

This morning's first reading comes the Book of Esther which is in the Old Testament.

The Book of Esther is one of the older stories. We're not sure exactly how old it is, but most people think its about 300 or 400 years before the common era, or before Jesus. Its a little bit of an odd Bible story in that it never names God directly, it has a woman as its main actor, and its not set in Israel. While the book is short and easy to read, its too long to read the whole thing this morning so I will tell you an abbreviated version. You should find a way to hear or read the text for yourself sometime because I'm going to be inserting some of my thoughts about this story as I tell you the short version this morning. Listen, and then decide for yourself if what I have to say is helpful.

This story takes place in Persia, which we would call Iran these days. The land that God gave to the Israelites happened to straddle a very important trading route between Africa and Asia. As Empires rose up, like the Romans but also the Babylonians and Hittites, the kings wanted to control the trade routes and get wealthy. Israel was a great spot to grab all the trade, so it was often invaded.

A little while before the beginning of this story, the Persians had taken control of Israel. They also took hostages back to Persia to live as servants or even slaves. Two generations of Jewish families have been born in Persia by the time this story starts. Two generations of people who have not known the country their grandparents were taken from but still - even after two generations - are strangers and foreigners in the land they had been born to. They will never be accepted as locals.

This story starts with a King. His name is Ahasuerus. We don't know very much about him but we know he likes to throw big parties. This story starts with a seven day feast of food and drinks. Lot of foods and especially, lots of drinks. Near the end of this long party, the King wanted to show off the beauty of his wife, Queen Vashti. He commanded her to come appear at the party with her crown. Queen Vashti refused. We don't know why. We can make some guesses. Women, especially women reserved for the King, didn't appear in public very often. They were set aside.

When we think of queens and the public with our modern eyes, we think of Queen Elizabeth perhaps, waving her gloved hand from the balcony of her palace to huge crowds in the square. Not only is it okay for the world to see Queen Elizabeth, its expected. I think there was a different standard for the Queen of Persia. I think in general, the Queen was set aside to be seen by the King only. So the king's command for Queen Vashti to appear before a drunken party is essentially a command to debase herself. It was nearly as bad as if he was commanding her to walk down the street without clothes.

Unfortunately, no one can refuse the king, especially this king. Not even his wife. The King felt foolish and dis-respected in front of his friends. So he asks for advice and his friends said, "you can't let her get away with this or else all of our wives will start refusing our commands." So The king told the Queen she is no longer his wife.

After a while, King Ahasuerus calmed down and started to miss his wife. His friends told him that he should find a new wife. So all the young women in the whole kingdom were rounded up and taken to the King's palace where they stayed in a special place, walled off from everyone else. Each young woman received a year of cosmetic treatment and then each girl spent one night in a trial marriage with the King. In the morning, the young woman left the King and lived in different place, still cut off from the world while she waited for the King to ask her to return.

One of the young women that had been gathered up for the King's selection was a woman named Esther. Esther was an orphan. She lived with her older cousin, Mordecai. Esther and Mordecai were Jewish. They were grand children of a Jew who had been forced to leave Israel and come to Persia. Even though they and their parents and been born in this Kingdom, they were still seen as outsiders, people who didn't belong. As outsiders, they always lived on the edge of society. You know, one of *them*. When Esther was taken for the King's harem, Mordecai told her to keep this part of her life secret.

One night it was finally Esther's turn for a trial marriage with the King. We don't know what happened because the text doesn't mention the details but the King was very pleased with Esther. He decided to make her the new Queen. Mordecai was happy to hear the good news. We don't know what Esther thought of the situation however. The text doesn't tell us.

Around the same time, the king made another decision. He decided to promote Haman, one of his friends, as the primary administrator, someone who had all the responsibility for making the kingdom work while the King concentrated on parties and war battles. Haman liked his new job very much because he was now an important and wealthy man. Everyone bowed down to him, everyone except Mordecai. Haman felt insulted and he was angry. Haman decided that Mordicai must die, but not just Mordicai - all the Jews must be killed in order to avenge the insult. Haman seems a bit sensitive. And extreme. Power is touchy, you don't want to threaten someone's sense of being powerful. Usually.

Haman asks the King for permission to kill all the Jews and then sent out letters to the whole kingdom saying when this would take place. Understandably, the Jews were alarmed. Mordecai sent a message to Esther. "You must tell the king we need his help," his message said.

"But I can't tell the king anything," Esther sent back in reply. "No one goes to the King unless the King asks for them first. If you go without being called then the King kills you. Or sometimes he doesn't but you never know. The king hasn't asked to see me for ten days. I can't help."

Mordecai had no patience for Esther's answer. He told her, "look, you can't hide in that palace. If we all die, then you will die too. God will know what you did not do."

Esther said, "hmm, okay. Then pray for me and we will all fast for 3 days and then I'll go see the King."

