

## **“Queen Esther: For such a Time as This”**

Date: July 16, 2017

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: People of the Bible, series

Themes: courage, trust and obedience

Texts: Esther 1:1-12, 15-20; Esther 2:1-11, 15-18

Oh, how I'd love for you to meet Esther. But since she lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, that's not likely to happen. We'll have to be content with reading about her in the book that bears her name. And what a book it is! Hollywood would have a challenge matching the drama of this story.

The evil Haman who demanded that everyone pay him homage, the gutsy Mordecai who refused to bow before Haman, Mordecai's great words to Esther that she may have been chosen queen for "such a time as this," and Esther's conviction to save her people. "If I perish, I perish," she resolved.

This "Hollywood drama" we know as the book of Esther was written after the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed and the Babylonians had taken almost all of Judah's inhabitants into exile. Less than a hundred years later, Persia defeats the Babylonian Empire and King Cyrus issues a decree that the Jews were free. However, there were many Jews who were still living in exile.

Let's meet the various characters of this amazing drama: Xerxes was the king of Persia, who seemingly had all the power on earth. He was absolute monarch over the land from India to Ethiopia. His official title can be translated as "emperor," but it actually carries a loftier meaning – "the king of kings."

Xerxes yielded immense power and was a feared ruler. He was quick to put down rebellions and to deal with anyone who threatened

the power of Persia. In many respects Xerxes symbolized the power of God, who is the true “King of kings and Lord of lords.” Yet, while our God is patient and loving, and invites us to come into his presence, the subjects of Xerxes feared their king.

Vashti is the king’s wife, the queen. One day the king got a little tipsy and he wanted to parade his wife around the room for all of his guests to admire her beauty. Queen Vashti refused, upset the king and he had her deposed.

A beauty contest is held to see who would replace her. A search was made throughout the empire for the most beautiful girls from whom the king might choose his next queen. Esther took part in the beauty contest.

Her loveliness was so natural, that without having to go through the year of beauty treatments required of the other maidens, she captured the king’s affections. Her position as queen of Persia now places her in a golden opportunity to save her people.

The plot thickens when we meet Haman, a high ranking official in the king’s court. Haman’s name sounds a bit like hangman, which is more than just a curious coincidence. Everything we know about Haman is that he is an evil man. He is so egotistical; he wants everyone in the country to worship him.

Haman, we learn is a descendant of the Amalekites, an ancient enemy of Israel, a hostility which began in the time of Moses. Haman continues to harbor ill feelings towards the people of Israel and is upset that they will not worship the Persian gods, but practice their own religion.

Mordecai is the cousin of Esther, also a Jew. When Haman gives an official order that everyone must bow down and worship him, Mordecai refuses. This so angers Haman that he creates a plan to liquidate all of the Jews scattered throughout empire.

When Haman points out to Xerxes that the Jews refuse to be assimilated, choosing instead to live by their own laws, Xerxes gives him permission to issue an edict for a wholesale massacre of the Jews on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Adar, February/March.

Did I tell you that Mordecai was Esther's cousin? Well, he kind of adopts her as his daughter and watches over her. And it was he who urged Esther to keep her Jewish nationality a secret when she became queen. It was also Mordecai who discovered Haman's nasty plot to exterminate the Jews.

He persuades his cousin to go and talk to King Xerxes about the impending massacre and beg him to stop it. But she had some reservations about doing it. Here's the deal: No one can go in to the inner courtyard of the king without being summoned by the king, including his own wife. Anyone who does enter must be put to death, unless the king holds out his gold scepter; then that person may live.

Esther bemoans, "And I have not been called to go the king for thirty days." Here's the tension in the story. If she doesn't go in and plead for her people, they will be exterminated. If she does go in, she risks her own life. But Mordecai doesn't give up so easily.

He tells Esther that just because she lives in the king's palace, she should not think that when the Jewish people are killed she alone will escape. And then he adds, "And who knows, you may have been chosen queen for such a time as this."

Esther considers her choices and decides to go in to the king. She walks into the throne room and there is the king sitting on his throne. He looks up and sees his beautiful wife. He holds out his gold scepter, indicating she has won his approval to enter.

The rest of the story is the rapid collapse of Haman's plan. Haman schemes to string up Mordecai, the only man who won't grovel at his feet. Esther plans to throw a couple of banquets for Xerxes and Haman. At the end of the second banquet, Xerxes practically begs his wife to ask for something.

Esther looks sort of sheepishly at the floor and says, "Well, now that you mention it, there is one teensy weensy favor I've wanted to ask." She proceeds to inform the king about the raging anti-Semite who was hell-bent on killing her friends like rats, which means that Xerxes was about to lose his bride if he didn't act soon – 'and you don't want that do you, honey?"

Xerxes demands the name of the murderer. Haman looks for the exits. Esther spills the beans and Xerxes loses his cool. The king storms out of the room, only to return to find Haman at the feet of Esther. Haman is begging for mercy, but the king thinks he's putting the moves on his wife.

Before Haman has a chance to explain, he's headed to the same gallows that he had built for Mordecai. Haman gets Mordecai's rope. Mordecai gets Haman's job. Esther gets a good night's sleep. And the Jews live to see another day.

It's a great story, and is regularly read at the Jewish Feast of Purim. But what does this book have to say to us today? There are many lessons we can pull from the book, but let's look at just a few.

Esther is able to save her people because of her willingness to approach Xerxes, “the king of kings,” with her request. Jesus, when he walked on earth, shows what happens when we approach God, the true King of kings and Lord of lords with our requests. The Gospels are filled with stories of people from all classes of society who approach Jesus with their needs, and Jesus never turns them away. Unlike Xerxes, we don’t have to be afraid to approach our God.

Another lesson: like Esther, you and I have been plucked from our place of obscurity and given a place in the King’s palace. Like her, we have been given royal robes – she was dressed in royal cloth and we are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

And finally, who knows when the Holy Spirit may speak to our hearts in a given situation, and say to us: “Perhaps you have been born for such a time as this.” God is continually calling on people to take chances, to live boldly, to serve Him.

God is seeking people, even today, to speak forth truth to power, to speak up for those who are being hurt by the powers that be, and to care for those who are being oppressed. You and I may not be the queen of Persia, but God may still need a person such as you, for such a time as this. Amen? Amen!

**Let us pray:**

Lord, thank you for not only being the King of kings and Creator of the Universe, but also our loving Father. Today we ask that you would help us to trust you as a loving Father who only wants the very best for his children. Thank you that we can always approach you with our requests, and thank you for always hearing our prayers and answering them. We love you, Lord. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Ten Women of the Bible*, by Max Lucado. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2016, pp. 73-97