

## Esther, Timely Service

November 1, 2009  
Esther 4 and 7

Rev. Dixie Brachlow  
Fairfield Presbyterian Church

Recently our community experienced the symptoms of hatred, when a student, who had been followed into the Tractor Supply store nearby, assaulted his followers with an ax; they'd become threats to one another, enemies. Rumors followed. The Lee Davis principal, Dr. Michael Bishop, met on Friday afternoon with a number of us Mechanicsville area pastors and youth directors. He clarified matters and wanted to enlist churches in helping to reduce anxiety levels, for internet blogs and text messages after the assault spread misunderstandings so that rumors had led to an atmosphere of fear within the high school this past week. Bishop would wish that both the victim and the assailant and their families be treated with respect and compassion, and that students would become calmed over the coming days.

In just such an atmosphere, Walter Wink, professor of biblical interpretation at Auburn University, contends that “a critique of our culture in the light of the gospel is imperative if the Christian church is to preserve a coherent sense of itself in a world that is torn and tearing.” [*Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 105.] Mechanicsville is experiencing some such tearing just now.

And whether we like it or not, we are caught in and cultivated by Western society with values that shape our lifestyles, even when we don't subscribe to them. We all have recently witnessed the polarization of people ready to take sides, portraying the other as “good” or “evil.” It's an “us-against-them” kind of thinking that has pervaded our culture. You can see it in the healthcare reform debates. And it is present as different ethnic and religious groups enter the U.S.A. Minorities are easily perceived as a threat to what we see as “normal,” as we become more multicultural.

So it is quite fitting that today we hear the story of Esther, a woman who was part of a conquered, slave-class Jewish minority living in a dominant culture in 480 BC. Esther and her uncle, Mordecai, had adapted to the Greek culture, which in the book is masked as “Persian.” The two

learned to “fit in” well. Becoming quite comfortable and successful, they never told anyone that they were Jewish.

But in this story, there came a time when it was urgent for Esther to reveal her Jewish roots. In Persia/Greece, angry feelings against Jews were rising, similar to those of Germany just prior to the Holocaust. In such cases, the majority blames their problems on a convenient scapegoat – a minority. And one especially powerful man of influence put thousands of Jewish lives at stake. Esther could either step up and reveal her true identity or get annihilated along with all Jewish people living in the country.

While the Book of Esther is a story which distorts and exaggerates reality, as explained by Old Testament Professor Mark Biddle to our 2007 VBS, it does so in order to drive home the point that human powers will fail in the face of God’s power to save God’s own. Esther’s story gets complicated, so I’m posting a simple outline. Here it is:

### **Queen Vashti Sent Away by King Xerxes**

Esther was a young Jewish orphan living in Susa, the capital of Persia, around 480B.C. Her older cousin, Mordecai, who worked at the king’s gate, raised her. It happened that after drinking seven days with his nobles, King Xerxes had wanted to show off his queen, Vashti, to them. However, Queen Vashti had refused to come. For refusing to come as commanded -- which embarrassed him and may have set an example for the kingdom that women could choose to disobey their husbands -- Vashti was, instead, stripped of her royal title.

### **Esther Becomes Queen**

King Xerxes sought a new queen by choosing from beautiful young virgins selected for a harem where they would be prepared with special treatments and food. Lovely Esther was selected as one of them. Mordecai ordered Esther not to reveal her ethnicity to anyone and she obeyed him. After twelve months of preparation, when she was brought before the King, he was struck by her beauty. He made her his queen, with lavish gifts and celebrations.

One day Mordecai overheard two of the king's guards plotting to assassinate the king. He told Esther about it and she told the king. The men were found guilty and were hung on the gallows. Mordecai's good deed and name were recorded in the king's annals.

### **Haman's Plot to Destroy the Jews**

Meanwhile, the King Xerxes had promoted a Persian, Haman, to the position of second in command. Being a proud man, Haman insisted that all the king's subjects bow before him. Yet positioned at the front gates, Mordecai refused, and this angered Haman. When he learned Mordecai was Jew, he plotted not only against Mordecai but all the Jews throughout Persia. He went to the king and informed him that there was a certain race of people scattered throughout Persia who do not keep the king's laws. At his urging, the King—unaware that his queen Esther was one of them—decreed that all Jews be annihilated.

