

Our Place of Royal Dignity – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

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

It's a good thing you're here today. If you weren't, you would have to wait another three years for the book of Esther to show up in our lectionary readings. Today's Old Testament lesson is the only reading from Esther in the entire three-year lectionary cycle.

Many Old Testament scholars downplay the importance of the book of Esther. Most commentators are quick to highlight the fact that God is never mentioned in the entire book. Some even say there's not much "religion" in the book of Esther. Esther doesn't pray to God for deliverance. The Jews don't seem to be concerned about food or dress laws or worship. In a ten-chapter book, there is only one verse that hints at God's involvement in Esther's story. That verse comes in chapter 4, a few chapters before the readings we've been given in the lectionary today. In that passage, when Esther's cousin Mordecai is trying to persuade Esther to take action on behalf of himself and the Israelites, Mordecai suggests God's divine involvement in her situation: "Who knows?" he says to Esther, "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

In isolation, the book of Esther can be read as a simple short story demonstrating the power of good over evil. But coming as it does at the end of the collection of history books in the Old Testament, Esther continues the story of God's faithfulness to the Israelite people. Read in light of that greater story, God's divine intervention (through Esther) becomes the indispensable theme of the book. Esther tells us a really good story, a story with plenty of "religion" in it.

Our lectionary reading provides us with a good summary of the story's climax and the highlights of its resolution, but Esther's story is much more complicated than our reading suggests. You probably know the story. Esther is a beautiful young Jewish orphan who has been raised by her cousin Mordecai. When the beautiful Queen Vashti refuses to do what King Ahasuerus has directed her to do, the King banishes Vashti, his queen. At his top advisor Haman's direction, the King then searches the kingdom for a beautiful young virgin to become his next queen, and Esther, our heroine, is chosen. Court life wouldn't be the type of life or position a poor young Jewish woman would have known. Undoubtedly Esther wouldn't have been able to follow Jewish law in her role as queen in a kingdom where Jews were looked down upon. She needed to follow the rules of court or she might be thrown out like her predecessor. But when her cousin Mordecai angered the king's "right-hand man" Haman so much that he sentenced Mordecai and all the Israelites to death, Esther was challenged to appeal to the king for not only Haman's life, but for her own life and those of all the Israelites in the kingdom as well.

Now that's not easy for Esther to do. Laws forbid everyone, even the Queen, from entering the king's presence without an invitation, so it takes a great deal of courage for Esther to risk her own life to appear before the king. Rather than make her case for the Israelites when she appears before him without an invitation, Esther invites the king and Haman to a banquet. Esther isn't courageous enough to make her appeal to the king at the banquet that first night; instead she invites him and Haman back for a banquet again the next night. That's when our Old Testament reading for today begins. As it tells us, at that second banquet Esther asks for her own life and the lives of the Israelites to be spared, and the King grants her request. And in an ironic twist, we learn that Haman was hung on the huge gallows he himself had built for Mordecai's execution. Esther's story seems to me to tell us that we should accept both Esther's abandonment of Jewish tradition for life in the court and her breaking of royal law as acts of "holy disobedience." It seems Mordecai's words are true—Esther was placed in "royal dignity for just such a time as this."

In the verses in between Haman's hanging and the end of our lectionary reading, the story provides the details of how the Israelites were saved. Since it was impossible for the royal decree to be rescinded, Haman's people, the Agagites, were still planning to kill the Jews. To counteract this irrevocable decree, at Esther's and Mordecai's prompting, the King issued another decree. In it he proclaimed that for one day all the Jews in the kingdom could "assemble and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them." So the Jews (and many other people who all of a sudden said they were Jews out of fear of the Jews) defended themselves against the Agagites, and the Agagites were soundly defeated. Following that first day of Agagite destruction, the king told Esther that he would grant her another wish, and she requested a second day, just like the first. The book of Esther reports that after two days of fighting more than 75,000 Agagites including Haman's ten sons had been killed, a sure sign of God's protection and favor of the Israelites. Esther has moved far from her meek innocence at the story's start—she now strategically uses her royal position of power for her people's salvation.

