

That Sounds Familiar: Esther

Esther 4

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This summer's sermon series title, "That sounds familiar" probably rings true for many of the stories you have heard this summer, but I imagine that for a decent number of folks today, the story of Esther does not, in fact, sound familiar.

Though it is a full book of the Old Testament, the story of Esther is not typically found on any top ten lists of well-known and oft-recited biblical stories.

Set in 5th century Persia, this book is centered around a young Jewish woman named Esther, an orphan being raised by her uncle. The Jews were one of several minority groups in the Persian empire under the rule of King Ahasuerus (or Xerxes). When the book opens, the king is throwing a huge party for the ministers and army. For 180 days, we read, he "displayed the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and pomp of his majesty." (1:4). Following that, he gave a week-long banquet for the people of the capital city. Well, he gave a banquet for the men, and had his wife, Queen Vashti, give a banquet for the women. The men's banquet was a debaucherous affair, full of revelry and wine. At the end of the banquet, the king summoned his wife to appear before the men- she was a beautiful woman, and he wanted to show her off.

But Queen Vashti refused to come. Whether it was because she was in a bad mood or upset with the king, or didn't want to be paraded in front of a huge group of overserved men, the book doesn't say. But her refusal was an affront and an embarrassment to the king, and made the officials fear that it would cause a backlash and wives throughout the land would start disobeying their husbands. So the king deposed Vashti and set out to find a new queen.

All of the young women in the land were called to the castle, primped and prepared for a year and then brought before the king for his review. When the king laid eyes on young Esther, he was smitten, and crowned her queen. Esther had not revealed to anyone, including the king, her Jewish identity.

Meanwhile, Esther's uncle Mordecai was spending most of his time sitting at the king's gate, waiting to hear news of his niece. One day, he overheard a plot on the king's life and quickly told Esther, who told the king, thus saving his life.

The king had an official named Haman, who was his closest advisor. Haman was a proud man, and he liked the perks of his office. One day, as he walked through the gates, reveling in the attention of all the people who bowed and did obeisance to him, he noticed that one person did not- Mordecai. He was enraged. When he found out that Mordecai was Jewish, he decided that it wasn't enough to punish the man who refused to bow down to him, he would see to it that all Jews were punished. So he convinced the king to put out an edict calling for the destruction of the people of Israel.

This brings us to the fourth chapter, probably the most well-known part of the book of Esther. (READ CHAPTER 4)

German educator Kurt Hahn once wrote, "there is more in us than we know. If we can be made to see it, perhaps for the rest of our lives we will be unwilling to settle for less."¹ In the story of Esther, it was Mordecai who helped Esther to see the "more" in herself. With his simple prompt, "perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this," Mordecai opened the young woman's eyes, and set her on a course that would see her taking a risk in order to save thousands.

Who is your Mordecai? Who is that person in your life who sees the "more" in you? Who is the one who looks out for you, protects you and challenges you? Who is the one who knows you well and sees opportunities for you before you see them yourself?

My maternal grandfather was one of the Mordecais of my life. Pappy was a man of deep and abiding faith, an elder and faithful member of the choir of the First Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in Greenwood, SC throughout his adult life. That church was a part of the family, and Pappy was there every time the door opened.

¹ Quoted in [Half The Church](#), Carolyn Custis James, p. 17.

Pappy's faith was a touchstone for my family. In fact, a lot of what I value in my own faith I learned by example from him. His nightly prayers were an understood part of any family gathering, and as we, his 9 grandchildren, stood holding hands in a circle after a long day at the beach, trying not to fidget and giggle, and Pappy prayed for us, for people back in Greenwood, and for people none of us knew, he quietly and absolutely conveyed to us the importance of faith in every aspect of life.

As I mentioned, Pappy was a lifelong member of the ARP church. The Associate Reformed branch of the Presbyterian denomination does not ordain women. When I began to sense a call to ministry, Pappy was one of the first people I wanted to talk to about it. But I was also scared to talk to him. I knew that his love and support for me were deep and real, but I wasn't sure how he felt about what his church said about women's roles in the church. While that wouldn't have kept me from following my call to ministry, if Pappy couldn't be supportive of it, I would have been devastated.

I needn't have worried. When in the late 1950's the session of his church called a special meeting to discuss what they would do if Black people came to the church on Sunday mornings to worship, Pappy was the one man to offer a dissenting view. While all of the other elders said they would turn people away, Pappy said, "no, we will welcome them in." For that, he was criticized by many of his friends and peers. But Pappy was never afraid to stand up for what he knew was right, and his faith told him that all people were God's children, deserving of kindness and respect.

When I went to Pappy and told him that I would be attending seminary with the hopes of seeking ordination, the look on his face said all I needed to know. His joy at having a grandchild in the ministry wasn't dependent upon the gender of that grandchild. Pappy became one of my biggest supporters, and even asked me to lead the family prayers from time to time at the beach.

I was ordained in the PC(USA) in June of 2005. Pappy was 94 years old, and he was there. My abiding memory of that worship service was turning around after taking my ordination vows, and kneeling on the steps for the prayer. The moderator called for all the Elders and Ministers in the congregation to come

forward for the laying on of hands. In the midst of the shuffling as people left their seats to come forward, I heard the high squeak of Pappy's walker as he made his way up the stone aisle to my side. I felt the movement of people as they cleared a path for him, and then I felt his hand on my right shoulder. I reached up and covered his hand with mine as the prayer was said.

