

## Uppity Women of the Bible, pt. 4 — Esther

This is the third of my sermons on “Uppity Women of the Bible;” the fourth, if you count my Pentecost sermon last year, which I titled “Red Hot Mamas” but which was really part of the “Uppity Women” series. For those of you who’ve not heard any of those other sermons, perhaps a little explanation is necessary – and for those of you who have heard one or more of them, I hope you’ll excuse a little repetition. You see, in the time and place where I grew up, the adjective “uppity” was a pejorative, referring to someone who didn’t know how to keep in their appropriate place as a “second-class” member of society. I usually heard it used to describe kids, women, or people of color. If you need a more precise definition of the term, on-line dictionaries provide this description: “Taking liberties or assuming airs beyond one’s station; presumptuous.” Personally, I prefer the definition given on the website of the now-defunct feminist journal, “Uppity Women Magazine.” It says, “This is a place for uppity women. You know who you are. You are a woman who refuses to keep your place, to limit yourself in any way, to live down to others’ expectations. You are a woman who gets up again and again, every time life knocks you down. You’ve learned how to survive.”

Frankly, rabble-rouser that I am, I generally find uppity people to be admirable. They bring a fearless honesty to their situation that can be instructive for anyone with ears to hear and eyes to see. In my past sermons, I’ve cited the influence of uppity people in general and uppity women in particular on my life – both my grandmothers, my mother, my wife and my daughter all come to mind, which shouldn’t come as a shock to any of you who know the latter two. In those sermons, I’ve mentioned such Biblical women as the matriarchs Sarah and Rebekah, Shiprah and Puah (the Hebrew midwives mentioned in Exodus), Jochebed and Miriam (Moses’ mother and sister, respectively), Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba (the scandalous ancestresses of Jesus), the ever-controversial Mary of Magdala, Martha and Mary of Bethany, the prophesying daughters of Philip the Evangelist, and Paul’s honored co-workers, Phoebe and Priscilla. It’s a substantial list and we’ve really just begun to explore their stories with many others left untouched.

Today, I want to focus on the story of one uppity woman in particular, Esther. From her humble beginnings as a Jewish orphan named Hadassah, she became the Queen of the Persian Empire, saved the Jews of Persia from death, established the holiday of Purim still celebrated by Jews around the world in the spring, and is remembered today in the Old Testament book that bears her name. It’s a book that has more than a bit of controversy attached to it. In some ways it seems strangely secular and troublingly violent, as I’ll explain later. But ultimately, it has been loved by Jews and Christians alike down through the centuries as a tale of great bravery in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds and it still has important lessons for us today about how to trace the saving actions of God in histories both national and personal, about how God acts through unlikely people and about how we are called to rise to whatever occasion we might find ourselves in, to show the world the greatness and the love of our God.

It had been quite a while since I’d read the short book of Esther before this week, so it would be unfair of me to assume that everyone here had all the details of the story readily in their memories. Let’s review. The story is set in the Persian Empire of the Fifth Century BCE, during the reign of Ahasuerus, as the Bible calls him, or Xerxes, as he is better known to history. Approximately one hundred years prior to this story, the Kingdom of Judah had been conquered by the Babylonians and their leading citizens taken in captivity to Babylon. The Babylonians, in turn, were conquered by the Persians, who allowed as many of the captives who wished to do so

## Uppity Women of the Bible, pt. 4 — Esther

to return to their homeland and to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. We know from history, however, that many of the exiles remained in their adopted home and that some then migrated deeper into the Persian Empire, creating at least a small Jewish community in the capital city of Susa. Among these would have been the family of Esther, including her cousin Mordecai.

Esther is not mentioned at all in the first chapter of the book that bears her name. Instead, we have the story of yet another uppity woman, Vashti, the Queen of Persia. It seems that King Ahasuerus had decided to throw a banquet for all his officials and ministers, which lasted 180 days, and when that was complete he threw another party for all the residents of Susa which lasted a week. While the King entertained all the men, Queen Vashti held a separate party for the women. But on the last day of the party, Ahasuerus decided that Vashti needed to come and make an appearance at his party so that he could show off her beauty to the men and he sent servants to fetch her. The queen, for reasons that are not enumerated, declined to come. Perhaps she was offended at being sent for. Perhaps she was concerned about being paraded around in front of a city's worth of drunken men. Perhaps she was simply having too good a time at her own party. But upon hearing of her rejection, Ahasuerus was enraged and asked the court lawyers about his options. They replied, "This deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath! If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she." And so it was done.

But when Ahasuerus sobered up and calmed down, he realized he had a problem. He had a harem but he had no queen, no one who was special to him, no one who could fulfill the ceremonial position of consort. So he sent representatives around the Empire, from India to Ethiopia, and they brought the most beautiful young women to Susa. There they were dressed up and dolled up and sent one by one for a night with the king. The one who pleased him most would become his queen. Among these young women, was Esther who, at her cousin's advice, had not revealed that she was a Jew.

