

Her-story - Esther

For such a time as this

A wee while back I was chatting to Matthew and we were talking about preaching plans and where we thought we could go after Easter. Matthew suggested that we could do a series on Women in the bible. I liked the idea, in fact the more I thought about it the more I liked it. We have recently done a series on Work and faith and one of the key things we wanted to communicate was how God is intimately involved in our secular work and that too is a calling, in fact the whole secular/sacred thing doesn't exist in God's eyes. God can and does use us in all of our roles, there are not 'better' or 'more spiritual' roles.

When Matt mentioned about women in the bible, my mind went immediately to Esther, and a passage in that book that says that Esther was placed in the role that she had, "for such a time as this". Perfect this will flow on perfectly and continue to encourage people that God uses us in all sort of ways in everyday normal life situations.

So I started looking at Esther, it's a fascinating read

The story of Esther has had a bit of a hard life. When they were working out which books would become part of the Hebrew Scriptures there was a lot of objection concerning Esther, there was a lot of explaining to do.

- Some people asked the question, was it historically true. They said it was just fiction written to justify bringing a pagan festival into Judaism--the festival of Purim – a celebration of deliverance.
- Others complained that it was missing all the important elements of the Jewish faith--things like law, covenant, prayer, dietary regulations, or Jerusalem.
- Others said it was morally bankrupt, Esther hides her Jewish identity, and also spends the night presumably having sex with a pagan king to whom she is not married.
- And the real issue is that the book neglects to mention God--not even once.

And yet, despite all of the objections, there was something enduring in the story of Queen Esther. Somewhere in this story of greed and lust for power, and vengeance and chauvinism was a message of truth that overcame the objections and landed the book in the Hebrew scripture, forever to be labelled as Holy.

If you haven't ever sat down and read through the book of Esther in one sitting, I encourage you to do that. It's not that long, and it reads like a made for television movie. In fact there are a few movies about Esther free on YouTube. In it we'll find, suspense, intrigue, betrayal, conspiracy, and treachery. The cast of characters includes: a king, a queen that loses her throne, an orphan girl who becomes a queen and saves the day, a man of God, of course a villain.

The story begins innocently enough with the King of Persia, Xerxes throwing an elaborate banquet for all his nobles and officials. This was a major celebration. There was food, the drink flowed freely, and there were dancing girls. But this was no Sunday afternoon get together. Xerxes and his party of friends partied hard for a solid week.

By the seventh day, the king and his guests had been drinking heavily. He was, as the scripture says, "in high spirits from wine." In other words he was plastered. In his present condition he wasn't thinking clearly and he ordered his queen, Vashti (Vash Tie), to come out and display herself before the king and his guests—wearing her crown and some say only her crown. You see she was quite beautiful and the king wanted to show her off. He sent for her, but her not wanting to be paraded around before a bunch of drunken men, possibly clad only in her royal tiara, she refused.

Well, her refusal really annoyed the king. He decided it was such a serious matter that he would consult with his advisors about it. These advisors tell him that Vashti has done wrong, not only to him but to all men in the provinces. Why, you ask? Because, if the queen can refuse to obey the king's command, then obviously, all women will follow her example and disobey their husbands too. They said to the king, "There will be no end of disrespect and discord."

The advisors instruct the king to sack queen Vashti and find a new queen—perhaps one who was less opinionated and defiant. (Now that part of the passage should come with a warning: MEN DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME!)

His advisors tell him this will ensure that, "all the women will respect their husbands from the least to the greatest." So the decree went out that every woman should obey her husband and that every man should be the ruler over his own household.

After Xerxes' gets rid of Vashti, he decides to have his whole kingdom searched for beautiful young women to come and make their bid for the throne. The girls were to be groomed and pampered for several months, then each one, in turn, were to spend some time with the king. From that experience he would decide which one would become his new queen. Sort of like the game show, "The

Batchelor” or “Who Wants to Marry A Millionaire?”

So, all the land is scoured for beautiful young female candidates to become queen: This is where Esther enters the scene.

When she was just a little girl, Esther became an orphan when her father and mother died. Mordecai, her cousin, raised Esther from childhood, as if she were his own daughter. Esther now a young woman, is selected as one who will be introduced to the king.

Everyone who looked upon Esther was captivated by her beauty. And wouldn't you know it, when Esther is brought before the king, he finds her more beautiful and desirable than all the other women. The king, completely taken with Esther's beauty, makes her his queen.

Now there was one man who was one of the king's closest friends. His name is Haman. He's a guy with an ego that was huge. Haman convinces Xerxes to make a decree that whenever Haman is around everyone in his presence should bow down to him.

