

“FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS”**Rev. Becky Stephens****Text: Esther 4 NLT****God’s Word: Esther 3 NLT**

Let’s talk about this woman, Esther. And I actually want to start today, at the end of her story. Have any of you ever read the story of Esther? If so, then you know that the ending of the book seems a bit strange. Here’s how it goes, *“Certainly, Mordecai the Jew was second only to King Ahasuerus in importance. The Jews also admired him greatly, and his many brothers and sisters were proud of him. He always wanted to do good things for his Jewish people and to speak up for all his family whenever they needed help.”*

It seems a little strange doesn’t it; that the book that bears Esther’s name ends with extravagant praise of Mordecai? Now, we could very easily make all kinds of snide remarks about how men get all the credit and so on. But I don’t think that’s really what’s going on here. The Jews needed a reason to celebrate, and they were celebrating everyone and everything they could at this point in their history because things were awfully tough. And they have celebrated Esther, too. In fact, there is still a Jewish holiday, called Purim, which celebrates Esther alone. And she does have the distinct honor of being one of only two women in the entire Christian canon who has a Biblical book that bears her name. So why was it so important for the Jewish people to celebrate Esther and Mordecai? Well, to understand that, we need to understand why things were so tough for the Jewish people at this time.

As was the case a couple of weeks ago when we learned about Huldah, we are still at a point in Israel’s history when division reigns. You will remember from that sermon that Israel divided into two kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. The Northern Kingdom had then been conquered by the Assyrians, and where we pick up this morning, the Southern Kingdom, too, has now been conquered, twice; first, by the Babylonians, then later, by the Medes and Persians. The result of all these conquests is that the Jewish people were ripped from their homeland and scattered all about the now vast Persian Empire. Now, as many of us would discern, a key to survival in a foreign and hostile place is to sort of “lay low” and not “rock the boat,” so to speak. And that’s how the Jewish people lived during this time of exile. They did their best to assimilate into the culture around them, while at the same time remaining true to the one true God.

So it was that when one of the ruling elites in a little corner of the Persian Empire decided to have a beauty contest to pick his next wife, the Jewish women were included in the pageantry. They didn’t reveal they were Jewish, it would seem, nor did anyone ask. You see, King Ahasueurus had decided his wife, Queen Vashti, was a bit too rebellious, and he needed a Queen who would be

more submissive to her King. Well, the King's little beauty pageant served its purpose well, and a young Jewish woman named Esther was chosen to become the next Queen. Esther had been orphaned as a young child, and she had grown up in the home of her cousin, Mordecai. Now, the way the story is written, we are intended to believe, I think, that Esther would not have been chosen if her heritage and background were known. But it wasn't known, and the King seemed to be so enraptured with Esther's beauty that he didn't bother to ask about those pesky little details like her past.

Yet, it seems there was much more to Esther than just good looks. I think it's fair to say that Esther also possessed a certain "inner beauty." Even by all measures of physical beauty, eventually one turns to something that is beyond measure: the person. Esther had such unique qualities that she "was admired by all who saw her," the Bible says. And "the king loved Esther more than all the other women" that were brought before him. But the King's Court wasn't such a place of complete beauty. Of course, we've already seen that, in the fact that the King decided to dismiss his wife because she refused to be at his every "beck and call." But within the court, there was one even more corrupt than the king, a man named Haman.

If every story has a villain, this is the guy in Esther's story. His sole focus was gaining more power for himself, and he was slowly moving up the ranks within the king's court. Things were going his way and he loved it. As Haman would make his way to the royal palaces each day, the citizens would bow at his feet, and if anyone did not, he would stop his procession and order that person to bow before him. There was one citizen, though, who refused; a man by the name of Mordecai. Let's hear what the text has to say. Esther 4.

4 When Mordecai learned about all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on burlap and ashes, and went out into the city, crying with a loud and bitter wail. ² He went as far as the gate of the palace, for no one was allowed to enter the palace gate while wearing clothes of mourning. ³ And as news of the king's decree reached all the provinces, there was great mourning among the Jews. They fasted, wept, and wailed, and many people lay in burlap and ashes.

⁴ When Queen Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was deeply distressed. She sent clothing to him to replace the burlap, but he refused it. ⁵ Then Esther sent for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs who had been appointed as her attendant. She ordered him to go to Mordecai and find out what was troubling him and why he was in mourning. ⁶ So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the square in front of the palace gate. ⁷ Mordecai told him the whole story, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸ Mordecai gave Hathach a copy of the decree issued in Susa that called for the death of all Jews. He asked Hathach to show it to Esther and explain the situation to her. He also asked Hathach to direct her to go to the king to beg for mercy and plead for her people. ⁹ So Hathach returned to Esther with Mordecai's message. ¹⁰ Then Esther told Hathach to go back and relay this message to Mordecai: ¹¹ "All the king's officials and even the people in the provinces know that anyone who appears before the king in his inner court without being invited is doomed to die unless the king holds out his gold scepter. And the king has not called for me to come to him for thirty days." ¹² So Hathach gave Esther's message to Mordecai. ¹³ Mordecai sent this reply to Esther: "Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. ¹⁴ If you keep

*quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?”*¹⁵ *Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶ “Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die.”*¹⁷ *So Mordecai went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.*

Yes, the very same Mordecai who raised the young woman that now sat on the Queen’s throne. Well, Haman found out that the reason Mordecai wouldn’t bow to him was because he was Jewish, because of course, the Jewish people only worship the one true God. Well, Haman concluded that no honor would satisfy him as long as this one man continued to ignore him. Still, Haman felt it was beneath him to destroy one insignificant person, so when he learned that Mordecai was a Jew, he decided that all the Jews needed to be destroyed. So, he persuaded King Ahasuerus to sign a document that would allow, on a particular day, the complete destruction of this relatively small but significant immigrant group. The King did give his consent, and even at this point, King Ahasuerus did not know that his fair Esther was a Jew herself, nor did Esther know that the king had signed this edict against her people.

Well, word gets around, as it always does, and Mordecai learns of Haman’s plan. So he gets a message to Esther that she needs to go in and speak with the king to persuade him to rescind his order. Esther is more than a little skeptical; you don’t simply march into the king’s presence without an invitation. But Mordecai is more than persuasive. He says, *“Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 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.”* Well, when the man who raised you talks to you like that, you listen, and draw up your strength, because you really just can’t say, “No.”

So Esther goes to work; she begins to fast and pray, and sends word to all the Jews through Mordecai that they should do the same. And after three days, she enters the king’s presence. Esther was the only person who could do what needed to be done. She had won a place of great privilege, and now, with that position came great responsibility. The entire fate of her people rested squarely on her shoulders. We can be quite sure that Esther was mortally afraid of the task before her. But two things stand out about how Esther responded to this challenge. First, she put her concern for the lives of her own people above any concern for her own life. In other words, she was willing to make a sacrifice of her own life if that was necessary to save the lives of her people. And secondly, she turned to God for the support she needed to carry forward. That’s why the time of fasting and prayer was so important; Esther knew she needed God with her if this plan had any chance of working.

Fortunately, the king is pleased to see Esther when she makes her way to him, and he invites her in to his court quite willingly. The king asks Esther what she would like and promises to give her whatever she desires. Esther tells the king she wants him to come to a celebration feast. So he

goes, and again he inquires of Esther what she desires, along with another promise to give her anything. Well, Esther didn't want half the kingdom as the king had offered. She told the king that she desired her own life and the life of her people. She wanted him to call back the order that had gone out to kill all the Jews. We might fully expect the king to get angry at Esther for being rebellious, but his response is quite the opposite. He willingly grants Esther her desire, giving her permission to write whatever she wanted on behalf of her people, and that's exactly what she and Mordecai did, and then the king signed off on it. And just like that, the Jewish people were safe once again.

I'd like to tell you that there's some really profound lesson here. But I don't think it's that complicated. Esther's story reminds us of the rather obvious, though not always easy. We have an obligation to one another. Our lives are no more and no less valuable than the lives of any other person. When we are in a position to help someone else, we have an obligation to follow through on that. Did you see that story a few years back about a guy in New York who dangled off a fire escape in order to save a man who was sitting in the window of his burning apartment with nowhere to go? That's the kind of the thing we have to be willing to do. When we see someone else in danger; whether physical, emotional, spiritual, or otherwise, we have to be willing to step out on a limb to save that person, even if it means risking our own well-being. That is what Esther did for the Jewish people, and it is also exactly what Christ has done for us. And each of us is called to "take up our cross" and to follow Christ. We are privileged to count ourselves among those who are saved by Christ. But with great privilege comes great responsibility, and that's the responsibility to bring others into a life-saving relationship with Christ as well.

And here's the thing; if it seems too tough, all we have to do is lean upon God, through whom all things are possible. If it seems more than we can handle, we need to call upon the One who promised never to leave us. If it seems out of control, we are to take shelter in the One who calms the fiercest storms.

My friends, as Christians, we have great privilege. We are the ones in the know. We are the ones who can tell the story of how we've overcome. We are the ones who can share about how God has seen us through. We are at a place where we are sitting pretty. It's when we are comfortable, that's when we need to shake it up a bit. It when we get too comfortable that we realize we're not fully doing our job. Pastor Mike and I both will tell you, as clergy, our job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. We have great privilege.

And with great privilege, comes great responsibility. What is the proverb? "Idle hands are the devil's handiwork." We are to be those who use our privilege to put God's Love in action. We are to be those who use our privilege to share the Love of God through physical acts of agape— clothing closet, food ministry, financial giving, mentoring a child, volunteering at the church or within our community. How will they know the power of God, if we don't show them?

For such a time as this. Live into your faith. Practice your faith. Share your faith. For such a time as this. May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.