Now I want to pause for a moment and think about this king. Why would he want a rule where people are threatened with death should they appear without a formal invitation? That's power, raw brutal power. The king clearly has a right to kill anyone it comes into his head to kill and everyone else appears to be okay with that. That's a kingdom that's being run on fear which usually doesn't bring out the best in anyone. But power isn't about what is best for everyone, it's about what is best for the King.

At the right moment, Esther dresses up and goes to the King. It's a dramatic moment - there she is, in the doorway, waiting to be seen.... Once he looks up and sees her, he'll either order her death or ask what she wants. Because the story doesn't end here, we know that his eyes light up and he says to her, "tell me what you want and you can have it - even up to half my kingdom."

Esther invites the King and Haman to dinner, twice, and then tells the King about Haman's plot to kill all the Jews. She tells the king that she is a Jew. The king no longer likes Haman nor his plot. Haman is put to death and Mordicai becomes the next vizier. Instead of dying at Haman's command, Mordicai takes over Haman's house and wealth and power. Another message is sent out to the kingdom and all the Jews are given the ability to defend themselves. Peace and harmony grows across the land and everyone lives happily ever after, or at least until the king throws another giant party.

Who knows what will happen when that king gets drunk.

On the surface, this is almost a standard Disney fairy tale. Boy meets girl, Boy almost loses girl due to evil bad guy, evil bad guy plans are exposed and boy gets girl for ever. At least that's how people who have power, who have wealth, tend to prefer reading this story. They think, "ah, lucky and smart Esther. She gets to jump from having no power to ruling half the kingdom while saving her people from certain death. What a nice girl. How lucky for her and her people."

I think that people who have power and wealth tend to ignore how carelessly, how thoughtlessly - even how criminally - the king behaves. I think people who have power and wealth don't want to look at how the King's power hurts people around him because then they'd have to think about how their own power and wealth affects others around them.

For example, power likes to look at kings with Walt Disney eyes. A king who is kind and wants only the best for his people. A king that makes great personal sacrifices.

But that's not this king.

This king rounds up all the women who are of an age for marriage for his own use. When I think about this king, I think about the 200 schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria last winter. Or the women kidnapped by ISIS "for marriage" to their soldiers.

Power wants what power wants. Power doesn't care about anyone else. Power comes with guns in someone's hand; power comes when the rent is raised on people working two jobs just to get by; power comes and children go hungry. Men and women suffer while power throws parties and plots murder.

But Power, human power, is not the only force in our world. God's love for this world is stronger than any human power. God's love for this world will overcome the world's brokenness. God's love for this world will eventually end suffering and liberate everyone held by fear, by anger, by powerless. This will happen and we live in the hope, in the vision of that coming restoration.

But we're not there yet.

When I think about Esther in this story, I wonder what she thought about how dramatically her life changed. Did she want to be a candidate for being the King's wife? Did she want to be the King's wife? Maybe she wanted to stay home with her guardian, Mordecai. Or get married to a nice village boy and settle down and have kids and bake bread every morning. We don't know what Esther wanted for herself because in this story, when the King started giving orders, what Ester wanted no longer mattered. She was trapped and at the mercy of an unpredictable king. She had to make do the best she could in the situation she found herself.

I think sometimes life becomes very difficult for people who do not have power or wealth. I think sometimes people without power or wealth have to do things they don't want to do. I think that people without power or wealth have to "keep the king happy" so they can live, so that their family can survive. I think that people without power or wealth sometimes have to do things that make them hate themselves. That make them feel there is no hope. They think, "God has abandoned me and I deserve to be abandoned." After a while, people who are abused, physically, sexually, emotionally, often start to think they are nothing. They are nobody. They deserve this.

I also think, perhaps, that some of us here this morning in this room know how Esther might have felt while she was waiting for her turn in the trial marriage chambers. I think sometimes the world might say, "You're only good for washing dishes," when in fact we've been to college and once ran restaurants. But we start to believe power's distorted view of ourselves and so we remain in the back corner of the kitchen night after long night after long night.

Which is why Esther's story is so important.

Everything changes in this story when Esther remembers who she is. Esther remembered who she belonged to and it was not the king. Esther remembered that she belonged to God. Esther remembered that she also still belonged to a community even though she's been locked up and hidden away for years. A community that was ready to support her as she supported them.

Esther remembered that she was not alone.

Esther remembered that while maybe she did things she didn't want to do, lived a life she had not chosen, God still loved her. God was still present with her and her people. And then Esther remembered that she did have a choice, that she did have power.

Its easy for all of us to forget that we are beloved children of God. Power does not want us to remember that there is a force greater than power in this world. Power wants us to be weak, to be filled with shame and self doubt. Power wants us to easily manipulated so that we can be exploited. Power wants no mention of God's love because Power knows God shatters Power's chains.

God remembers who we are and God loves us. God does not use us for God's own gain, but instead God calls us into our best selves so that we can be gifts to God and to each other.

So God reminds us over and over again, who it is that we really are. We are beloved children of God.

This is the lesson from the Book of Esther:

No matter what the world tries to tell us - we don't belong to the King - We belong to God who is always working for our liberation.

Remember who you are.

Remember to whom you belong.

Remember.