

OT STORIES SERIES

Lessons from Esther (Esther 2:1-5; 4:10-17)

By Cindy Snider; July 18, 2010

Good morning.

Today I'm going to share with you an amazing story from the Bible, from the book of Esther. It's one of the 10 History Books from the Old Testament, and it's one of only two books in the Bible named after a woman; the other book is Ruth.

You've heard part of Esther's story through the scripture reading and the skit this morning. Now we'll take a look at some of the highlights of the story. And then later, you can go back and read the "rest of the story."

The Book of Esther has been likened to a good movie: it's got romance, intrigue, danger, fear, and lots of food. (There are several banquets in this story. One banquet lasts for 180 days; now that would be quite a potluck, wouldn't? I think I could enjoy that!)

There's another very interesting and curious thing about the Book of Esther. Nowhere in its 10 chapters of text is there any mention of God. Nada, zilch. Which seems a bit odd since it's a book of the Bible. While the religious nature of the Book of Esther may be questioned by some, others have concluded that God's hand is seen in all the circumstantial details of the story. One commentator said this, "For the Hebrews, there simply was no secular history. Everything that happened, happened in a world penetrated by God. God is always present, even if God is invisible and silent. As far as these writers were concerned, the only reason for paying attention to people and events was to stay alert to God."

Another commentator said: "We are drawn to Esther's story and to the hope that though God is not named, God can still be known. In *our* stories and places and experiences, God finds ways to reach us, and to show us that God can be known, and heard, and trusted with our lives and the lives of those we love."

A personal example of a time when God, for me, seemed absent was when my sister was dying of cancer 12 years ago. I was staying with my sister and her family in Georgia. How strange, I thought at the time, that I cannot pray, I cannot read the Bible, I cannot even sense God's presence. Where are you, God, when I need you most? Later I realized that God did show up, but in a different way than I expected. God showed up through *you*, my faith community; you shared God's Love and Compassion to me and my family through your cards and letters, phone calls and prayers, and your presence to me when I returned home. God *was* there all along.

There are lots of twists and turns throughout our lives and throughout the story of Esther. I want to introduce you to the main characters in *this* story:

King Ahasuerus, king of Persia, who ruled over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia, about 485 years before Christ was born.

Queen Vashti, she is the queen when we first enter the story, but already by the end of chapter 1, she has been ousted from her position.

Mordecai, a Jew living in the region, is the cousin to our leading character.

Esther, a beautiful young woman, is one of the many women taken to the palace when the king is looking for a new queen. She is a Jewish orphan girl who was adopted by her cousin Mordecai.

Haman, second in command to the king, is the villain in this story. He craves wealth, power, and position – at any cost, even if it means death to many people. He’s a plotter and a schemer. In other words, he’s up to no good most of the time.

Most of the story takes place at the king’s winter palace in the city of Susa (Shoosh), now a part of modern-day Iran. King Ahasuerus has dismissed his wife Vashti and he is seeking a new virgin bride upon the recommendation of his advisors. After a search *throughout* the empire, beautiful, young virgins are chosen and brought to the palace and given 12 months of beauty treatments (not just 1 day at the spa, but 12 months) before they could go before the king. That’s a lot of preparation time, don’t you think? Out of all of the women brought before him, the king chooses Esther to be the new queen. She had gained the favor of the king’s servants and the king not only because of her beauty, but because of her humility. What the king does not know is that Esther is Jewish. Esther and her cousin Mordecai are part of an ethnic minority who are living in a land that is not their homeland. They are descendants of the Jews who were captured when Jerusalem fell some 100 years earlier.

After Esther becomes queen, we might smile, sit back, and look for a “happily ever after” kind of ending. But the villain soon shows up. If you were at a Jewish Purim (Poor-im) celebration, which is all about the book of Esther, you would all boo at this point, when Haman shows up. Haman holds a high position in the palace court, and he is used to people bowing down to him as he passes by. But Mordecai refuses to bow to him, As a Jew, Mordecai will not commit the idolatry of bowing to a human being. This infuriates Haman! He has found out that Mordecai is a Jew, so Haman decides to convince the king that *all* the Jews are a threat to him and his kingdom, and they should all be destroyed.

Let’s step aside for a moment to relate our own experiences to this part of the story:

As Mennonites, we choose not to bow down or pledge allegiance to anyone or anything other than Christ and Christ’s Kingdom. This infuriates some people in our country. In 2002, when Kansas representatives and senators learned that Hesston College was not flying the

American flag, some threatened to withhold state monies from the school. It was a matter of patriotism, one said. He added: "We'll be watching to see if the flag is flying." The college defended its position by pointing to the Mennonite Church's historic and theological stance against pledging allegiance to *one* nation's flag above the larger interests of global Christianity.

