

The Queen of Beauty and Courage

I love looking up the stories behind common phrases. The original meanings and settings for them are often fascinating. In Ancient Greece for example, beans were used to vote. Voters would place a white bean in the container if they liked the candidate, a black bean if they did not. Sometimes a voter would knock over the jar, expose the beans and show everyone the confidential votes, or as we say, “spill the beans.” Years ago some people feared being buried alive so they were buried in special coffins that were connected to a bell above ground. At night, guards listened for any bells in case they had to dig up a live person who would thus be “saved by the bell.” During the 1500s, most people did not bathe often. When they did bathe, the entire family used the same tubful of water. The man of the house bathed first, followed by other males, then females, and finally the babies. You can imagine how thick and cloudy the water became. So mothers had to take care not to throw out the baby out with the bath.

But the phrase I want to call your attention to this morning is when we say one is “hoisted with his own petard.” The phrase means to be injured by something you intended to use to injure another. A petard was an ancient explosive device used by soldiers to blow up castle walls. However, if one got a little too close to his explosive device, not only would the wall come

down with the explosion, but the soldier would fly up and get “hoisted with his own petard.” That is what happened to one of the characters in our story this morning, the story of Esther.

Most of us know this story well. Among the Jews it has always been the best known and most beloved of all the Bible stories. There are more ancient manuscript copies of the book of Esther than any other book in the Bible. And of all the Jewish festivals, the festival of Purim, which celebrates the story of Esther, is by far the most enjoyed. One reason for that may be because the story of Esther emphasizes a precious truth. Even when God does not seem present, he is; even when our enemies have the upper hand, God still has the last word; even if we are suffering the consequences of our own faithlessness, “the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations (Ps 100:5).

Unlike every other story in the Old Testament, this story makes no mention of God at all. There are no prophets who show up to give a clear word from the Lord; there are no miracles or supernatural events that give a clear sign that God is present. In fact, because there is no mention of God, some Jewish leaders felt the book should not be included in their sacred writings. No great sea is parted; no city walls come tumbling down; no fire

falls from heaven. There are no fire works in the story, but that does not mean God is not at work.

It is a story about a few Jews who live in Susa, the capital city of Persia, nearly 1,000 miles away from Jerusalem. It is a story of how they survived in a hostile land. It is a story of how they struggled not to forget who they were even when it appeared God had forgotten them. It is a story of how, even if there was no obvious sign, no undeniable evidence that God was present and working, these people still believed they were God's people and that God would continue to be faithful to them. And for that reason they must continue to be faithful to him, even if it meant to die. It's a great story!

The story takes place 50 years after the first wave of Jews returned to Israel, led by Zerubbabel and about 30 years before the second wave led by Ezra. Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the Jews who return home. Esther is the story of those who would later be called the Diaspora, Jews who were dispersed throughout the world; Jews who were no longer compelled to live outside their homeland, but who chose to.

It is the story of Jews trying to hold on to their Jewishness even though they have no temple, no Jewish king, no priests, no prophets. All they have is their story and their faith. The Persian king, Xerxes, is the son of Darius the Great who is himself the son of Cyrus, the one who first gave

the decree for the Jews to return home. Cyrus is considered one of the all time great leaders of the ancient world, building a vast empire from India to Egypt. His grandson Xerxes (in Hebrew referred to as Ahasuerus) is not so great. The Greek historian Herodotus described Xerxes as capricious, sensual, cruel and despotic. That description would probably fit most ancient kings; the fact that Herodotus notes these qualities is a sign that Xerxes excelled in these traits. This is confirmed by an inscription found at the ancient city of Persepolis, a quote from King Xerxes. It says, "I am Xerxes, the great king, the only king, the king of all countries which speak all kinds of languages, the king of this big and far-reaching earth..." Big words for a king who history tells us lost the only major battle he fought. The author of Esther is not impressed with Xerxes either. In the beginning of the story Xerxes has invited all the leaders of his kingdom to the palace for a party that is characterized primarily as a drinking party; scripture says the men were allowed to drink without restraint. Xerxes, in all likelihood under the influence, makes a request of his queen Vashti to parade herself among his guests. She refuses. It is not hard to discern why a queen might refuse her king's request, given what was undoubtedly an audience of bawdy and drunken men. Vashti's refusal creates quite a stir. If the king lets it stand it sets a bad precedence. Pretty soon every wife in the kingdom will

feel empowered to disobey her husband. The king's advisors tell him to banish the queen and send out a royal edict warning any upstart wives that no such behavior will be tolerated in his kingdom.

