

## **Reading Esther for Today**

**Esther 7:1-10**

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About Esther – I grew up learning about Esther from my grandmother... She was in Eastern Star, and had to practice the story for her secret gatherings.

But there were things I learned about Esther later, particularly hearing about the Presbyterian Women Horizons Bible study on Esther several years ago (At Massanetta Springs). It's a farce, not meant to read as a history, so if you get a King who seems to be a drunk and a buffoon, and a bad guy who is REALLY evil, and one queen (Vashti) who is banished for refusing a stupid command to dance naked at a party, and another queen (Esther) who learns how to manipulate the King with multiple invitations to wine-laden parties - that's why. It's supposed to be funny and poignant, more so than being literally accurate. It goes to the extent of being bawdy at times and then lavishing the reader with blockbuster movie levels of violence. This book is read every year at Jewish Purim – a festival that requires eating a feast and drinking wine, and telling the WHOLE story from verse 1 to the end.

Martin Luther didn't like this book, and John Calvin refused to write a commentary on it.

Sourpusses that they were. When I posted on Facebook about preaching Esther basically for "such a time as this" on the Facebook page titled "Happy to Be a Presbyterian," that brought out some haters too. It doesn't have the word "God" in it, someone lamented. Then another commenter called it "scantly religious." I found that amusing. And in that conversation, I discovered yet another reason to LOVE the Bible. I love that we kept in the humor, and I love that we are

connected by this book to our Jewish cousins in such a way that we just may find something to like about it and to learn about God.

It is also helpful to note that in the Presbyterian lectionary – the cycle of readings that preachers use – chapter 7 and a few verses from chapter 9 are the ONLY parts of Esther that ever come up for use in worship. Odd, in that I think this whole story, and this chapter in particular is pertinent for what we've been hearing about non-stop in our news cycle for over a year now as women have had enough of standing idly by and accepting that the men who abuse their power often use their privileged status to get away with harassment and rape. And it's also relevant to pointing out the hate and bigotry spewed by powerful voices that leads to eruptions of violence against targeted minority groups. As the news is filled with the frustrating rhetoric of he said/she said, and the dialing back of progress made by immigrants and people of color, Esther may offer us wisdom from our sacred texts, for such a time as this – right now. Known at first more for her beauty than her brains – she still is called upon to save her people from attempted genocide. To do so, she must defend herself in a room full of powerful men – particularly including one who was set to kill her, and another who had “taken” her as his trophy wife. And it may help to know that the Hebrew word for “taken” gets used about Esther multiple times in this book.

THE SET UP: In this particular chapter, Queen Esther was calling a second luxurious meeting banquet with her husband, trying to earn his favor, because she knew she was risking her own life to request that he save the lives of the Jews who were set to be annihilated by the King's own military. It was time to get him tipsy and ask him for what she really wanted, to stop the plan of Haman from killing all the Jews, a plan he wanted to enforce because her adopted father, Mordecai, wouldn't bow down to him out of his own religious practice. So, listen carefully to this chapter of the story.

**Esther 7** <sup>1</sup>So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. <sup>2</sup>On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." <sup>3</sup>Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. <sup>4</sup>For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king."<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>5</sup>Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" <sup>6</sup>Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. <sup>7</sup>The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him. <sup>8</sup>When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining; and the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. <sup>9</sup>Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." <sup>10</sup>So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

When Esther reveals the real purpose of her banquet, telling the truth about the plot against the Israelites – one man is furious and the other fears for his life. Mordecai was right that she was their only hope, and yet, Esther put herself in a very dangerous situation to bring light to the plot against her people. What happens next is somewhat of a mystery – even in the text. The King flees the room in a rage, leaving her alone with the person she has just called out as a foe, an enemy, wicked to the core. What does Haman actually do in verses 7 and 8? Again, in an interesting manipulation of biblical readings, these are the verses of this chapter that are left out of the recommended lectionary reading – on purpose. That made me wonder.

Here's what happens: The King storms out. Haman remains behind, at least under the pretense of begging the queen for his life, but that's not what the King sees when he returns. He sees Haman throwing himself at his wife. "Will he even assault the queen in my own house?" A different translation has the King shouting, "Will he even molest the queen in my own house?" What's going on here? The language is not so clear when it comes to Haman's true purpose. So, most commentators come in defending Haman – something I find particularly interesting. He "fell" on her couch. He groveled at her feet. He was so overcome with fear that he couldn't remain standing. But the King sees something more than that. Assault. Attempted rape. The fury of an evil man who felt he had been brought down by a woman. But in the story itself, we don't hear anything from Esther's perspective, only the men's. Was Haman remorseful and begging for his life? Or was he furious and taking it out on the Queen? Esther's voice on this – isn't heard.