But Mordecai, is a Jew and he will only bow to God. Mordecai flatly refuses to bow down to Haman. And as you might imagine this annoys Haman's.

Haman stews about this so devises a plan to eliminate not just Mordecai but all the Jews in Persia because Mordecai won't bow to him. The scriptures say, “Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.”

Haman tells Xerxes that there are a group of people who do not honour the king's command—specifically the one about bowing to Haman. He says, “If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them . . .” Xerxes tells Haman to do as he pleases with the Jews. So a decree goes out with the king's seal to “kill all the Jews—young and old, women and little children.”

When Mordecai hears the king's order, he tears his clothes and sits in ashes and weeps for his people. But Mordecai isn't the only one weeping, so are all the Jews. In fact, throughout the provinces of Persia, when the king's edict is read, every Jew wept and mourned and fasted.

Eventually word gets back to Esther that Mordecai is sitting outside the king's palace overwrought with emotion. Esther greatly distressed, sends a messenger to find out what was going on. Mordecai returns a copy of the king's decree to Esther and begs her to go before king Xerxes and plead for mercy for the Jews.

Now royal protocol dictates that no one, including the queen, is allowed to enter the king's presence without his express invitation. So Esther sends word back to Mordecai that she can't just go waltzing into the king's court without an invitation. She could literally lose her head over such a breach of etiquette.

Read chapter 4 verses 12-16 :

12-14 When Mordecai was told what Esther had said, Mordecai sent her this message: "Don't think that just because you live in the king's house you're the one Jew who will get out of this alive. If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. **And who knows that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this.**"

15-16 Esther sent back her answer to Mordecai: "Go and get all the Jews living in Susa together. Fast for me. Don't eat or drink for three days, either day or night. I and my maids will fast with you. If you will do this, I'll go to the king, even though it's forbidden. If I die, I die."

I'm not going to tell you the rest of the story. If you don't know it, go home and read it. But I am stopping at this point because I think the first real wisdom in the book of Esther appears here, in the words of an uncle to the woman he raised as a daughter:

*"Don't think that just because you live in the king's house you're the one Jew who will get out of this alive. If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. **And who knows that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this.**"*

As I said earlier, God is not mentioned once in the entire book of Esther. But this statement is a statement of absolute faith, coming from a devout Jew immersed in the history of the relationship between God and God's people.

Listen the faith that underlies what Mordecai is saying. He has absolute confidence that there will be deliverance for the Jews--he is well aware of God's promise of restoration, and he is so confident that God will keep His promises

that Mordecai can continue to believe in ultimate deliverance even in the face of his own death.

Look Esther, he is saying, God is going to deliver his people no matter what, but if you won't be part of the solution, you and me and all of our family are going to be wiped out as part of the problem. Have you ever considered that maybe you got to be Queen so that God could use you to solve this very problem?

What Mordecai is saying here is that people matter and our actions make a real difference. God will make sure that God's overall plan is carried out and will intervene directly, if necessary, to ensure that end. That's what the coming of Christ is all about. But when it comes to the details of the plan-- like exactly who is going to do what and when, that part is left to the free will of human beings. The message of Esther is that God might engineer the circumstances, but what happens after that is ultimately up to us. God might prod us, but we might refuse. And if we refuse, people might die.

I came across a story of a woman who learned this lesson the hard way – which is the way most of us have to learn them. She was at work at a University library. For about a week there had been two workmen in the library installing an alarm system. Toward the end of the week, she started to get that unsettled feeling you get when God is prompting you to do something. And she felt that what God wanted her to do was to approach those two young men and to tell them that God loved them and that she loved them. She was 22 years old and she didn't think it would be very smart to stop two strange men and tell them that she loved them. But the feeling persisted. And she persisted to refuse it.

She succeeded in her refusal. The end of the day came, the men left. Having completed their work--and she went home without having embarrassed herself.

When she came in the next morning, the staff was buzzing with the news. One of those two men they had seen all week had left the library the day before and had gone straight to a bridge and had jumped to his death. The note said, no one loved him.

Had she been brought to that position in the library for such a time as this? But when the time came, she was not faithful.

The faith of Mordecai rings true—

- perhaps, just perhaps God allowed Esther to be Queen for just such a time as this.
- Perhaps, just perhaps, the positions that we attain in life are not rewards for good living or hard work, but mandates for service.

- Perhaps, just perhaps, the people we encounter from day to day have been nudged close to us by God so that we might help each other along this rocky path of life.

