

Sermon: October 3, 2021

Pastor Lucy Brady

“Remembering for Times Like This”

Throughout the Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament stories are told, retold and reenacted in ritual, and festival as a way for God’s people to remember how they were saved. There are no historical markers, statues museums, or libraries to mark these moments of God salvation. Instead, we have a story and a command to remember, retell and reenact.

Today I’m going to tell you the story of the book of Esther, a story of how the Jewish people were spared extinction. It is one of the strangest and most exciting books of the Bible. It is set in the capital city of Persia, today Iran, about 100 years after the Babylonian exile of the Israelites. We can recall the stories of their return to Jerusalem with leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah, but not all Jews returned. Communities remained in the capital of a Persia, Susa and in the surrounding areas.

The story begins in the third year of the reign of King Ahasuerus, when he gave a feast that lasted 187 days while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days.

On the last day when the king was “merry with wine, very drunk,” he sent for queen Vashti to appear before his guests wearing her royal crown
Queen Vashti refused.
This was unheard of!

In a fit of anger, the king removed Vashti as Queen and I guess she lived happily ever after.

A rather stupid decree was sent out to all the people far and wide,
“All women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.”

A search for a new queen began as a kind of beauty pageant. A Jew named Mordecai encouraged his niece Esther, whom he raised, to enter the search for a queen. At his advice, she did not reveal she was Jewish. Among all the of the beautiful women gathered, the King chose Esther to be his queen. The King then gave a feast to honor Esther's. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.

Meanwhile, her uncle Mordecai sat by the gate so he could communicate with Esther. One day he overheard two men plotting to kill the king. He told Esther and she told the king. After an investigation, the plot was verified, and the men were both hanged on the gallows. It was recorded in the book of Chronicles in the presence of the King.

Next appears a man named Haman. The king elevated Haman to the highest rank in the kingdom and Haman demands that everyone bow down to him whenever they see him. However, Mordecai, Queen Esther's uncle, refuses to bow down before him. This infuriates Hamon and when he discovers that Mordecai is Jewish, he convinces the King to send out a decree to kill all Jewish people! Then they have a feast to celebrate this terrible plan. In order to decide the day, the destruction will take place, Haman casts lots, rolls the dice-The Hebrew word for "lots" or "dice" is PUR. It is decided in the third month of Adar the Jews will be annihilated.

The only hope now for the Jewish people is Mordecai and Esther. Mordecai convinces Esther that she must speak to the king, but she is hesitant. She knows as does Mordecai that you can't just go talk to the king, even if you're the queen. To go without a request from the king can be a cause for death under Persian Law. Mordecai reminds her, "It may be that you have been chosen to be in the castle for such a time as this."

Esther finally agrees to go to the king without an invitation and declares, "If I perish, I perish!" Now the plot thickens.

Esther goes uninvited to the king, and he holds out his royal scepter indicating she may come into his presence. She tells him that she would like to host a feast for him and for him and for Haman, the next evening. At the feast, Esther invites Haman to an exclusive dinner the following evening when she will make a special request of them both. He leaves filled with good food and plenty of drink, but when he sees Mordecai, who of course refuses to bow down to him, he is furious. All the honors, riches, and attention he has received mean nothing. All he can think about is the one man who will not honor him by bowing down to him.

Haman orders gallows built in his own yard where Mordecai will hang the next day. Gallows In ancient times we're not like the gallows we would see today. These were a tall spike on which the person would be impaled and left hanging.

Meanwhile, the king can't sleep, so he asks to have the book of the Royal Chronicles read to him. Then he hears the part about Mordecai saving his life. He had forgotten all about it and wondered if he had done anything to honor him. He had not!

The next morning Haman comes to the king to request that Mordecai be killed that very day. But first the king asks, "What should be done to the man the king delights to honor?"

Haman thought, "Whom does the king delight to honor more than me!?" He then suggests, bring Royal robes that the King has worn, and a horse the King has ridden, and a crown that has been on the Royal head. Let one of the most trusted nobles lead them through the city, declaring, *"Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor."*

Things are not looking good for Haman!

Later that day Haman is summoned to Queen Esther's second banquet where The king asks what request she wishes from him and declares he will give her anything up to half of his kingdom. It is then Esther reveals that she is Jewish and that there is an enemy who has sent out a decree to kill her, her uncle who saved the King's life, and plans to annihilate all the Jewish people!

The King demands, "Who is he and where is he that dares to do this?" Esther points to Haman and cries "This is our enemy! This wicked Haman!"

The King has been drinking heavily again and is livid. He storms out to the garden.

Haman stays by the Queen to beg for his life. When the king returns from the garden. He sees Haman falling on the couch where Esther is, he shouts, "Will this man attack my wife even in my presence!"

One of the guards standing nearby says, "You know he has built a gallows 50 cubits high, that's 75 feet, your highness! It is in his yard waiting to hang Mordecai, that man who saved your life! He is doing it today."

"Hang him on that!" The king ordered and Haman was hanged on his own gallows.

Esther introduced Mordecai to the king who gave him the royal signet ring. The king also allowed Mordecai to write a decree and seal it with the mark of the Royal signet ring, saying that Jews should not be killed and all the provinces.

Jewish Communities remember the story of Queen Esther with an annual celebration called Purim. The story is read the night of the celebration and again in the morning. It is a joyous celebration with lavish food and drink, giving to those in need and those they love.

God's name is never mentioned in the book of Esther, but one can see that hand of God everywhere. By remembering and retelling this story it becomes part of our own story. It helps us to remember to look for God's hand in our own life.

In a few moments we will remember the sacred story of Jesus' last, but never-ending meal, Holy Communion. As we remember we are renewed for God's work in and through us.

As my friend, Rev. Lisa Dunson, reminds us,
"Our journey is not only about us doing the work of ministry...it's also about us allowing God to minister to others in and through each of us..."