Now the king needed a new queen so he sets up an empire wide beauty contest. Esther was a beautiful woman and so she is selected to be included in the contest. Mordecai warns her to keep the fact that she is a Jew secret; which is a bit hard to understand. Jews were commanded not to marry Gentiles. This is the major issue in the Book of Ezra, the prohibition of mixed marriages of the Jews. Yet Mordecai tells Esther to be quiet even though letting it be known that Esther is Jewish would have probably made it less likely that she would be chosen. Scholars differ on Mordecai's reason. Some say Mordecai is trying to protect Esther, but there doesn't seem to be any special animosity against the Jews at this time (they had after all been allowed to return home!). Some say Mordecai is being ambitious. Having a relative so high in the government could an opportunity to advance himself or perhaps to help his people. Some say Mordecai is simply being realistic. They are a simple family caught up in a whirlwind not of their own making and they are just trying to get through it as best they can. Nothing is said in the text to suggest what he does is wrong, even though what he is advising Esther to do is clearly wrong. So what's the deal? I don't know. The book

of Esther is a story about the struggle to be a people of God in a godless land, not an instruction manual for an ethics class. The purpose of the book isn't to give us a step by step guide on how to navigate the winds of culture, but a reassurance that though we may struggle to keep our balance in the wind, our God is more than able to work out his will no matter the winds.

What follows is a string of episodes that seem unrelated but end up all playing an important role in the story. Mordecai discovers a plot to kill the king and saves the King by warning him. His action is noted in the royal record. Then Haman appears on the scene as an ambitious politician who loves to have the people bow down to him. But Mordecai refuses to bow down when Haman passes by. Haman is furious. And when he finds out Mordecai is a Jew he essentially plans a holocaust to eliminate the race. He convinces the king that this should be done and then following his religion he throws the dice to determine the date for their destruction (the Persian word for dice is purim, thus the name of the Jewish festival). Haman sends out a royal decree announcing his intentions. Mordecai discovers the plan and gets word to Esther that she must go to the king and get him to change his plans. Esther reminds Mordecai that no one simply approaches the king; one must wait to be summoned. To approach the king uninvited could get one banished like Vashti or worse!

In response Mordecai warns Esther that if Haman is not stopped she is not likely to escape extermination herself and then gives one of the greatest lines in the book of Esther, if not the entire Bible. “Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this.” What a great way to perceive not just isolated moments of our life but all of our lives. How would it change the way we live if we saw the times we are living in and the circumstances we find ourselves in not as random events but as remarkable opportunities to do important things. Who knows but that you are in this job, that you have made these acquaintances, that you have been given this influence, that you possess these gifts for just such a time as this. Mordecai’s insight is life transforming. Rather than always waiting for a better time, looking for a better position, striving for a more advantageous circumstance, instead we live in the now, seeing who we are, what we are, where we are right now is pregnant with opportunity to do good, to be influential for the good, to make a difference in this world.

Mordecai’s words seem to have that transforming affect on Esther. She overcomes her fears and makes plans to approach the king and try and save her people. She knows the peril of her actions, she also knows the unique opportunity of her position and courageously she acts and delivers another of the great one-liners in scripture. “I will go to the king, even if it

is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” Here is the core of what faith is: to hold on to some things, some beliefs as more important even than life. If simply staying alive is the most important thing in life then there is nothing else that gives life its meaning. To merely exist, to simply survive, cheapens life. Christians might argue the relative merits of evolution as a mechanism to explain the development of life, but there could hardly be a worse philosophy of life than the “survival of the fittest.” What gives meaning to our lives is not the knowledge of how to survive, but the wisdom to know when dying is more important than living, knowing when to say with Esther, “If I perish, I perish.”

Well Esther hatches a plan. She invites the King and Haman to a very exclusive dinner party. This appeals to Haman’s inflated ego and he is excited to be included in the affair. But his excitement is short lived when he sees his arch enemy, Mordecai at the gate. Filled with rage and bitterness he pouts all the way home. His wife tells him to quit pouting and instead just go out and hang Mordecai. That sounds like a good idea so Mordecai has a set of gallows constructed to hang Mordecai. In the meantime the king has a restless night and asks his servants to read to him the royal records (it is not clear if he is taking advantage of being awake to get some business done or because they are so boring they are sure to put him back to sleep).

Whichever the case, the records happen to open to the page telling of Mordecai's rescue of the king. The king discovers Mordecai has never been properly recognized for his brave actions.

The next day the king invites Haman to his office and asks Haman what could the king do to best honor someone. Haman, being the humble servant he is, assumes the king must be talking about him. So he comes up with exactly the kind of praise and honor and treatment that he himself covets. Put one of the king's own robes upon him, and a royal crown on his head and place him on one of the king's own horses. Then find a noble prince to lead the horse and the man through the streets and cry out to the crowds, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" The king says to Haman, great idea. Go immediately and do that for Mordecai. Stunned, mortified, enraged, horrified Haman leads his mortal enemy through the streets forcing his lips to form the words, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" Isn't this a great story?!