This one part of the story of Queen Esther shows us where the rubber meets the road. We can spend hours a day in prayer and Bible study and go to church seven days a week. But if we can't respond to the call of God to reach out and tell someone else "I love you and God loves you" it has no meaning.

- If I speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. (1 Cor. 13:1)
- Faith without works is dead. (James 2:26)
- Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (1 John 4:20).

It's all over the place.

Can I encourage you to think about two things this week.

1. The first thing **I want you to consider is your position in life**. What are the circumstances of your life right now? What positions of responsibility have you been given? What resources are at your disposal?

Perhaps, just perhaps, they were given to you for 'such a time as this'--a time when children are needing constant and regular demonstrations of love and care; a time when the systems and values of our social structure are struggling or being eroded; a time when God's creation is groaning under the weight of our demands; a time when people are jumping off bridges for lack of love and hope.

Otumoetai Baptist Church is a congregation with resources and many of us hold positions of power or responsibility in the community. The message of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation is that the resources you have are not yours. Not a dime in your pocket, not the job that you hold, not the spouse that you married, not the children you have borne, not even the breath that enlivens your body belongs to you. All of it belongs to God. We are not owners but stewards of the things that we call "ours." It doesn't matter if we are 2 years old or 102, God can use our circumstances to further the Kingdom of God, if we are willing.

Esther was used significantly by God, but it is important to note, Esther was no Daniel. Though both of them are set in the exile and both of them serve in a royal court of a pagan king, the similarity ends there. The way they conducted themselves was radically different. Daniel is a story of a young man who commits his way to the Lord and God honours that faithfulness, but Esther is not that story at all. Esther is a hot babe trying to survive. She doesn't make a

courageous decision to follow the Lord; she makes the only rational choice available to her. She trades certain death for possible death. She turns from no hope to *some* hope. That may seem harsh, but that's what the facts point to.

Because she features in the bible along with some amazing people, the temptation is to put her into the hero mould even though she probably does not belong there. Failing that, some make the story about the unseen providence of God working through her courage and faithfulness. The details of the story and its distinction from all other books of the Bible just don't allow for that, though. That view ignores, even contradicts much that the author recorded.

Let's assume that the writer of this story did everything intentionally. That he did not accidentally forget to mention God, or prayer, or Scripture. That he could have easily left out the embarrassing details of Esther that would be shameful to any Jewish girl. That's all included for a reason. He *intended* to make us uncomfortable about Esther. While the story is certainly about Israel's deliverance from death and extinction, it equally reveals the imperfect circumstances and people God uses—often from the shadows.

That is the message of hope and grace. I'd love to be like Daniel, always choosing the right thing regardless of the consequences, but I'm really more like Esther, (not the hot babe part) but an imperfect vessel stumbling my way into God's use in spite of myself.

That seems to be the way God works. Just read God's pattern throughout Scripture. He is a God who is so great that in his wisdom he uses a lying Jacob, and a lustful Judah, and a disobedient David. He takes a murderous religious zealot like Saul of Tarsus and transforms him into a champion of grace.

It seems like sinners are the only people God can work with and maybe you have been given the position you hold for 'such a time as this'.

2. So I want you to think about your position in life this week. But **I also want you to consider the people in your life**. As I told the story of the woman's failure to respond to God's call at the library, was there a name or face that came to your mind? Is there someone you need to call? Someone who needs to hear "I love you and God loves you?" Is there someone God keeps throwing in your path who you've thought about inviting to church or youth or small group? Don't just sit back and believe that if you don't do it that someone else will. You may be the last someone else between that person and despair.

For those of you who have had a suicide touch your life, I want to be careful that you don't hear this message as a call to guilt. I am not saying that if

someone you knew committed suicide that you or someone else could have prevented it with a few words...or even a lot of words or a lot of anything. It's not that simple. Dealing with suicide is hard enough without me laying additional guilt on anybody.

But I do want to use that story to make you stop and think about how God uses us to help others and about how available we are willing to be for that purpose. Think about the people in your life--family, friends, co-workers, strangers we come across, those at work, those who we socialise with, the woman next to us in the grocery line, the man in the nursing home who can't remember his own name. How do you live out your faith with the people you encounter every day?

Every day we need to look for opportunities to tell people "I love you and God loves you." It may not be verbally, it may be practically. Chances are it will be in a familiar place. Look for a face out on the fringe of the crowd and go say hello. It might seem embarrassing or silly or unnecessary. But when you find yourself thinking that way, remember a young man installing alarm systems and a young Christian woman who refused to share God's love. Tell somebody. Tell everybody. We may have been placed here for just such a time as this