

Esther 4:1-16
Second Baptist Church, Lincoln, NE
Nov. 8, 2009 - Rev. Stephen Wisthoff

- ¹ When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.
- ² But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it.
- ³ In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.
- ⁴ When Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them.
- ⁵ Then Esther summoned Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.
- ⁶ So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate.
- ⁷ Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews.
- ⁸ He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.
- ⁹ Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said.
- ¹⁰ Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai,
- ¹¹ "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."
- ¹² When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai,
- ¹³ he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape.
- ¹⁴ For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"
- ¹⁵ Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai:
- ¹⁶ "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

I'm sure if you're anything like me, you can look back to various people who were your teachers over the years. I think of Mrs. Bartness who taught me how to read, and Mr. Patton who taught me how to sing. Then there's Mr. Sheets and Mrs. Stenslie who inspired me to play guitar. Mrs. Solberg and Mr. Ludwig taught me the importance of public speaking. Dr. Traylor turned me on to History my second year of college and Pastor John Giles helped me get started

as a pastor. We all have people who have taught us and mentored us throughout our lives. People that took an interest in us or simply by virtue of their occupation, influenced us and made us better people. Sometimes we are influenced and inspired by characters from movies. Who wasn't inspired by Eric Liddel from *Chariot of Fire*. Who wasn't inspired by the German industrialist Schindler in *Schindler's List*?

To me, that is the value of the Old Testament. We not only see the way God worked through people in bringing us redemption by the law, the prophets and eventually the cross – but we are taught by the many heroes and their experiences. We not only find stories in the Bible, we find inspiration.

We've all heard of Abraham, Moses and Joseph. Abraham was known for his obedience to God. Moses was known for his choices and his leadership. Joseph was known by his high integrity and his trustworthiness. Each person is our teacher—our mentor. From both their successes and failure, we learn how to live. We learn through their mistakes and rebellion as well as their faithfulness. We learn from Biblical characters how to respond to God and live with one another.

Esther is no exception. Her name meant “Myrtle” and was changed from Hadassah (in the Hebrew) to the Median version of the name which was Esther. She was a beautiful young Jewish woman with plenty of reason to be worried and concerned. Some might believe that she was a victim of her circumstances, living in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jews – even pretty ones – were despised in the time of Esther. They had been uprooted from their homeland like many of the refugees who have been resettled here in the Lincoln area.

To make matters worse, her parents had died. She had been raised by a kindly old cousin old enough to be her father with the strange name of Mordicai. Mordicai took seriously his role as caregiver and guardian to Esther. It would have devastated him had anything happened to his young cousin while she was in his custody. However, being people of faith, both Esther and Mordicai trusted God to guide them and protect them.

At that same time, the ruler of the Persian Empire who was the ruler of the captive Israelites, had a slight crisis. His queen had disgraced him. Apparently, there had been two parties going on in the palace, one for the men and one for the women. At some time during this seven-day party, he called for his queen to come and model herself before the gentlemen guests, but she refused. This dishonored the king and was a signal of his weakness to his guests – and he was very angry. He consulted with his advisors as to what he should do, and they suggested he exile her and she would never be allowed to be in the presence of the king again.

So the king went on a search for a group of young virgins to make up his harem. Like the story of Cinderella, while Hadassah (or Esther) was not the most socially elite woman in the kingdom, she was certainly the most beautiful. But it was imperative that she not reveal that she was Jewish to the king or to anyone.

So after a time (about 10 months) she entered the court of the King and he found her to be stunningly beautiful – so much so that he invited her to become his queen. Now into the story enters the king’s attendant, Haman. (sssssss) Haman was an evil man. It’s like in the old mellow dramas, where the evil villain ties the young heroine to the railroad track when the train’s coming. That essentially tells you the character of Haman. He hated Jews and he wanted them annihilated. So he got the king to sign a decree announcing that everyone must bow down to the king, fully knowing the Jews would not commit idolatry in this way. So since Mordicai refused to bow down, Haman tricked the king into signing a decree stating that all Jews would be exterminated. Mordicai got word of this and appealed to his cousin Esther, who had some clout with the king. Mordicai wanted Esther to discuss this with the king and talk him out of this dastardly act of annihilation.

