

Book of Esther

Here is a biblical trivia question... which two books of the bible never mention God?

Song of Songs (Solomon) and Esther.

Who can pass up the challenge of preparing a sermon on a book from the Bible that never mentions God? God never appears in Esther. Neither does Torah, temple, prayer or worship. The only thing that could be interpreted as religious practice (and it is a stretch) is some fasting by the main two figures of Mordecai and Esther.

And so this week we turn to the reading from the Hebrew scriptures, the edited sections from Esther. The book of Esther is a rattling good story. And it certainly should be read as legend rather than as history. It has two strong female protagonists, and in a era when we are hearing a lot in our society of the need for men to cease abusing and disrespecting women we need role models like Vashti and Esther. Read through the whole book if you have not done so recently. It will take not much than half an hour and despite the absence of God we can still say it tells us something about God's character and action. And you will touch on some very contemporary issues such as the intersection of the public and private, gender, racism, violence, abuse of power, strategic use of influence, providence. And you will be reading of the origin of Feast of Purim

The verses assigned by the lectionary are out of context and need to be seen in light of the whole book in order to be understandable.

And so, a summary of the book of Esther. It is set in Persia after most of the Jews who were exiled there have returned. Some however had made a life for themselves and settled in. At this time Ahasuerus (Xerxes 1) was king and Vashti was Queen of Persia. The King was throwing yet another one of his extravagant parties; this one went for 6 months! He told his eunuchs to go tell Vashti to put on her crown and come and show herself to all his drunken buddies, for "she was fair to behold."

She refused. Can we even imagine the courage it took for her to say "no." The king was all powerful. She had absolutely no power except the power within herself. All she had to do was to put her sense of self – her dignity – her pride – on hold for an hour or two and do a little dance in front of the king's slobbering friends. Could that be so bad?

But Vashti saw herself as something more than a piece of meat. Vashti said, "no." And with that single word she banished herself from the palace. She was out on the street with nothing but the clothes on her back – if that. And it

seems to me that Vashti was the foremother of all the women who dug down inside themselves and found the courage to say “no.” And faced the consequences.

But after a time the king grows lonely and starts looking around for a new wife. Why not have a Miss Persia contest and invite all the most beautiful girls to the capital to compete for the king's affections? Ahasuerus likes this plan immensely, and so women are collected from all 127 provinces of the vast empire. Among them is the gorgeous Esther, who has been raised by her cousin Mordecai after her parents died. They just happen to be Jews but no-one knows Esther is and Mordecai has counselled Esther to keep it to herself.

Meanwhile, Ahasuerus has promoted Haman to be chief among all of his officials. It's just like the foolish king to choose a most unpleasant fellow for a position of great power. Haman immediately demands that all persons who encounter him bow to his greatness. Mordecai refuses to do so, and Haman is so enraged that he decides then and there to murder not just the Jewish Mordecai, but *all* the Jews to revenge the slight he has received.

Thus, Haman becomes the forerunner of all those through Jewish history who have hated Jews for no reason whatsoever, except that they are Jews.

Haman's rage causes him to convince the king to sign an edict allowing Haman to destroy the Jews. But while Haman's terrible plan moves forward, Esther becomes the queen and is urged by Mordecai to tell the king to stop the coming slaughter. Esther warns her cousin about the unpredictability of her new husband, telling how to even enter the King's presence without permission was to die. Mordecai responds in words that have rung down the years: "If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place . . . Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." (4:14) Rather bizarrely despite these words being perhaps the high point of the book of Esther, and certainly the best known quote from the book, they do not appear in our lectionary selections for today.

Take little break from listening/reading to this sermon to listen to a round based on Mordecai's inspiring words

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=275668197138956>

For such a time as this - round

Esther takes courage in hand and approaches the dangerous king. He fortunately is having a good day and he listens to her simple plea to come to a dinner with her. She invites Haman as well who is so thrilled to be asked to dinner with the royal couple that he can hardly contain his sense of privilege and greatness.

But at the feast, Esther reveals Haman's plot to destroy all of her fellow Jews. The king is furious, but in typical fashion cannot decide what to do, so he rushes into the garden to try to think. Meanwhile, Haman throws himself

physically on the queen's couch just as the king reenters the room. Immediately, the king is convinced that Haman has recklessly attempted some sort of sexual contact with his queen and orders Haman to be hanged on the absurdly high (50 cubits or about 75 feet!) gallows he had built for Mordecai. And the reader cannot help but be left with the thought that what goes around comes around.

But the Jewish problems are not yet over, because when the Persian king decrees a thing, it must happen. And the destruction of the Jews has been decreed. So Esther begs the king to decree some more, this time to allow the Jews their day of revengeful destruction. And here is the great problem of the book. Does this new decree allow the Jews the right of self-defense against their enemies, or are they given the right to slaughter their enemies willy-nilly? And the answer appears to be "yes" on both counts. [Esther 8:11](#) speaks of "defense," while 9:5-10 suggests a vast slaughter. Self-defense or freedom to kill? It makes a large difference, of course. It goes to the heart of the ongoing conflict playing out at this very time in Gaza and Lebanon. It does make the book not the simple Good and Evil story it has been made out to be.

The message of the book seems to swing around the turning point for Esther when she determines to take action to save her people. And here we can find some links with Season of Creation and while Esther faced the destruction of her Jewish people humanity faces the destruction of life on our planet as we know it. What she does do at this decisive moment impacts not just Mordecai and herself but her people. She stops denying, stops ignoring, stops making excuses, stops running away. She resolves that she will face up to her responsibility and go in to the king. She recognizes that what she must do must include disclosing her true identity as a Jew. She takes stock of the realities of her situation and says simply, "If I perish, I perish." She goes to the heart of the empire to save the Jewish people. She becomes her people's saviour, a kind of Christ figure. She finds her voice, her courage, her authenticity. She is empowered to risk all in the name of a greater and higher cause and she wins out.

People find this level of integrity and selflessness attractive. It has its own attraction.

Esther does have an advantage in a palace driven by male egos. Because she is a woman, the powerful men never see her coming. Taking charge of the fate of her people, Esther uses the men's underestimation of her to great advantage. In doing so, she takes her place in a long line of biblical women who have succeeded in a male-dominated world by outwitting the more powerful men around them: Rebekah, Rachel, Tamar, Shiphrah and Puah, and Rahab, to name but a few.

Like Esther and Mordecai, we are called to resist injustice whether it be to other humans, or the creation itself, in different ways depending on circumstance and opportunity. Some of us may resist like Mordecai, who used his act of refusal to draw ethnic hatred out of the shadows and into the light of day where it could be exposed and recognized. Then, taking to the streets, he made a spectacle until he drew the attention of those in power.

Some of us may resist like Esther, who shrewdly negotiated the halls of power to save the lives of her people. She resisted by studiously following royal protocols and speaking the language of power, winning the king to her side.

But if we are to defeat the powers of hatred emboldened among us, we must all resist. Whoever we are, wherever we are—perhaps our lives have been preparing us for such a time as this.