We don't fully know. We weren't there. And even if we were there, two differing reports are made in a story that is designed, not to tell the accurate history, or to complete an investigative report, but to

bear out a moral truth. What are we supposed to glean from this story? And since it is in scripture, like it or not, for me I do have to ask, “Where is God in this story?”

I think God is in this story calling women to speak their truth, even when their voice is shaking. And I think God is in this story reminding men with evil and destructive intentions that they will hang on the gallows of their own abusiveness, because that’s exactly what happens to Haman. God remains, ever loving. Ever compassionate. Ever calling us to a greater sense of justice for all people. God orchestrates events by putting them in the right place at the right time for changes to be made.

Mordecai’s plan saves the Jews – that’s the main point of the story. The bad guy, Haman, gets his punishment – hung on the gallows he built to execute Mordecai. The Persian King gets to save face. Those who plotted against the Jews are destroyed. And then there’s Esther, the namesake of the book, who uses her voice to speak to the powerful on behalf of the powerless – and it works – the King reverses all the decrees that had been sent out to annihilate the Jews.

Stories like these are ones that continue to unfold layers upon layers of meaning. And I encourage you, fully, to read the book of Esther for yourself, and see what kind of insights you get from this text. But I’m also going to share with you the connections to this text made by New Millennium Church preacher from Little Rock, Arkansas, Wendell Griffin. Once I read them, I knew they were things I’ve noticed in this book as well. So, I want to share with you his insights – particularly from his perspective, as an African-American preacher.

Griffin says that these are the important moral lessons that can be derived from the book of Esther:

- 1) Power and privilege are never morally neutral. Power and privilege always have potential for doing justice or injustice.**

- 2) **Esther is a fictional Hebrew parody about the dangers associated with adopting the mindset of Empire.** *Just like Star Wars – it's a fictional universe, but with truthful implications for what it means to want to rule the world.*
- 3) **Esther affirms the moral and intellectual equality of women.**
- 4) **Injustice and risk of oppression are realities for unprivileged people...Esther teaches that we should always be concerned about how social and public policies affect people who live on the margins of life.**
- 5) **The Lord God delivers.**
- 6) **Deliverance is always a reason for praise and thanksgiving.**

So this is where I return to the other scripture reading for today. Let's let Jesus come in to add commentary to what's going on in this story. Jesus reminds us that naming God in the story may not always be the most important thing. He isn't at all concerned about this exorcist who has been doing healings in his name, even though his disciples are caught up in how wrong it is. Rather, Jesus says, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Getting credit isn't important. Casting out evil is.

And then he has a teaching on sin that makes us all squeamish. If a body part causes sin, it would be better to cut it off. If you set up a stumbling block for even one kid, it would be better if you hung a millstone around your neck and flung yourself into the sea. Again, we get a drastic response, kind of like the hyperbole in Esther. But I think Jesus had on his serious face. Sin and evil are to be called out and cut off. Therefore, it is our obligation to teach an understanding of the gospel message that leads girls and young women to know their human value, and teaches boys and young men that justice and kindness are the values God chooses. I think he knew the tradition of Esther. The annual telling of the story was already in place when he started his ministry. He knew the old, old story. The Lord God delivers, and deliverance is always a reason for praise and thanksgiving. It's true. The

messages come together and remind us that the followers of Jesus will be “salted with fire” with the intent of seasoning the world with God’s ongoing message of protection, deliverance, forgiveness, and redemption.

My friends, this is the hard, hard work of being part of the faithful. Listening to all the Biblical stories, perhaps especially the ones that make us squirm with our own guilt, or that make our anger surface and the tears flow. And then to recognize that there are real people lurking behind every story – even the exaggerated fictional ones. Healing comes. Deliverance comes. And for us, it comes at a table where broken bodies are made new, and sins are forgiven, and love always wins. It comes for us in a world where God is made known, not just by invoking a name, but by recognizing that God’s love casts out our fear, and is stronger even than death.

## Another Exorcist

<sup>38</sup>John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone<sup>[u]</sup> casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." <sup>39</sup>But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. <sup>40</sup>Whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup>For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

## Temptations to Sin

<sup>42</sup>"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,<sup>[k]</sup> it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. <sup>43</sup>If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell,<sup>[u]</sup> to the unquenchable fire.<sup>[m]</sup> <sup>45</sup>And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.<sup>[u][o]</sup> <sup>47</sup>And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,<sup>[o]</sup> <sup>48</sup>where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

<sup>49</sup>"For everyone will be salted with fire.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>50</sup>Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?<sup>[r]</sup> Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."