Problem: It would be a major faux pas for anyone – even the queen – to approach the king without being summoned by him. She could not just go marching in and say, “**King XERXES, there’s something we need to discuss.**” So we find in Esther chapter four that she contacted all the Jews in the area to begin praying and fasting for her. She wanted God’s attention when she went into the king to seek his help.

This was a moment of discernment, not just for Esther, but for the whole community. This is important news for us. When one of us has a difficult decision – especially one that affects the whole community, then the community of faith, the church, needs to go to prayer. A false move would not only jeopardize Esther’s life, but also the life of the nation in exile that had already been condemned by the decree. So the community begins to pray and to seek the protection and wisdom of God. They need a miracle to overturn Haman’s evil plan. So the community began to pray day and night at Esther’s request, preparing Esther for the moment when she would need to approach the king.

So in chapter five, Esther enters the king’s chamber and invites him to a dinner that evening. He also indicated that he wanted Haman to be there. So when the dinner begins, the king is so smitten with her that he says she can have anything she wants – up to half the kingdom. Later, as Haman was leaving the banquet, there was Mordicai the Jew sitting beside the gate. Mordicai didn’t bow or even acknowledge Haman. Haman was furious. He told his friends, “**go out and build a gallows 75 feet tall so that everyone can see Mordicai hanging there.**” That night, the king couldn’t sleep so he began reading the chronicles of his kingdom and he discovered that Mordicai, the Jew and queen Esther’s cousin, had saved the king’s life from a couple of assassins.

So the king wondered, “**HHHMMM, I wonder if Mordicai was ever properly rewarded for his bravery and valor?**” About that time, the Haman enters and the king says, “**Haman, what should be done for a man who is to be honored.**” Haman, thinking the king spoke about him, says, “**Oh, put a royal robe on him and put him on a horse and parade him through the streets as a hero.**” So the king commanded Haman to parade Mordicai through the streets announcing, “**This is what is done for the man the king wants to honor.**” Angry and Mortified, Haman now

goes to the banquet with the king and Esther. The king says, “What can I do for you, Esther?” She replied, “Someone is trying to destroy the Jews, my people.” Xerxes responded, “Who is this man who would do such a vile thing.” And there sat Haman with a guilty look on his face.

To make a long story short, that night Haman was the one hanging on the gallows that he had built to hang Mordicai. A twist of fate for Haman. Esther, the heroine, was successful in doing the right thing because she wanted to shine for God. But she could not shine on her own, she enlisted the Jews to pray and fast for her – and God came through. King Xerxes could have lost his temper and called for Esther’s head on a platter, but he did not because Godly people fasted and prayed.

Take note: This is the characteristic of SOMEONE WHO THRIVES SPIRITUALLY. They thrive because they depend upon others. They thrive because the choices they make are bathed in prayer, constantly seeking the mind and the will of God. A person who thrives spiritually turns to the prayers of others when their physical, relational, and emotional welfare is at stake. Ever watch a fire burn? Sure you have! God used that image of the burning fire to impress a very important spiritual truth upon Lloyd Ogilvie, popular author and chaplain of the US Senate. He says, “For a log to ignite and burn, it has to be in contact with other burning logs. A log that does not lean on another that is already afire will not blaze. Similarly, even logs which have been burning will grow cool and lose their glow if they are left alone and do not find the company of other pieces of wood.”

That was Esther’s principal. For a fire to be left alone, it can not survive the night, it can’t abide alone. In order to shine for God, you have to look to others to keep your flame alive. You seek the prayers of the believers around you. How open is your schedule to other Christians? In the second chapter of Acts, the description of the early church is that of “interdependence”. Everyone was dependant upon everyone else. How well do you know other people in this room? Find someone you don’t know very well and get to know them. Discover their faith story. Ask them some questions like:

- How did you come to your place of Christian commitment?
- What challenges do you face being a follower of Christ between Sundays?

I believe there are wonderful faith stories in this congregation. Some have happened already and just need to be shared. How God has provided for you through the help and encouragement of others. I also believe there are wonderful faith stories of people in this congregation that are yet to unfold. I believe that some of the best days for this congregation still lie ahead of us. When we are part of this community, like Esther, we are able to make difficult and life altering decisions with the prayerful support of the whole community. Ultimately, our potential to make difficult decision is based upon our connectedness to the body. Are you connected spiritually to those around you? Make an effort to be part of the small groups like Sunday school and Bible study, the ladies Bible study. It’s where these relationships are formed and where you find your support. Amen.