Now back to Esther's story: Haman tells the king: "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction..." The king replies to Haman to do with the Jews as it seems good to him to do. An edict is then issued for all the Jews to be killed; the date is set and the plan is publicly announced.

There's another parallel between this part of Esther's story and our situation in the United States today. Like the Jews in Persia then, there are minority groups in our nation who are not native residents, and they are said to be a threat to our nation. Some in our land are saying, "Get rid of the immigrants!" What are we doing in response? Together as a faith community, we have committed ourselves to understanding the immigration issues and policies and to taking action toward a more just society.

Consider the following statement by Elie (Ely) Wiesel (V-cell), Holocaust survivor, as he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize:

"I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides...Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant."

Now let's step back into the story of Esther...

Mordecai hears the announcement that all Jews are to be killed, and he immediately goes into mourning in the traditional Israelite manner: he tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth and ashes. Esther is told about Mordecai's behavior, and she sends a messenger to take clothes for Mordecai and to find out what is going on. Mordecai sends back the clothes with the news of the king's genocidal decree. Mordecai asks her to approach the king and to entreat him for her people.

But there's a *big* problem with Mordecai's request. Esther replies that she can't do that; this is what she says,

"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. (Pause) Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live."

Mordecai sends word back to Eather; "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."

Esther heard those words, and we know that she took them to heart. She asked Mordecai to call upon all the Jews in Susa to fast and pray on her behalf for three days, and she and her maids would do the same, she said. This fast from both food and water was a form of prayer for the Jewish people.

After three days, Esther goes into the inner court opposite the king's hall. The king sees her, and ... (pause)... he holds out the golden scepter to her. And he says that he will grant whatever request she makes. Wow! Does she now request that her people, the Jewish people, be saved? No, interestingly enough, she does not. She is both courageous before the king and clever now in how she handles the problem of the deceitful and greedy Haman. She uses her wits, and the gifts that God has given her for this situation. She invites the king and Haman to a banquet in her quarters to be held the next day. They come, they eat, they drink, they have a great time, but Esther still does not make her request to the king. Instead, she invites the king and Haman to come back the next day to another banquet. (I told you there were a lot of banquets in this story ☺) Meanwhile, Haman thinks he's pretty hot stuff to get this second invite to a private banquet with the King and Queen.

The next day at the banquet table, Esther finally makes her request to the king. She begs for her life and the life of her people and tells the king of Haman's lies about the Jews. When the king hears of Haman's deceit, he becomes *very, very mad!*

... To make a long story short in the interest of our time, the king gets rid of Haman, the Jews are saved from annihilation, Mordecai takes the place next in rank to the king, and an annual Jewish holiday known as the Feast of Purim (Poor-im) is inaugurated to celebrate the time that had been turned for the Jews from sorrow into gladness. The story of Esther is still read today during this annual Jewish holiday.

What a turnaround of events! What a story! As one commentator noted, "God is good, all the time! Even if God is unseen or unnamed by us."

Now, some of us may be thinking, "Hey, that's an interesting story, but what does it have to do with us today?"

Well, we know that all scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the people of God may be complete and equipped for every good work." (We read that in 2 Timothy 3:16-17). So what can we learn from the story of Esther?

Here are some lessons that we might reflect upon, and you'll probably think of other lessons too:

- 1) First, we need to speak up for those who have no voice. The story of Esther is a wonderful example of how God works through humans to bring about justice.

- 2) We can look at Esther's story as one having to do with "community." Esther relied upon her community for the encouragement and support she needed to take on *her* role in helping to fight injustice. The gift of being in a church like Mennonite Church of the Servant and of being attached to a wider faith community like Mennonite Church USA is that there is a space for sharing ideas, for sharing resources, for knowing that we are held in prayer, and are strengthened by our relationships. So that we can stand up, speak up, and walk beside those who are being oppressed and treated unjustly.

- 3) A third lesson from the book of Esther: BE PREPARED – Esther spent 12 months preparing for her opportunity to go before the king. How are we preparing for God's call? One of the ways is to practice spiritual disciplines so that we can be nourished and refreshed daily, attuned to God's will and growing in passion for God's cause. Kids, young people, middle age people, older people -- God has a place and purpose for each of us and all of us together.

- 4) A fourth lesson—Esther was willing to die in an effort to save her people. We can be sure that she was afraid; we would be too, but with the backing of her community and with renewed courage, she stepped forward. This reminds us of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us. He was willing to step forward in spite of his torment the night before his death. This is the One we follow today. We die to our false self daily so that we can become our true Self, the one united with God in purpose and plan.

- 5) And fifthly, like the Jewish Feast of Purim (Poor-im) we celebrate God's goodness and deliverance. Life with God is not all work and no play. God is good; let's celebrate that, count our blessings, and live life to the fullest.

Christ said, "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly."

We can choose to live life fully -- acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. Just like Esther...