

Title: "Living Faith For Such A Time As This"

Text: Esther 2:1-18

We are continuing to explore how wide and long and high and deep the love of God is,

-and we are currently exploring the "deep dimension" of God's love.

-That is, how do we experience the depth of God's love when we are in deep, dark places of our lives?

The period of Exile was a deep, dark valley for the people of God back around 600BC.

-And we have spent some time with Jeremiah, and Ezekiel and Daniel who lived during that period of Israel's history.

Today I would like to introduce you to Esther.

-She was a Jewish woman who lived during that period, too.

-But Esther was born in exile, and she then lived through the latter part of the period of exile.

-And after the Jews were permitted to return to Israel around 538BC, she remained in the City of Susa,

-a city about 250 miles east of Babylon.

Turn with me today to the Book of Esther in the Old Testament which is found on page _____ of your pew Bible.

-I am going to be reading chapter 2:1-18 today,

-but let me first give you a little run down on what happens in chapter 1 that sets the stage for this reading,

-and then during the sermon I will tell you the rest of the story.

First, the Persians have now conquered the Babylonian Kingdom, and the current King of this Persian Empire is Xerxes.

-And as every good ancient king did, Xerxes had many wives and concubines in his harem.

-But among his wives and concubines, there was only one who was officially his queen.

As the story of Esther begins, King Xerxes official wife and Queen is named Vashti.

-And Vashti was famously beautiful.

- Now in the 3rd year of King Xerxes reign, he decided to give a banquet for all his nobles and officials and military officers.
- And this banquet lasted a whole week: a full 7 days of feasting and drinking and showing off the wealth and splendor and power of the king.

Now the feast for these nobles was a male-only event.

- So Queen Vashti decided to also give a banquet for all of the wives of these nobles and officials and officers.
- It was a “woman only” event.

And that was all well and good until the 7th day of the feast, when everyone was a little “worse for wear.”

- King Xerxes commanded his 7 eunuchs to interrupt the women’s banquet and command his Queen, Vashti, to appear before the men wearing her royal crown.
- And there is a little hint in the Hebrew wording that implies he meant she was to be wearing “only” her royal crown, -if you know what I mean!

For the king wanted to show off her royal beauty to all of his nobles.

- Well, this idea did not sit well with Queen Vashti.
- And she refused to come.

This infuriated the King, and embarrassed him in front of his nobles,

- and King Xerxes decided to immediately depose Vashti as his queen.
- She was never to appear in his presence again.

This is where we enter the story in chapter 2.

So have any of you been watching the royal wedding this weekend?!

- Come on, be honest. How many of you were up at 5 or 6 in the morning on Saturday with tea and scones to watch Harry and Meghan tie the knot?

Well, if you missed it, we have our own little royal wedding to look at today: a royal Persian wedding, Xerxes and Esther.

- I am sorry I can’t tell you exactly what the royal bride was wearing, or show you pictures of the pageantry.

But what you did get to hear in the reading today, was all that the bride had to go through in order to be picked to be the Queen;
-and it was all about the physical beauty.
-She went through 12 months of beauty treatments at the King's spa,
-6 months with oil of myrrh, and 6 months with perfumes and cosmetics.
-I have no idea what that even means, but you can bet she came out looking and smelling pretty great.

But here's the thing about Esther as she's introduced to us here:
-there's something about her that wins the favor of Hegai, the king's chief Eunuch in charge of this vetting process.
-And something about her that later wins the favor of King Xerxes, too, and it's not just how she looks.

Esther was just one of a whole bunch of young women who had been selected as potential new queens for Xerxes.
-And they were all beautiful, and they all went through the 12 months of spa treatments.
-Just like Daniel had gone through the 3 year training program for King Nebuchadnezzar.
-And Esther, like Daniel, was found to be the best of the best.

God is not overtly mentioned in either case, but the way in which both Daniel and Esther find favor in each story,
-is an indication that God is with them.
-He is watching over them. He is guiding them.
-God is shepherding them for His good purposes.

It is that "3rd dimension" of their lives that is always running alongside the human dimensions of their lives.

Now, on the human side, we are told two other significant things about Esther's life, besides that she was beautiful.

1. First we are told that she was Jewish, but that she kept her nationality and family background a secret during this whole vetting process.

2. And secondly we are told that her parents had both died when she was young,
 - and she had been taken in and adopted by her uncle Mordecai, who raised her as his own.

Next Sunday we are going to spend some time with Mordecai, -and re-look at Esther's story in terms of Mordecai's living out a life of faith in exile.

But for today, I want you to know that Esther's young life had not been an easy one.

- She had lost both parents at a young age, and then been raised by a single parent, who was a guy.
- He was a good guy, and a godly guy, but she had no mom.

From a human perspective, it is quite possible that this early trauma in her life,

- and the difficulties of growing up as Jew in exile,
- and being raised by an uncle,
 - may well have been part of what made Esther stand out among all of the other beautiful young women chosen as candidates for the King's new queen.
- Throughout this story, we see that Esther is not just beautiful on the outside.
- She also has character, and an "inner" kind of beauty that is what we call "winsome."
- There is something about her that wins the favor of Hegai and King Xerxes.
 - She stands out among the beauties as a woman with character qualities that make her the King's choice.

My friends, it is often the "deep times" of our lives when we experience grief and loss and suffering of various kinds,

- that produce character qualities in us which can't be attained any other way.
- This is one of the ways God's love is experienced in deep times: He shows up to use those times in our lives to
 - mature us, and deepen us, and produce character in us.