Four months later, Pappy died. Out of respect for my grandfather, the pastor of his church included me in the service, and I was probably the first woman ever to robe and participate in worship in that sanctuary.

Who is your Mordecai? Who has taught you what it is to live in faith, to follow God's call, to be brave and to step out into the unknown with certainty that God is with you?

One of the reasons I think people don't know much about the Book of Esther, perhaps one of the reasons it is not preached or taught with the same frequency as other stories, is that God is not mentioned once in the book. Not once.

As the story continues from where we left off, Esther invites the king and Haman to a banquet, and the king tells Esther that he will do anything she asks. She tells him about the edict to destroy the Jews and that it is Haman who was behind it. The king is outraged (which is odd, considering that he was the one who made the decree) and calls for Haman to be put to death. A new decree goes out protecting the Jews. It gets a little violent, as the Jews turn with impunity against those who would have attacked them. The book ends with Mordecai being raised to a position of great power.

We are used to biblical stories containing some tribute to God for deliverance, but the writer of Esther does not praise God for bringing relief for the Jews; the honor goes to Esther, with thanks to Mordecai for his supporting role.

For many readers, this is troubling. The absence of any mention of God feels to them like a turning away from faith. But, as one commentator remarks, we ought to see this not as "a problem, but [as] a benefit, mirroring the ambiguity we often

feel in our spiritual lives,” as “it reflects the very human situation of looking back over a situation that has turned out well and asking, ‘Did God do that?’”²

The lack of direct mention of God in the book of Esther does not mean that God is not active in the story. Our human recognition- or lack thereof- of God does not control God. We don’t put God in situations, and we can’t keep God out of situations. God is there- God is here- always. Whether or not we recognize God’s presence is our issue.

The hard truth is that few, if any, of us will have an experience of God such as those that Moses, or Mary, or Paul had. We are not likely to get the burning bush or the visit from the Angel or the Damascus Road conversation. For reasons known only to God, God’s interactions with humankind tend to be subtle, and are usually mediated through other humans.

In the face of conflict, grief, disappointment and uncertainty, when we wonder what we should do, or how we will move forward, when we are lost and looking for God’s presence and power in our midst, we often need only to turn our heads and look at the people walking this journey alongside us to find ample evidence that God is, indeed, present.

One of the great gifts of my recent Sabbatical time was the opportunity to read more than I am normally able to do. I read some important books and some “fluffy” books- truthfully more of the latter, and enjoyed them all.

One of the books I enjoyed the most was written by a woman named Glennon Doyle Melton. Her Momastery blog is widely read because of her humorous and unflinchingly honest account of her life- her struggles with addiction and a desire for perfection, her challenges as a wife, mother and human being. She writes about life and faith in a way that is at once accessible and also challenging.

In her book, Carry On, Warrior, she tells of a time when she participated in a fundraising bike ride for AIDS awareness, joining thousands of other people in riding 280 miles from NC to Washington DC. Unlike most of the other participants, Melton did not train for the ride, and in her own words, she had never done anything for charity before, and hated “physically hard things.”

² Linda Day, *The Book of Esther*, The Discipleship Study Bible, p. 672.

And it was hard. As it would be, to ride a bicycle from NC to DC. She writes of sweat and blisters and sore muscles, of hours-long stretches of pavement, and of mountains. Lots of mountains.

And then she writes this:

The problem was that there was no quitting. Even quitters like me couldn't quit. Nobody said it; we all just knew. Even so, I'd also know that I just *couldn't* take this next mountain. I just *couldn't*. My soul was willing but my body was close to dead. So I approached one of the mountains, already defeated. And a thin, gray-skinned, baldish man on his own bike rode up beside me. The man had hollow cheeks and eyes that were set too far back, like caves. His leg muscles looked painted on. Just muscle and bone. So skinny and small, like a jockey with a vicious flu. I made confused eye contact with the grayish man and he put his hand on my back. He read my pain and said, "Just rest, I'll push you." And I cried and rested my legs and let myself be carried. I didn't understand how he was doing it, how he was pushing me up that hill, riding his bike and my bike, one hand on his handlebars and one hand on my back. But slowly, together, we made it to the top. And I squeaked out a thank –you, and he looked right at me with his cavey eyes and said: *thank YOU*. Then he turned away from me and rode back down the hill to carry another rider who couldn't carry himself. And I turned back to watch him go and saw that there were at least twenty of these angels – twenty men with hands on the backs of other women, other men twice their size, pushing them forward and upward. They stayed at the bottoms of the biggest mountains along the route, the mountains we knew we'd never climb on our own, and they carried us. One at a time. . . 'Til we were all on the other side of the mountain, together.³

God may not always show up like we imagine. But if there's one thing that the stories of scripture tell us, whether or not they mention God, it is that God shows up. In family and in friends, and sometimes in complete strangers.

³ Glennon Doyle Melton, *Carry On, Warrior: The Power of Embracing Your Messy, Beautiful Life*, (New York: Scribner, 2013), 186-187.

They are our Mordecais. They remind us that God is with us, that God has plans for us, and that God loves us.

Thanks be to God.