Still stinging from the humiliation, Haman shows up to the exclusive dinner with the King and Esther, no doubt hoping to recover some small portion of his pride, only to discover the dinner was a trap set to expose his own wicked plans. When the king hears Esther's accusations against Haman, he is outraged and demands something must be done to punish him.

A servant tells the king that it just so happens that Haman has constructed a set of gallows to hang Mordecai (the man who had saved the king's life). The king gets the hint and orders that Mordecai be hanged on his own gallows, or as one might say, be "hoisted with his own petard."

It's a great story but what exactly are we meant to learn from it. I'm sure there are many lessons, but for me one of the most encouraging lessons is how God works out his will in concert with our own plans and efforts. God could have raised a prophet to send to Susa and perform a few miracles to fix everything. He could have struck down Haman with madness like he did Nebuchednezar. He could have delivered Mordecai like he did Daniel from the lions or the Hebrews from the fiery furnace by divine tampering with the gallows or just sending fire down from heaven to burn them up in front of everyone. One could imagine all kinds of divine scenarios to accomplish his will; but one thing we learn from this story is that divine scenarios need not be miraculous to be divine.

I often hear Christians talk about how we still live in the time of miracles. God is still doing fireworks as he has always done. I have no problem with God still doing fireworks, but lets be careful with our testimony about God and what he may or may not do. I for one do not see happening today anything like what happened in the days of Jesus and the

early church. I understand that people experience remarkable recoveries from illness that may indeed be the supernatural healing of God. And I understand things often happen in such a way that it seems the best explanation is the direct hand of God is at work. But as no different than the miracles and wonders of the first century. I have never seen or heard of anyone walking on water; I have never read any reports of a few pieces of bread and fish feeding thousands of people; who of us can testify to someone standing over a raging storm and commanding its waves and wills to immediately calm down; there are no stories I know of that testify to people's ears being cut off and immediately put back on or leprous skin immediately transformed to healthy tissue or anyone who has been dead and buried for three days and at a single command come forth from the grave fully alive. I do not say such things cannot happen today. I have heard testimony that have in some places. I am only saying lets not cheapen the reality of a miracle by describing everything that happens as a miracle.

The miracles performed by Jesus and his apostles were undeniable wonders. Jesus had his doubters and skeptics but it was not the miracles they doubted, they could not doubt them, they could only accuse Jesus of doing them with the power of the devil rather than of God. In my opinion we do not live in a time when such fireworks regularly occur, and that is

why the story of Esther is so encouraging to me, because apparently they didn't live in that kind of a time either.

The lack of fireworks in the story of Esther is no indication that God is not at work in the story. Notice the string of "coincidences" that are mentioned. Esther "happens" to be chosen queen. Mordecai "happens" to overhear a plot on the king's life. The king "happens" to be unable to sleep one night and the servants "happen" to open the royal records to the very page of Mordecai's story. These events can all be explained away as mere coincidence, but people of faith define coincidence differently. When different incidents work out for the good of someone people of faith do not see it as co-incidence but as co-operation. We believe that God is at work in this world co-operating with us. We do not stand passively on the sidelines and watch God at work; neither do we anxiously feel the burden of doing everything ourselves. We work with God; God works with us. And though our participation often creates all kinds of problems, God counters with his promise to be at work in everything for the good of his people.

And that is exactly what I see happening in the story of Esther. From the human point of view it may seem God is quiet, uninvolved even uninterested. And if we insist on seeing God's involvement only when fireworks occur, then we will not see God involved in this story at all. But

Mordecai and Esther certainly do not see things that way. They may not “see” God’s involvement but they bet their lives on it. It may not be for me to see mighty, miraculous acts of God. It may not be for me to see wondrous healings or supernatural marvels. But that does not mean I do not get to see God at work in my life and in my time. In fact, If I understand the Lord, I may be even more blessed by not seeing such things. Did our Lord not tell us, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” There was not much that God was doing that Mordecai and Esther could see, but their faith was no less blessed. May we have that kind of faith, to live constantly with the belief that we are alive right now in this time, right here in this place to be uniquely used by God for his divine purposes. “For who knows that we have come to our positions for such a time as this.” And to see God’s purposes are what give to our lives divine meaningfulness, purposes we hold on to even more firmly than life itself, purposes so that we are able to say with Esther if need by, If I perish, I perish. Esther is a great story and it is our story.