

Sunday - September 27, 2009  
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner  
Sermon - **Heroes and Heroines**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace, for you are our Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

Our scripture today is unusual –it is likely that some of you have never heard this story preached. The story comes from an Old Testament book of Esther. Only 2 books in the Bible have women's names: Esther and Ruth. The fact that our lead character is a woman is unusual, so too is the fact that the story took place in Persia – in the royal court of Persia (modern day Iran). And, thirdly, there is no religious activity apart from fasting, no sacrifice, and no mention of God in the entire book --- but don't let that make you conclude that God was absent..... Let's get ready for a good story over 2,400 years old.

I regard the woman, Esther, as a heroine – and so have Jews since this story took place. A hero or heroine is someone who risked their life, who committed an act of remarkable bravery or oftentimes nowadays, someone who is admired for outstanding qualities or achievements.

The time is 480 BC during the reign of a Persian King Ahasuerus (also called Xerxes) the reason for having dual names is whether the name is called in Hebrew versus Persian. The story is set in modern-day Iran when the Jewish people were living in exile.

In your imagination, enter with me into the Persian palace; it was lavish..1:6 "There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of marble, mother-of-pearl and colored stones. Drinks were served in golden goblets, and the royal wine was lavished.....drinking was without restraint." It was one royal bash..... that King Ahasuerus threw for all his officials and government ministers --- meanwhile Queen Vashti was throwing a banquet for the women in the palace.

The King wanted to display the Queen to his drunken crowd, but when Queen Vashti refused his command to parade before them, he became angry and banished her as queen. It wasn't long before the King was lonely and wanted another queen. His advisors suggested our equivalent of a Miss Universe pageant --- only more extensive. All the girls suggested as future queens had to undergo a one year cosmetic treatment – 6 months oil of myrrh (Avon) and 6 months with perfumes and cosmetics (Mary Kay).

Yes, this IS a Bible story --- so far it has been one of drunkenness, opulent decadence, focus on outward beauty ----- gee, this story may be old, but it certainly sounds current to our times, doesn't it?

At the beauty pageant, Esther (whose Jewish name is Hadassah) participates. Esther pleases the king to the extent that he makes her his queen. The King does not know Esther is a Jew. She had taken her cousin Mordecai's advice about keeping her Jewish heritage a secret.

Don't you just love the intrigue --- can't you just imagine this as a movie? – Actually it was made into a movie, called One Night With the King. But I digress.

Back to our Bible story: Cousin Mordecai is not only a loyal and helpful relative looking out for Esther's best interest, he is also a loyal subject of the king. When Mordecai hears of a plan by the king's servants to harm him, Mordecai saves the king's life and was rewarded. However, this action and his reward earned Mordecai the jealousy of the king's wicked advisor, Haman. Haman demands that Mordecai bow down to him; Mordecai is a good Jew and will not bow to other than God. Haman resolved to get revenge on Mordecai, by getting rid of the Jews. Haman put in place a plan to have a mass execution of the Jews, and he built a gallows to hang Mordecai.

Mordecai learns of wicked Haman's plot against the Jews and goes to his cousin Queen Esther, begging her to intercede with the king on the Jewish people's behalf. When Mordecai asks Esther to go to the king and plead on their behalf, Esther is at first passive and hesitant. But she gathers her courage, asking Mordecai to gather the Jews and fast for 3 days and she too will fast with her maids before she enters, unbidden, before the King. Although she is Queen, there is great risk of death for Esther to go to the King's chambers unbidden. Esther has now evolved into a heroine..... she says, "I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." Queen Esther devises a plan. She invites the king and wicked Haman to a banquet. Here is where the reading for today picks up: **Esther 7:1-6, 9-10.**

Queen Esther has evolved from a woman who traded on her beauty, to a woman who stood up for her people. She used her beauty, but also her intelligence. She remembered her heritage and did not turn her back on her people in their need. She risked her life. Remember, she could have been killed for entering the king's chambers unmasked --- She said, "If I perish, I perish"-- accepting her possible fate with courage and resolve.