When I get to this part of Esther's story, I have to admit that I definitely prefer the telling of this story found in another great canon of literature rather than the actual Biblical text. In the Veggie Tales story "Esther: The Girl Who Became Queen," the beautiful, wise, and courageous Esther takes the form of a voluptuous green onion who can sing beautifully. The Veggie Tales Esther still saves the day of course, but instead of killing an enemy of 75,000 Agagites, the villains are banished to the Island of Perpetual Tickling forever.

While the Island of Perpetual Tickling looks scary enough for me and most children, the Biblical story of Esther is just the kind of story most of us want to read or watch these days—stories in which plot and action reign over character development and good description. We seem to find pleasure in watching good powerfully annihilating evil. As Christians in the 21st century though, I believe God wants us to feel a little uncomfortable with the "annihilation" part of the Esther story. And perhaps God wants us to feel discomfort at the annihilation happening in the world we live in as well.

We don't have very many heroic females in the Bible. Esther is one of only two books named after a woman (there are two more in the Apocrypha). As a woman myself I want Esther to be a hero. She is a hero. She overcomes fear and wisely uses the system into which she has been thrust to save her people. To do this though, she needed to adopt the Persian culture around her and most certainly break the rules of Torah she had grown up knowing. Aren't we Americans in many ways in a place of "royal dignity" in the world today? We don't live in a monarchy and none of us is likely to ever be crowned queen or king, but we do have more money and more power than most of the rest of the world. None of us chose this world for ourselves, just as Esther didn't choose to be Jewish or to be made queen. How should we use the "royal dignity" we have been given to bring about justice in our world? Are there acts of "holy disobedience" that we like Esther should make a part of our stories?

In the pre-Resurrection world of Esther and Mordecai, a story celebrating God's deliverance of the people of Israel from the hands of their enemies fits right in. The Old Testament reminds us over and over again that God had a special purpose for Israel. In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus reminds the disciples that they too have a special purpose and a "royal dignity," but that they are part of an ever expanding group of disciples with whom they share that common purpose.

Interspersed with a series of encounters that Mark describes in his gospel, Jesus was trying to prepare the disciples for his approaching death and resurrection, talking to them about how they should live as disciples. Our passage today begins where our Gospel lesson ended last week. The disciples have clearly not learned or remembered Jesus's lesson about who is least and greatest in the kingdom of heaven because this passage begins with John tattling on a "non-follower" who the disciples have seen casting out demons in Jesus's name. Believing this to be wrong, the disciples tried to stop this "other exorcist" because he wasn't a "true" disciple. Jesus immediately reprimanded them for their exclusivity saying that they shouldn't stop the other man because a person who does a good work in Jesus's name wouldn't be able to speak evil of him later. Mark's focus on inclusivity rather than exclusivity clearly shows through in Jesus's declaration that "Whoever is not against us is for us."

Jesus recognizes the value of every good work done in his name, especially as his time of physical presence on earth draws to a close. Those who do good work in his name become his disciples. It is a ministry of multiplication not subtraction according to Mark. There isn't an "in" group. Last week Ben reminded us that we are the disciples in the story. We are the ones who want exclusive rights. We don't always understand and remember the paradox of the Gospel—that only through losing can we find, and only through dying can we live. This is the paradox we celebrate today as we eat Jesus's body and drink his blood. This is the message we get from Esther today as well. By giving up her life as a Jewish woman and by putting herself in a position where she would be sentenced to death according to the law of her land, she was able to gain life for herself and for her people. Her true "royal dignity" came from God from whom we inherit ours as well. How should we use our "royal dignity" for God's purposes in

this world? And how should we be “holy disobedient” to both the rules of our religion and our culture as we discover those purposes?