Very often, this part of the story is romanticized or at least tamed into the story of an ancient beauty contest, not unlike the Miss America contest in its heyday. I've been guilty of this myself, I'm sorry to say. But let's be very clear about what this really was – abduction and rape. Shawna Renee Bound Atteberry is a writer, storyteller, speaker, and theologian whose blog, "Career Women of the Bible and Beyond," calls her mission, "empowering women who have been silenced and suppressed by a religious tradition." In her fine article entitled, "God Uses Harem Girls," she writes, "Esther was probably a teenager, no older than 16. She might have already been betrothed to a friend of the family. Ripped out of the only life she knew by the whim of an impulsive king, Esther began the one year of preparation for her one night with the king. She... was one of hundreds—one harem girl in the middle of a harem that likely numbered in the 1000s. She would probably spend one night with the king then be sent to the house of the concubines where she would live out the rest of her life alone and with no purpose, unless the king called her again."

## Uppity Women of the Bible, pt. 4 — Esther

As it happened, though, Ahasuerus chose Esther out of all those young women to become his queen. And after her coronation, she did something that endeared her to Ahasuerus even more. Her cousin, Mordecai, was an official in the king's justice system and he learned of a plot between two of the king's servants to assassinate Ahasuerus. Mordecai told Esther and Esther told her husband and the plot was foiled. Esther and Mordecai had saved the king's life and, despite his other shortcomings, he was not ungrateful.

But Mordecai had an enemy, Haman, who was promoted shortly after to be the king's prime minister. Haman hated Mordecai because he thought Mordecai did not show him enough deference and when he was advanced to the position of number two in the empire, he thought he had a way to eliminate his rival and to do it in a way that showed how powerful he, Haman, had become. Haman, knowing that Mordecai was a Jew, went to Ahasuerus and said, "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, so that they may put it into the king's treasuries." And, again, so it was done.

Once Mordecai learned of Haman's plot and the decree of Ahasuerus, which was not due to take effect for a few days, he dressed in sackcloth and ashes and sat in public mourning. Queen Esther heard of her cousin's behavior and sent servants to discover what was going on. When the servant returned with Mordecai's story and his appeal that the queen should attempt to help her people, it began the exchange of messages I read as our Scripture for this morning. Mordecai convinced Esther to help but it was not an easy decision for the queen. Shawna Atteberry, drawing on other historical sources and legends of Xerxes, writes, "This was the king who got rid of his first queen on a whim. This was the king who commanded the engineers of a bridge he was building be thrown off the end of the bridge when they fell behind due to a horrible storm. When a father requested this king not to send his last son off to war (he had lost his 3 other sons to this king's war), the king commanded the last son be killed in front of the father, then had the father blinded so that was the last thing he saw. This was the king to which Esther was going, without an invitation."

In the event, Esther was well-received and, after buttering up her husband with two banquets, to which she also invited Haman, she made her plea: " 'If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.' Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, 'Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?' Esther said, 'A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!' Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen." Ahasuerus had Haman hung on the gallows that Haman had prepared for Mordecai and Mordecai was elevated to Haman's place at the king's side but the old decree about the Jews could not be revoked. And so, on Mordecai's advice, a new decree was issued giving the Jews license to take up arms against anyone who came against them. On the day previously appointed for the death

## Uppity Women of the Bible, pt. 4 — Esther

of all Jews in the Persian Empire, the Children of Israel took up arms against their oppressors and, according to the Book of Esther, slew over seventy-five thousand. It is that day that is still celebrated as the Feast of Purim.

As I mentioned earlier, there are several troubling aspects to the inclusion of this story in the Scriptures. For one thing, there is absolutely no overt mention of God. This was so troubling to the ancient scholars who translated the Book of Esther from Hebrew into Greek for the Septuagint that they made several late additions to the book, probably during the Second Century before Christ, writing new passages detailing the prayers of Mordecai and Esther as they struggled with how to derail Haman's plot and adding a prophetic dream of Mordecai's which revealed the hand of God in the episode, as well as other details meant mostly to put God's name into the book. This updated version of the book is used by Roman Catholics and can be found in the Apocrypha section of our pew Bibles, if you're ever interested in reading it. But to many readers, this seems unnecessary. For one thing, there are far too many coincidences in the plot of the book for the faithful reader *not* to suspect the guiding hand of God. Mordecai's famous admonition to Esther that she had become Queen "for such a time as this," reveals a deep faith in God's control over the events of history. Likewise, Esther's call for fasting among the Jews while she prepares to go to the king only makes sense in the context of the Jewish custom of fasting and prayer to God in preparation for or response to major life events. There is evidence in the telling of the story of the Jews' fight against their enemies that the battle was conducted in accordance with the rules laid down in Torah for "Holy War." The Book of Esther may not mention the God of Israel by name but faith in God permeates the characters and their story.