The book of Esther gives us a first example of a pogrom/organized extermination against the Jewish people --- and ever since Jews have had to be concerned with genocide. There is evil in this book of Esther. King Ahasuerus is a self-serving king who is pagan and does evil. So too, Haman, the king's advisor, who wanted to set in place a plan for killing all the Jews in the kingdom. Evil is present, evil seems to be in control, but evil is not in control. God's name is not mentioned, but God's presence is clearly evident. God is working through Esther to deliver the Jewish people in Persia under the reign of King Ahasuerus. Esther holds a unique position in biblical history. Most biblical women are important because of their motherhood --- Sarah, Hannah, Rachel, Leah, Elizabeth, Mary..... not Esther. She is important because of her role in the deliverance of the Jewish people.

So you don't think I've glossed over her story, let me acknowledge that there are issues in this story that make us downright uncomfortable and skeptical. The use of women as sexual objects and the use of violence to reach political ends are not exemplary means no matter how positive your ends, yet, these same circumstances are evident in our society. All the focus on

Esther's outward beauty--- well, that certainly isn't unique to the Persian Empire, it is true today in all our advertising and entertainment today. And then there is the reality that Esther for some time compromised her Jewish heritage – she hid the fact that she was a Jew, she slept with and married a pagan king. I do not pretend that all aspects of this story make me comfortable. They do not. The emphasis on beauty --- on gluttony, and drunkenness, on **violence and revenge**; this is a hard story when you look at the details. But when you view it for **the purpose for which it was written**, you see the merit in the story.

The story is meant (1) to encourage Jews living under oppressive rulers and not in their culture; and it can also encourage us. We do not live under oppressive rule; we are the freest people in all of history, yet we do need encouragement to live counter to the culture of violence and self-centeredness, of revenge and materialism that we confront daily. We need heroes and heroines to remind us of the best a human being can aspire to; they give us something to strive toward; they make us proud to be in the human race. This story also reminds us of the evil of genocide, of its place throughout history and of our need to be vigilant when a minority is turned against by the powerful majority.

The story helps (2) to show that one person can make a difference in whatever situation they are in if they will allow God to work in and through them. This story gives us a heroine who is human. She has her weaknesses, but God works in and through her for good. She teaches us that if we allow God to work within us, we can be agents of change and good.

God used Esther – who she was and her circumstances for good. God does that. You and I do not have to be perfect. That's good news, because we are not. We just need to be willing to be used by God. Do not let your past sins, your failures keep you from allowing God to use you right now for his good purposes. The people in the Bible are all flawed but God uses them.

Perhaps some of our difficulty comes when we begin thinking of our heroes or heroines as saints and hold them up to a perfection model. Heroes and heroines do heroic deeds – take actions marked by courage and daring, take self-sacrificing action. Yet, heroes are not necessarily heroic in every aspect of their lives.

The plan to execute the Jews was thwarted. **READ Esther 9:20-22**

Even today, Jews throughout the world celebrate this story of deliverance from death with the yearly festival of Purim.

On Feb. 28, 2010, all our Jewish friends will celebrate Purim in their synagogues. Many will come dressed in costumes, it will be a party atmosphere. Children and youth will be given noisemakers and everyone has permission to boo and hiss when the entire Book of Esther is read aloud and the name of Haman is said (and it is recorded 50 times in Esther)..... and cheers and shouts go up when Esther and Mordecai's name are said. It is a time of joyous celebration. For the Jews were delivered, they were saved by God's working and unseen hand through the life of a young woman.

God does that, you know. God's purpose is to save us..... if we will only allow God's good work to evolve. Through the Old Testament times God

stepped in to human history to save his people..... but humans were so bent on self, on idols on doing and following anything other than God. Over and over God sent deliverance and over and over the people turned against God and turned to idols. Then God took an even more extraordinary step. God came into the world himself, took on human form, as the son, Jesus..... to offer all deliverance, saving us from our guilt and shame and sin. The challenge for you and me is: can we turn from our idols, our self-centeredness, our money worship, our success motivation and accept the deliverance God offers to us?

God does not want to remain apart from us. Will you soften your heart, will you slow down your life, will you listen and see how God is trying to work in your life today? He came to deliver in Persia 480 years before Christ and he came in Jesus and he comes today....will you let him in?