The Voice Of Esther -- Missy Deal and Rachel Terrell

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

**Spoken word:**

Esther,

Chosen because of her beauty to become the next queen

But the grotesque nature of this saga remains unseen.

The story we tell children is not the whole truth,

Could it be we’ve forgotten her reality was really aloof?

Let’s begin from the beginning,

Xerxes ruling the Persian Empire.

He ruled with his power, having all control,

If you messed with his command, you would end up on a pole.

Persia was filled with captives

The nation of Israel being one of those extractives.

The stage is set, the faux love story,

Xerxes owning Vashti and all of her glory.

But what’s this? Something is going amiss.

She is kicked out of position

Because she wouldn’t act in submission.

Orderedto come before the King and his friends

She says no; her dignity she defends.

Forgiveness is out of the question, there will be no amends,

Disrespect, disgrace, dishonor must be cleansed.

Queen Vashti is banished

Hope for a woman’s voice has vanished

Now King Xerxes is down and out,

A women to show his power, he is without.

He is in search of a new queen.

Actually, this is no love scene.

It’s more like a hunt.

Forcing all virgins to the palace,

just to be blunt.

The term virgin is key

Because this was never about a fairytale,

it’s an act commanded by the power of a male.

So forced from her home to spend a year being groomed,

We find Esther the Jew, who seems utterly doomed.

This was not Esther’s dream come true,

Because of what the King was about to do.

At the end of it all, comes one fateful night

Where human trafficking becomes Esther’s plight.

You see Esther was picked because she pleased the king.

A prized victim who got the ring.

Queen Esther, they called her now,

maybe even to whom they bowed.

But there was no joy to be had.

Esther was controlled by the king.

To his authority she must cling.

In this way, Esther was much like a slave,

Contained in her own royal cave.

We glamorize this story,

So we don’t have to face

That culture allowed such a horrible disgrace

That defaced women,

Even ones with power.

So that if we really saw what was real,

We’d see souls that cowered

From the brute force of men who ruled and reigned

As if it was all some sort of game.

I understand the story of Esther, what her reality is--

We know women who only viewed themselves as “his.”

Trapped in slavery

But capsuled in bravery,

These women survived

But of love they were deprived.

Their beings were commodified,

Some of their lives ending in homicide.

For money they were exchanged

To keep their pimp from becoming deranged.

Fear was their prison,

Stockholm syndrome had arisen.

Their self-worth was shattered,

Their dreams broken and tattered,

Like their bodies, bruised and battered.

“This is all you can ever be” has manifested,

Backed by the past, a child molested,

A teenager arrested.

Trapped by lies and deception

This is their perception.

The narrative we learn from TV

Are stories of glee.

Covered in glitter and money

Beauty dripping like honey

What we miss is that they are girls just like me (like me).

Who never decided this is how they wanted it to be.

Does anyone really ever wake up and say

To a trafficker I want to fall prey,

To sell my body for pay,

This is what I will do today?

The Esthers of our time don’t live in the palace

Holding a chalice.

No, their lives are full of strife.

Instead, they live in the brothel

Enslaved not to a king but to a pimp,

Because of whom their souls have gone limp.

The stories we hear about adult stars and fame

Are partly to blame

for the indifference to this life called “the game.”

A game in which someone else holds all the cards

And the girls are only a pawn.

Wishing for dawn,

When their day’s work is done.

Yet they can’t sleep or utter a peep

Of the real life that they seek.

No choice in the matter,

Like Esther, their voice becomes shattered.

Their dreams are important

Lest we paint them as only victims or projects.

Their trauma is complex;

It’s evident when they begin to speak about their ex,

The one who stole their dreams

With their terrible regimes.

Dreams to become something else:

A welder,

A writer,

A farmer,

Just to name a few dreams

That are bursting at the seams.

These women are people

Are human, our sisters. (Our sisters.)

Let us call them by these names

And let their past be refined by the flames

Of justice and truth

To which they are due.

Esther’s story did not stop.

She faced the man at the top.

Haman’s plan was exposed

A brutal fate for him was imposed.

The Jewish people were given the right to stand,

Finally recognized as members in this land.

What happened to Esther? To the hero of our story?

She was owned. Property. The King’s own glory.

Today, we can help write an alternative ending.

For the Esthers of today we must fight for justice, and truth, and healing.

**Homily:**

Esther’s story is powerful. A culture where women are to be seen and not heard. A culture where you can summon virgins to the palace for a year of prepping for the king. She was in a culture where men dominating over women was an order that was forcefully established time and time again. Xerxes and his wise men needed to keep power. We see this with their punishment to Vashti, and with the decree they send out to the land in chapter 1. When Esther entered the palace, she was forced to enter with **no voice** in the matter. She was presumably a very pretty girl, and won the king’s eyes over. Yet even this favor did not give her a voice.

**Esther felt voiceless.**

When Haman began his plan to annihilate the Jews, Esther struggled with what to do. Mordecai encouraged her to intercede; what was she, a voiceless woman supposed to do in a time of dominance, submission and power? **Esther felt voiceless.** The politics would get in the way, she rationalized to herself. If I go before the king, I could die. A very real and scary option.

Esther knew if she did not speak out, her people could die. But even here, Mordecai's words to her, “If deliverance does not come from you it will come from someplace else.” This makes me think, like in most areas of life, God does not NEED us to intervene. Instead, he welcomes us into the story. He gives us the opportunity to step in, and says, **“I give you a voice”**—evenwhen we feel like we don’t. What if Esther would have said no? She would have missed out on a chance to fight for justice, for truth, for healing. Are we saying no? **Are we choosing to stay voiceless?**

So Esther decides to go to the king. **In a voiceless time, Esther finds her voice.** She was desperate for change. **She fasted for three days. In our lives, we will all come across circumstances that demand us to commit ourselves to act courageously and exercise faith. This was Esther’s courageous, powerful, voice moment.** This was her compete-reliance-on-the-Lord decision. What do you need to say “Yes” to, where you are completely relying on the Lord?

I want to point out, what Esther was doing was ILLEGAL. Sometimes, if you haven't noticed, our laws are not just, and require us to break them to have a voice, to stand in the gap, to speak for justice, and take your courageous moment. It is often times cultural norms, or legislation, that **strip people of a voice.**

So, Esther, like many of the women we encounter, uses manipulation to get the king’s attention and to be heard. This manipulation is something that is carried from an old life of survival, and can be so destructive in a life of thriving. But when desperate for change, when desperate for a voice, I think I would do whatever it took too.

So what does this mean for us? Unfortunately **voices today are still ties to cultural and political games and regimes.** We have the option to live in this voicelessness, or to claim the voice God is ushering us into. In whatever context you are living in, I have to believe there is a story God is inviting you into. Whether it’s the fight against human trafficking, social or racial injustices, or believing survivors of assault, your voice matters. **Freedom comes when you are heard.** We never see Esther being freed at the end of this story. But she found freedom for her people by being heard. Listen to people and believe them. You have a voice. **Use it.** Use a courageous act and exercise brave faith. Live into the voice God gives you.

On this day of Freedom Sunday, may we remember those in the past and the present still enslaved, and enter into the invitation God is giving all of us to use the voice he gives.