For modern readers, there is also the discomfort of that aspect of Holy War. There has been too much talk of Jihad and Crusade in the past decade for us to skim lightly over such a concept in our study of the Scriptures. For me to read the passages concerning the Battle of Purim with any amount of equanimity requires that I remember two things. First, what had been planned by Haman for the Jews was by no means a fair fight and even with the blessing of Ahasuerus to take up arms against their enemies, the odds against them were still huge. In most of the provinces of the Empire, the Jews would have been a tiny minority who could have been easily overwhelmed by a native populace turned against them. It took the brave actions of Esther and Mordecai, courage on the part of the Jews, and an uncredited miracle of God to prevent a Persian Holocaust that would have rivaled that of the Nazis. This was not a case of a strong people with superior weapons claiming self-defense as they beat down a weaker enemy but a people fighting for their very existence. Second, the victorious and emboldened Jews did not take plunder from their defeated enemies nor did they mount a preemptive campaign against potential enemies. They abided by the Deuteronomic ideal that they were not to profit by war, only to secure their own safety. And in a world where blood feuds could spiral out of control, the ideal of Torah that justice consisted of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was both just and merciful. We may point to the teachings of Christ concerning loving the enemy and turning the other cheek but we must remember that those teachings had not yet been given to the world. And, I think, we should also remember the lesson of Christ about removing the plank from our own eyes before helping our neighbor with the mote in his. We may mourn the violence of ancient Israel but we must quell the violence, physical, spiritual or attitudinal, in our own lives.

## Uppity Women of the Bible, pt. 4 — Esther

These difficulties aside, as I read the Book of Esther, I come back to the deep bravery of the title character. Esther and her cousin Mordecai, after all, were what we might call “assimilated Jews.” They had adopted names that concealed their national identity – we don’t know about Mordecai but Esther had originally been Hadassah, and both Esther and Mordecai are names derived from those of Babylonian gods. Had Esther been around in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America, she might have been one of those Jewish Atlanta debutantes, portrayed so delightfully in Alfred Uhry’s play, “The Last Night of Ballyhoo,” whose families decorate indoor evergreen trees in December and call them “Hanukkah bushes.” To rise and claim one’s heritage in a time of such extreme crisis, to put oneself in harm’s way with such a changeable tyrant as Ahasuerus is bravery indeed. Esther is an admirably uppity woman in the very best sense of the word. Is it any wonder that the Jewish American women’s organization founded in 1912 as part of the quest for a Jewish homeland chose the name Hadassah?

But how should we, the Christian Americans of 2009 remember the lessons of Hadassah Esther? We might take from her story the idea that in order to get one’s spouse to do something, it’s a good idea to feed them a couple of nice meals first, but that’s not terribly profound. Instead, perhaps we are to remember Esther’s willingness to accept, as Mordecai suggested, that she had “come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Esther did not experience the word of God in a dream or receive a message from an angel. Her plan to save her people was not delivered to her on stone tablets. Instead, she listened carefully to a family member she trusted and then trusted her own instincts and the relationship she had forged with her husband to move ahead as she thought God would have her do. In her weekly lectionary blog for the United Church of Christ, Kate Huey writes, “Unlike several other books of the Bible, God’s deliverance of the people in this Book of Esther is not accomplished through amazing, miraculous events but through the actions of flawed but courageous human beings who were probably never sure they were doing the right thing.” Huey also cites the work of Dr. Sidnie White Crawford, professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Studies at the University of Nebraska. Dr. White Crawford writes, “It is possible, that Esther became queen just to fulfill God’s purpose, but humans cannot know that. They must act, with profound hope that they are thereby participating in the divine scheme....All they can do is act, in the hope that their action corresponds to the plan and purpose of God.”

And so, my uppity sisters and my brothers, let us take away with us this morning Esther’s willingness to be what God means us to be at such a time as this. Not great heroes, ready to save whole nations, but simply flawed but courageous human beings, never sure that we are doing the right thing but hoping with all our might that we are participating in the divine scheme for Good Shepherd Baptist Church, that our actions correspond to the plans and purposes of God for Greater Seattle in the latter years of the first decade of the Second Millennium of Christ. Let us remember what our God has done in ages past and rely on God to give us the strength, the hope, the love that we need to be God’s people in this place at such a time as this. Let us be ready, as the opportunity presents, to say, “Here I am, Lord! I will go, Lord.” After all, if, to borrow a phrase from Shawna Atteberry, God can use a harem girl, then surely he can use you and you and you and me. For the grace of God and the love of Christ Jesus and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit which empowers us to be exactly what our world needs us to be at such a time as this, thanks be to God!