### **Mordecai Turns to Esther**

When the Jews learned of the decree they put on sackcloth and ashes and began to weep and lament. Mordecai let down his cover and did the same. Using a messenger, Mordecai told Esther what Haman had done and sent her a copy of the king's decree. He begged Esther to go to the king on behalf of her people. Esther was reluctant to go before the king. Let's read from chapter 4 which explains her debate with Mordecai:

*<sup>10</sup>Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, <sup>11</sup>“All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.”*

*<sup>12</sup>When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, <sup>13</sup>Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. <sup>14</sup>For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you*

*and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.*"

<sup>15</sup>*Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai,* <sup>16</sup>*"Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish. (Esther, chapter 4).*

Although the book never mentions God, Esther exhibits clear awareness of her identity as a woman in partnership with her God. The time had come for her to act on her faith, even though it meant risking death by going to the king, unbidden by him. Esther sets aside three days for fasting and prayer, and she empowers other Jews to join her in this: if she has success, it will be a shared success for the whole community who fasts and prays together. She's back into gear as a person of faith.

### **Esther Acts**

So she and others fasted, and on the third day, Esther put on her royal robes and went before the king. As soon as the king saw her she won his favor and he held out his scepter. She touched it and he asked what she wanted. She requested the king and Haman come to a banquet she had prepared. They agreed, and at the banquet the king again asked what her request was, saying he was ready to grant half his kingdom! (So whatever she was serving must have been good!) She invited them both to a second banquet, when she would "answer the king's question."

### **Haman's Pride and Gallows**

By this time, Haman had come to feel pretty special as the guest of the royal couple. He crowed about it, and yet plotted Mordecai's death. He had a gallows built on which to hang Mordecai.

## **Mordecai's Honoring is Haman's Humiliation**

But the following day, Haman arrived at the palace to a reversal. The king, you see, had been sleepless and had called for the royal record books to be read to him. In them, he was reminded how a servant named Mordecai had foiled a plot to have him murdered. Then the king realized he had never given Mordecai any reward for his good deed. So early that morning, the King saw Haman and called him in. The king asked him what reward he should give to a man who had done a great deed for the king? Thinking that man to be himself, Haman suggested this man be given the royal honor of wearing the king's crown and riding the king's horse through a procession of people in Susa. The king said, "Let it be so for Mordecai." Haman was shocked at this turn of events.

## **Esther Petitions the King to Undo Haman's Plot**

When the King and Haman came to Esther's banquet, the king asked Esther what her request was of him. She told the king of the plot to destroy her and her people by an edict he, at Haman's urging, had signed. The king was furious that Haman's plot would bring harm to his beloved queen. Just then someone said, "*Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house . . .*" *And the king said, "Hang him on that."*<sup>10</sup> *So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.*" (chapter 7:9-10) The plot was foiled! The edict was reversed, and the Jews celebrated Esther's saving of them with a festival called Purim.

While Esther's story is unique to 480 BC, its message is as relevant and contemporary as today's news reports. It is about confronting the evils of prejudice and hatred wherever they exist. As much as Esther and Mordecai had embraced the culture around them, they had to take a stand against those who would abuse power and plot evil. Esther is any one of us who is in a position to stand against hatred and injustice to defend the vulnerable. Her story can be also about our waking up, too, in order to take stands for the welfare and good of others. .

Who knows? Perhaps God has placed you somewhere to stand up to a deep-seated hatred or prejudice ...at work, in a social gathering, a family gathering, or elsewhere. And perhaps this church, as we consider any one of the difficult issues before us, might act first as followers of Christ called to the ministry of reconciliation. You and I can do our part to create a calm among the anxiety, to remind others of each person's worth, to respect those who are different from ourselves. Our calling in Jesus Christ is to be peacemakers; we are to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. "For such a time as this." Who knows? Pray with me: *Search our hidden places, O God, that they may become wellsprings of strength. By your love, awaken us and strengthen us that we might claim our identity in every situation. May your wisdom overcome hatred and injustice, for the sake of Christ, who simply calls us to acts of love and kindness. In His name we pray. Amen.*