We catch just a glimpse of this in how Esther is introduced to us here in chapter 2.

And so the King placed the royal crown on Esther's head and made her his queen, and the whole nation approved and applauded.

Now most fairy tales would end the story right there and say, "And they lived happily ever after."

But the Bible is not a fairy tale, and there would be no telling of Esther's story at all if she had not actually made an impact on the history of Israel because of this royal wedding.

-But she did!

Esther saved the Jewish people of the Persian Empire from annihilation.

-She saved the Jews of her day from a holocaust like the one Jews actually did suffer at the hands of the Nazis.

Here's how it happened.

-A few years after Esther became queen, the King elevated a man named Haman to be his right hand man and chief official in government: like a Prime Minister.

-And Haman, we are told, was not actually a Persian himself, -but was an Amalekite, and the descendant of an ancient Amalekite King named Agag.

Now the thing you need to know about this, is that the Amalekites and the Jews had been sworn enemies for hundreds of years.

-In fact, all the way back to the time of the Exodus from Egypt during the time of Moses, they had been enemies.

-And during the reign of Israel's first King Saul, King Agag had been Saul's enemy, and had sought to wipe out the Jews.

So it is no surprise to find that all these years later, this Haman has a deep prejudice against the Jews.

-And when he becomes the King's Prime Minister, there is no rejoicing in the Empire among the Jews.

-And one of the first things Haman does in his new position is to flaunt his new power in public.

-He persuades the King to issue a decree that whenever he appears in public, people everywhere are to bow down and pay him honor.

Well, guess who refuses to do this? Mordecai, Esther's uncle.
-And this drives Haman crazy.
-It infuriates him so much that Haman goes to the King and demands the annihilation of all the Jews in the Empire.
-He claims that they are all rebellious and disobedient to the laws of Persia and should be wiped out.
-And the King didn't care anything about the Jews, so he accedes to Haman's request and issues the decree.

Neither one of them are aware that Queen Esther is also a Jew.

-Now when Mordecai hears the news of this decree, he puts on sackcloth and ashes and goes to mourn at the palace gates.
-He somehow gets word to Esther that he needs to speak with her, and so she comes out to him.

He tells her of the King's decree, and pleads with her to go to the king and beg for mercy for her people.

-But she tells Mordecai she is not allowed to just go to the king without his summoning her.
-She could be killed for just appearing before his presence, unless he extends his golden scepter to her to spare her life for so appearing un-summoned.

Mordecai then speaks the words to Esther that are the most famous words of the whole book:

"Esther, 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 just such a time as this."

And there is it, the turning point of the whole story.

-It's a statement of faith that God is alive, and will bring deliverance to his people,
-but a challenge to Esther to take a risk and step out in faith because she may well have been put in the place she is for the very purpose of being the channel of that deliverance.

Mordecai does not force Esther to take this risk.

-She must decide for herself what God is calling her to do.

And you know what she does?

- She first tells Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Susa and ask them to fast and pray for her for three days.
- Then she entrusts her mission to God goes to the King un-summoned.

And the first answer to all their prayers is that the king extends to her the golden scepter and welcomes her into his presence.

And then through a whole series of events, God guides Esther to a creative way of presenting her plight to the king.

- And she presents the plight of the Jews in such a way that Mordecai and the Jews end up being honored,
- and Haman ends up being hung on the gallows that he had erected to exterminate the Jews.

It's a wonderful story I urge you to go home and read it.

- It's a page turner you won't want to put down until Haman finally gets his due.
- And we will unpack more of the story next week as we look at Mordecai, and his role in the story.

But for today, I'd like us to pay attention to the silent and subtle way in which God is present in Esther's life,

- even when she is unaware of it.
- Even when she is being silent and secretive about her faith in God.

This is quite often the way many of us live our lives as Christians in this world.

- We live pretty much unaware of God's presence in our lives, and we live pretty much quiet and even secretive about whatever faith in God we may have.
- We don't go making a big deal about our faith, and many people we work with, or go to school with have no idea what we think or believe about God.

That is how Esther was living.

- And one of the most unique things about this Book of Esther, is that there is no explicit reference to God in the whole story.

-And other than Esther asking Mordecai to gather the Jews for fasting, there is no other acknowledgment of faith in the story.

But this is part of what makes Esther's story so remarkable.

-As we read it, even all these years later, the silence about God only heightens our awareness that it is God who is controlling and directing all the seemingly mundane little events that make up the story.

-God's sovereign rule is assumed and even displayed at every point in the story, without ever being mentioned.

And isn't that the way our lives actually work quite often?

-Jerry Pothier often speaks of how he only sees God "in his rearview mirror."

-That's exactly right.

-We often don't think God is involved in our present moment and situation at all.

-We aren't aware of his presence, or of his sovereign purpose being worked out in our lives.

It's only later when we look in the rearview mirror, that we say, 'O my, He was with me the whole time.'

And it's in the rearview mirror that we discover that He was using the events of our lives to grow and mature us.

AND he was using us during the events of our lives to touch the lives of others in ways we had no idea of.

We might even discover in the rearview mirror, that he placed us in those situations "for just such a time as this."

-And we were enabled to participate with Him and some redemptive work that He was accomplishing with us, and for us, and somehow even through us.

That is Esther's story. It is the testimony of her life in exile.

-It is the story of how she discovered how wide and long and high and deep the love of God for her and for her people truly was,

-right in the deep dark valley of danger and despair.

What's your story?