

December 9, 2018

This Little Life of Mine

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Esther 4:1-17

4 *When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; ² he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. ³ In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.*

⁴ When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them. ⁵ Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. ⁶ Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, ⁷ and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews.

⁸ Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.

⁹ Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰ Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, ¹¹ "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." ¹² When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶ "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." ¹⁷ Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

For understanding the holocaust, we have the novel Night by Elie Wiesel. For the great depression, we have The Grapes of Wrath. For American racism we have To Kill A Mockingbird. For labor in America we have The Jungle. Nothing in these stories is real. All of them are as true as any textbook. The stories are outrageous, but not exaggerated. [The half has never been told](#), either in terms of atrocity and suffering, or courage and sacrifice.

Many scholars treat the book of Esther similarly – as a fictional, but no less true, account of Jewish history everywhere and always: exile, pogrom, genocide and survival; scape-goat and doormat in every country and culture where Judaism ever landed. Outrageous, but not exaggerated. This morning I want to consider Esther, both the story and the character, in light of Advent. Specifically, as we wait for Jesus to come do for us what we cannot for ourselves, what is Jesus waiting for us to do for one another?

Let's pray: *These little lives of ours are not our own, O God; we know it and yet forget it all the time. With Esther as our teacher, help us to remember: these little lives of ours are yours, to spend as needed for the loving care of your precious creation. Amen.*

The story is set in a place called Susa, a palace complex in Babylon around 600 BCE. There are four main characters. *King Xerxes* and *King Ahasuerus* are two names for the same person. He was the king of Babylon, from Ethiopia to India, as the story goes – 127 provinces. (Very little of this telling matches other history books, by the way.) King Xerxes has no idea how to govern. His twin goals in life are to be admired by important people and have beautiful women fawn over him. He stays drunk a lot of the time. He has a ring of power that he hands over to anyone with a bad idea.

Haman was the right hand of King Xerxes. He is as gross as the king, but with slightly less power. Mordecai is a Jew who had come to Babylon from Jerusalem in one of the Jewish deportations. He lives near and is constantly present in the palace complex. Hadassah was his cousin, an orphan whom he had raised. Hadassah's other name is Esther. As the story goes, at one of King Xerxes' drinking parties – this one lasting for 180 days – he had the idea that his wife, Queen Vashti, should put on her crown and parade around in front of all the men, so they could see how beautiful she was. While not every commentary agrees, not a few read the Hebrew to say *wearing ONLY her crown*. Naked or clothed, Vashti refuses.

Xerxes is enraged. It's a national emergency. He calls together his advisors. Knowing upon what side their bread is buttered, they tell him to banish her immediately and forever, lest wives everywhere hear of it. They say, *then there will be no end of contempt and wrath. And issue a written proclamation too, they say, something like, "from now on all women everywhere will give honor to their husbands, high and low."* The king loved their plan and said, "Make it so." Then he wrote personal letters to all the provinces that

said, "Every man is master of his own house." (And the simultaneous eye-rolling of women everywhere no doubt caused the earth to tip on its axis.)

So then Xerxes had to find a new queen, so he sent eunuchs throughout the kingdom to raid villages and kidnap the most beautiful girls from each one. It's sort of like *Hunger Games*, only instead of training, the girls endure a year of beauty treatments in preparation for their one night with the king! One by one, they go to his chamber. His favorite is Esther. Mordecai has kept an eye on her the whole time and made her swear to tell no one she's a Jew. In a year, Hadassah has catapulted from orphan refugee to Queen of Babylon, a position of consummate privilege based entirely on her looks – and a secret.

Time goes by. Mordecai keeps his eyes on Esther the best he can. He gets word to her of an assassination plot against the king. She tells the king, credits Mordecai, and the assassins are caught and hanged. Haman continues to be the worst. It's decided that everyone must bow down to him. Mordecai refuses, day after day. Seeing upon which side their bread is buttered, other officials in the court tell Haman, *the reason he won't bow to you is that he's a Jew*. Haman is enraged. As Eugene Peterson translates it, *Haman hated to waste his fury on just one Jew*. He goes to Xerxes with an idea: *Let me exterminate each and every Jew in the kingdom, and I'll pay for it myself*. Xerxes, who five minutes before hadn't thought about it one way or the other, loves this plan. He gives Haman his ring of power and says, *Keep your money and make it so*.

A date is set. The edict is published in every language and posted in every province, "*On this particular day, all Jews shall be killed, massacred and eliminated*." Published and posted, the story says, *so the people can get ready*. Which people? The Jews or their neighbors? The Jews are devastated, naturally. None more than Mordecai. He puts on the garment of death – sackcloth and ashes – and goes to the palace gate. Because, in spite of the public service announcement, not every Jew has heard.

Esther sees Mordecai and thinks he has a wardrobe problem. That's privilege, don't you know? She's protected from what threatens her family. Her secret is now secret from herself. She identifies more with the banished queen than with her own people. A good house, good food, and servants make assimilation to privilege easy-peasy. Mordecai wants Esther to go to the king and beg for their lives. *It's too dangerous*, she replies. She's now fluent in privilege, its language and its math. The crisis is about her. Her life is suddenly worth more than all other Jews.

