

“Subverting Hatred”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 16, 2020

11th Sunday after Pentecost Rev. John Wahl Esther 5:1-8, 7:1-10

This morning, we continue to look at the fifth and final of *The Forgotten Books of the Old Testament*, the book of Esther. Last week, we looked at the first chapter, which tells the story of Queen Vashti and her brave act of protest: refusing to come when King Ahasuerus summons her to be paraded in front of his drunken party guests. Angered by this affront, the King is advised to banish the queen and enact a royal decree stating that all wives across the kingdom must submit to their husbands.

As we talked about last week, whether or not Vashti was intending to make a stand for the rights of women, this single act of protest would have likely been seen and heard around the kingdom, including by Esther. While the queen lost her position of influence, she exposed the weakness of the laws seeking to uphold a system of patriarchy.

The removal of Queen Vashti sets the stage for what follows. After a kingdom-wide search that rivals the most elaborate season of *The Bachelor*, Esther is chosen as the king’s new queen, and she becomes his favorite. The fact that Esther is Jewish is kept a secret.

At the same time, another man finds favor in the eyes of the king: Haman, who we are told is an Agagite. His people have a long-running feud with the Jewish people, and so – while Haman will take advantage of his good relationship with the king to endanger the Jews – Esther will likewise utilize her insider position to protect her own people.

The fourth major character in this drama – in addition to King Ahasuerus, Queen Esther, and Haman, the king’s right-hand-man – is named Mordecai. He is also a Jew, and a relative of Esther, who spends his days at the king’s gate. One day, Mordecai discovers a plot against the king’s life and – through Esther – shares it with the king. At the same time, Mordecai refuses to bow down before Haman; out of allegiance either to his God or his king. Angered, Haman vows not only to pay back Mordecai for this disrespect, but initiates a plan that will wipe out all Jews throughout the land.

Thus, another royal decree is written and sent around the kingdom which states that on a certain day, all Jews are to be killed and their property seized. Knowing that his people are in grave danger, Mordecai responds with traditional signs of Jewish mourning – tearing his clothes and putting ashes on his head. He heads into the streets crying out loudly and bitterly but he can only go so far: for, by law, no-one wearing mourning

clothes is allowed to pass by the king's gate. Clearly, the king is not interested in knowing the people's discontent. So complete is the isolation within the palace that Esther hears nothing of the decree against her people.¹

Mordecai is able to get a message to Esther, urging her to go to the king and plead for the welfare of the Jews. But it is against the law for anyone – a favored queen included – to appear before the king uninvited; the penalty is death. Therefore, she is reluctant to join in the protest – either fearing for her life or wanting to wait for a better opportunity. Esther's initial refusal to speak Ahasuerus on behalf of her people prompts Mordecai to respond with what may be the most well-known words from this book:

Don't think for one moment that, unlike all the other Jews, you'll come out of this alive simply because you're in the palace. In fact, if you don't speak up at this important time, relief and rescue will appear for the Jews from another place, but you and your family will die. But who knows? Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be part of the royal family. (4:13-14)

It's important to remember, at this point, that there is no historical record that the events of the Book of Esther ever took place. Although his character may have been modeled on a real king of Persia, there was no Ahasuerus, no deposed Queen Vashti, no Jewish replacement queen. Esther is likely a work of fiction that – despite all the threats of and carried-out killings – is written as a farce, with outlandish exaggerations and misunderstandings. Though not factual, it is consistent with real stories – then and now – of anti-Semitism. Laws and threats of violence against Jewish people sadly are nothing new. That is why this story of triumph over the ugliness of racism, true or not, is remembered in Judaism as a cause for great celebration.

This brings us, finally, to the first of this morning's two readings. Esther, after her initial refusal to take part in his protest, is persuaded by Mordecai to make a stand against the forces of ethnic hatred taking hold in the empire. Despite the threat of death, she intends to stand before the king and plead for the lives of her people; her plan involves a great deal of wisdom, patience, and an ability to navigate the halls of power and the men that inhabit them.

