up. We heard about it in our first reading. His officers would go throughout the empire and gather the most beautiful young women (virgins). They would be brought into the harem and prepared for a period of a whole year and then brought before the king who would then choose the one he wanted to be the new queen. Think of this as a forced “beauty pageant” or episode of the “Bachelor” on a huge scale. One of the young women taken from her home to the harem was Esther.

We heard in verse 15 that it came Esther’s turn to go before the king. And in verse 17 it said, *“the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.”* The king was now happy. And as improbable as it may have seemed, this young Jewish woman was now the Queen of the vast Persian Empire. Esther certainly must have been some beauty to behold! But the true story does not end here. She had been placed into this position by God as 4:14 will say “for such a time as this”.

Not only was Esther beautiful, she was also believing. She had to trust God. Can you imagine the roller-coaster ride that she had been on? Her parents died, her kind cousin took her in, she is taken away forcibly by the agents of a Gentile king, she undergoes a year living in a harem awaiting one audience with the king, and then is chosen to be queen over one of the most powerful empires the world has ever seen? She must wrestle with issues relating to her Jewish faith. She has not revealed, and in fact is instructed by Mordecai, to not reveal that she is a Jew. And she will soon learn as to why God has placed her in this position.

The Jews are in grave danger. The villain of the Book of Esther is a man named Haman. He is promoted to the “Grand Vizier”, basically the Prime Minister

second only in power to the king himself. Everyone is supposed to bow before him. They all do, except for one guy: Mordecai. Every day that he refuses to bow to Haman is a day that Haman's arrogance and lust for power drives him to more hatred. His hatred extends beyond only Mordecai to all of his people. Not only, Mordecai-but all the Jews in Persia must die. Through half-truths and deceptions, he gets King Xerxes to sign off on the plan. But Mordecai learns of this and warns Esther. She is "on the inside". Only she can try to stop this. But what could she do? Even as a queen she was living in a "man's world". She could not make policy. Her husband did not even know she was a Jew. She had to believe, to trust.

This brings us to the third "B", in that Esther had to be bold. Remember that this courtship where she became queen was no modern reality TV program. It was not a sanitized Disney princess tale. She has been forced to come to the palace. The king obviously thought very highly of her, but would he listen to her? No one, not even the queen, could come into the king's presence uninvited. In fact, to do so carried the penalty of death. Only if the king extended his golden scepter, would the uninvited guest's life be spared. At this point, the king had not summoned Esther for 30 days. At the end of Chapter 4 a dramatic exchange is recorded. Mordecai says to Esther, "*And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*" Esther tells Mordecai that all the Jews should fast and then declares, "*Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.*" She will do it. She will be bold to try to save God's people, even if it costs her very life.

She enters the king's throne room. You could have heard a pin drop. And Xerxes extends his scepter. And the king not only does receives her but says, "*What is it Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom.*" Wow. Even as Esther was bold, she also wisely used tact.

Multiple times when addressing the king she would say, “If it please the king...” Instead of asking it right there, she invited her husband and Haman to a banquet that she would prepare where she said she would make her request known. A beautiful woman and rich food, how could any man resist? But for some reason, she does not ask at that banquet, but instead invites the king and Haman back to another feast the next day where she will then make her request. This is vital to God orchestrating the saving of His people in this book. In between those two meals, everything changes. Time will not permit going through the whole chain of events-please read the book!

But here are some key elements, King Xerxes could not sleep that night. He goes down to the records room and begins looking through documents. He discovers that Mordecai had actually saved his life by exposing an assassination plot some time earlier. He wants to reward him. Meanwhile, Haman has had an 80 foot gallows constructed to execute Mordecai and the clock is counting down to the day when the sword will be unleashed upon all the Jews. But at the feast Esther held, she finally lets the king know what she wants (see our second lesson). She wants him to spare her people. She is a Jew. The secret is out. The king is not taken aback at all, but asks who would want to do such a wicked thing to her people. She reveals it is Haman. Long-story short: Haman ends up hanging from the very gallows he had built for Mordecai! His replacement? Mordecai is then elevated to Haman’s former position.

So in all of this, the fourth and final attribute comes into view: Esther is blessed. She is blessed because her God-given attributes, including her stunning beauty, had been used by the Lord to put her in just the right place at just the right time. And Esther had believed and had been bold. She had been obedient to the Lord. In this not only she was blessed, but the entire Jewish population living in the Persian Empire. In this powerful, pagan, gentile empire Jews now held the

positions of Queen and Prime Minister. At the brink of annihilation, God has once again worked to preserve His people. As Psalm 124 proclaimed, *“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side when people rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us up alive...We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped! Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”*

The events of the Book of Esther pave the way for what is recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah. More Jews would return to Israel, the temple system would resume, a wall of protection would be built around Jerusalem. And of primary importance, the people from which the Messiah-the Savior of both Jew and Gentile-would come had been preserved. God keeps His promises, and He used Esther as a major part of putting His plan into place. Yes, she had a “pretty face”, but there was a lot more to her than met the eye.

So while the name of God in the Old Testament, YHWH, is not used in the Book of Esther, His stamp is all over it. This reminds us how God operates, orchestrating events-often that seem improbable-to accomplish His purpose. In fact, the events of Esther are celebrated by Jewish people everywhere every year with the Feast of Purim that you see declared in the last part of the Second Lesson.

And what a “reversal” of fortunes that we read of in Esther. And this is how God works, is it not? We see this so many times in the Bible, the one that no one would expect-or the thing or event that no one would expect is used by God to accomplish His purposes. Water, bread, wine, the printed and spoken word-seemingly so ordinary-are the vehicles through which God the Holy Spirit brings faith, forgiveness, and life. And, of course, the son of a small town carpenter would become would become the Savior of the world. And as we so joyously celebrated especially this Easter season that what looked like defeat: death on a cross, was actually victory. In this, Jesus paid the price for the sin of the world.

And in His resurrection He showed that sin, death, and the devil were defeated once and for all.

Christ is Risen!

He is Risen Indeed. Alleluia!

Amen.