But she didn't grow up in a palace. Mordecai raised her. Now he reminds her, *this is who we are: Jews. We will survive. We always do. The question is, how shall you live? What will be your part in it? Will you be found faithful or not? What will you do with this one little life you have been given?*

Here's the thing about privilege: it's useful when one has it, but it can be tenuous. Esther's privilege is perishing with each new wrinkle or gray hair, and she knows it. *The king hasn't asked for me in a month*, she tells Mordecai. No doubt he had a younger harem at beauty camp right then and talent scouts in the provinces too. *Who knows*, Mordecai says, *perhaps all that's happened to you was to bring you to this exact moment?*

Is that a question? And if it is, doesn't the answer have to be "yes"? However any of us got to this moment, this is the only moment in which to spend this one life we have. Esther knows what she must do. And I would offer, her obedience happens in four movements. I call them *movements*, because they are acts of faith.

1. She **accepted** the reality of privilege. However passing her power might have been, however slim her chances for success, however dangerous for herself personally, she had access and resources other people didn't. She had a hundred reasons to stay quiet and only one to speak up: because it was right. She didn't do it because she knew she'd win. She did it because it was right. And being righteous matters. Following Jesus matters, most especially through terror and chaos. But every day, our assignment is to act justly and love mercy, spending whatever privilege we have to maximum efficiency.

2. First Esther accepted the reality of her privilege. Then she **applied** that privilege to the problem at hand. Obviously, Esther was arm candy. She was responsible for being beautiful and available – until **SHE** decided to re-write the job description of **queen**. I have the lovely idea that she called Vashti for advice. However she came upon her plan, she used her position as queen to beat the system at its own game. She saved her people and took down Haman too. His demise is sooooo satisfying. You should read it. This privilege of ours spends like money – on what, *we* decide. Ourselves? Our comfort? Justice? Kindness? Righteousness?

Queen Esther did beat the system and save her people. But in real life that almost never happens. Even now, 2500 years later, women going up against the system more often end up like Vashti than Esther. In the long history of human oppression, people like Esther lose and lose and lose, until enough bodies get stacked up that things finally begin to move. But nothing starts to move until someone goes first. Esther went first. St. Stephen, St. Paul, the disciples, so many through the persecutions, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romeo, Reverend King, and all the people whose names are gone – people going first to do right to break up the hard, hard ground of injustice.

3. Esther accepted the reality of her privilege. She applied that privilege to the problem at hand. And third, she **asked** for help. She prayed. She prayed and she fasted and she told every Jew in the kingdom to pray and fast with her. In his book on Habakkuk, Howard Thurman points out that folks who do evil work hard at it and that somewhere, people who want to do right got the idea that our job should be easier just by virtue of it being right. Esther has good reason to expect to be killed for walking into the room. She

can only go in alone. But knowing that everyone is with her in heart and spirit, that is powerful stuff. Stuff that will keep her legs under her. To people facing genocide, three days of prayer and fasting may not have been a big ask. But would you do it? Would you do it for others?

It's a hard question – isn't it? – since people the world over are facing genocide by starvation and war and abuse right now. We're tempted to say, "Who's asking?" as if that would make a difference. What if the one asking was the arm candy wife of the worst king ever? In the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, Esther is described this way, just before confronting the king: "*She was radiant with perfect beauty, and she looked happy, as if beloved, but her heart was frozen with fear.*" Most anyone can be brave once. Or twice. But only in the deep waters of God's peace and grace will the strongest of us keep our legs. We are too afraid of pain. Not even pain – just discomfort, inconvenience. How shall we face death if we haven't learned to pray?

4. Esther accepted her privilege. She applied that privilege to the problem at hand. She asked God for the courage she needed. And then, she **acted in faith**. She acted out the most genius plan. All the stars fell into line; the good guys lived happily ever after; and the bad guy died a gruesome, yet satisfying, death. You want me to tell it or do you want to read at home? Nah, I'll talk about Jesus and you can read at home.

This Advent ritual is just pretend. All Jesus came to do for us is done. He lived. He died. He rose. We are set free from death. We wait only to be set free from fear of death, fear that binds the courage that would have us spending our privilege, our very lives, on behalf of people who live in the real terror of hate and meanness dealt by the principalities and powers of this world, *being salt and light* as Jesus said in Matthew 5. Salt: living unspoiled in the spoiled and ruined world. Light: helping other people see what they can't see in the shadows of the spoil.

Taking off eighteen years for childhood, five years for really old age and a third for sleep in those middle years, a 90-year-old is left with a little less than 47 years to decide what she'll do with. Drs. Bonhoeffer and King both died before they were 40. We have today. We have the world we have. It may not be the one we wish we had. We may know exactly what we would have done in 1942 Europe. Or 1968 Birmingham. But those were not our times and places. We have here. We have now.

Jesus has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. Here and now, he calls us to do what we can for the people around us who are waiting for hope, who are waiting for peace. Would you pray with me?