Esther's success seems to hinge on the fact that both Haman and the king seriously underestimate her. When she appears before the king, wearing her royal robes, he is pleased to see her and offers to give her anything, even half of his kingdom. She responds instead that she has prepared a feast for these two powerful men; feeding their stomachs and their egos at the same time. When the king again asks what he can give her, she implores them to join her again the next day for yet another feast.

¹ Robert Williamson, Jr., *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*

Esther's strategy has the desired effect on Haman, who brags to his wife and friends about all his successes, including about "his great wealth and many sons" – as if his wife and friends don't already know this! This is a man who craves adulation. Still, Haman cannot shake his irritation that one man in the empire, Mordecai, does not admire him. Leaving the banquet, he had seen Mordecai who refused again to bow down. "All else loses its meaning every time I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate," he laments.

His wife and friends propose a plan: "prepare a pointed pole seventy-five-feet high. In the morning, tell the king to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then you can go with the king to the feast in a happy mood." Such a spectacle would send a message to the entire city that Haman is not to be trifled with, and that Mordecai and his fellow Jews are expendable. Little do they know, of course, that the feast he ate would be prepared by the secret Jewish queen.

In chapter six, the focus moves to the king who – unable to sleep; maybe because the food Esther prepared is not sitting right – calls for the court records to be read to him. They recall the time when Mordecai saved the king's life, five years earlier, and Ahasuerus wonders whether anything has been done to honor this act; to which the servant replies, "nothing." Surely this can be no coincidence; on the very night that Haman is plotting Mordecai's death, the king wants to honor his good deed. But, if God's hand is at work, here or elsewhere in the story, we are not told. In the end, good is rewarded and evil is punished; Haman – who, up to this point, has prospered at the expense of the Jews – will get what he deserves; impaled on the very pole he set up for his targeted enemy, Mordecai.

Our reading from chapter seven describes Haman's demise. The king, who so often finds himself left in the dark, was unaware not only that Esther was a Jew, but that her people were the ones that Haman so wanted to destroy. Esther, having waited patiently for the perfect moment to make her request, reveals not only her own identity but the racist and deceptive character of the king's trusted confidante. Furious – and likely confused – the king leaves the feast to take a walk in the garden. Sensing that everything he has is slipping away, Haman – in another of the long string of this tale's ironies – bows down before the Jewish queen to beg for mercy. Just then, the king comes back, assuming that what he sees is an assault of his wife; now the affront has become personal. His servant suggests using the seventy-five-foot pole – since the king never seems to look outside or come up with an idea on his own – and, in the ultimate irony, Haman's mighty fall from grace ends there.

Esther is careful never to accuse Haman directly; she knows the vulnerable position that her people are in and that – despite her favorable position with the king – Haman still has money, power, and the law on his side. Her plan had to take into

account the deep hatred Haman felt against Mordecai and the Jews – which he had enacted into law – as well as the indifference of the king who had gone along with Haman’s plan. Thus, she argued not solely for the welfare of her people, but that killing them – rather than selling them into slavery – did not make economic sense.² Waiting patiently until the time was right, she appealed to what mattered most to the king in order to get justice for her people.

Both Mordecai and Esther engage in the fight for justice, though in very different ways. Mordecai rips his clothes and takes to the streets, calling out racism by refusing to bow down before Haman, even at the risk of his own life. No matter how loud his shouts, though, he is not able to get past the king’s gate. Thus, he appeals to Esther; calling her to action; helping her to realize that her position of power will not protect her once her Jewish identity is revealed. The hatred of systemic racism, especially when codified by law, shows no mercy. Thus, she has to be strategic when confronting hatred; understanding of the systems of power that can be slow and resistant to change.

These days, at least as much as at any other time, we must work to resist the powers of racism, anti-Semitism, and all forms of systemic repression. And, as the book of Esther reminds us, there are different forms of resistance: from Mordecai’s loud protests in the streets to Esther’s wise maneuverings close to the seat of power. And let us not forget Vashti who, willing to risk it all, chooses her moment to expose the unsteadiness of a house of power built on injustice. All three of these characters – not real but certainly true-to-life – show the importance to taking action that we believe in when necessary; and using given moments to enact a shift to greater justice where and when they come. Hatred need not stand, then or now; maybe our lives have likewise been preparing for a time such as this. Amen.

² Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr., *Bibleworm Podcast*