

Such a Time as This
(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, September 27, 2009)

Mark 9:38-41 (TEV) ³⁸John said to him, “Teacher, we saw a man who was driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop, because he doesn’t belong to our group.”

³⁹“Do not try to stop him,” Jesus told them, “because no one who performs a miracle in my name will be able soon afterward to say evil things about me. ⁴⁰For whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹I assure you that anyone who gives you a drink of water because you belong to me will certainly receive a reward.

You have probably not heard many sermons, if any, from the book of Esther. As I said in the introduction, this is the only time a reading from Esther appears in our lectionary and you might not be quite sure of who Esther is, unless you have a good memory from your Sunday School Days. It seems to be an unusual story to include in the Bible because if you took the time to read it carefully, you would not even find one mention of God. There is an ancient Latin version of Esther that adds quite a few verses giving God the credit for guiding the events in this story, but the older, Hebrew version is like ours, has no mention of God. Of course, the faithful Jew would know that the many remarkable coincidences in the story are not that at all, but are clearly seen by the faithful as God’s hand actively involved in leading the events of the story. But in the original Hebrew, and in our version, God is not mentioned. And so many preachers simply ignore this book of the Bible. In fact, Martin Luther was reported to have said that he thought it should be taken out of the Bible! Nevertheless, it is in the Bible, it surely has a purpose for being there, and I feel it is fitting that at least once in three years it is worth looking at this story.

The purported purpose of the story is to provide the rationale for the Jewish feast called Purim. Purim is an interesting festival among all the Jewish feasts. It is a holiday where people share food with neighboring families and with the poor, and it is celebrated with singing and dancing. The story is told that a child once asked her father, what is Purim? The father answered, “it is like all the rest of the Jewish festivals: They tried to kill us, we survived, so let’s eat.” Well, actually, that is the story of Esther. So let’s look at it in some detail.

The king of Persia, sometimes called Xerxes, sometimes called Ahasuerus, when he had consolidated his power, made a grand display, maybe like a state fair, showing off his power, for six months. At the end of this period he gave a seven day feast for everyone who was in Susa, his capital. On the seventh day, when the king was happy with wine, he ordered his servants to bring in his wife, Vashti, so he could show the kingdom how beautiful she was. I guess Vashti wasn’t too keen to stand before a crowd of drunken men, so she refused to come. That not only made King Xerxes angry, but his advisors told him that she would become an example for all the women of Persia, and there would never be peace in the home for anyone because wives everywhere would refuse to obey their husbands. They felt the world wasn’t ready for that, so the king issued a decree saying that Vashti was no longer queen and she was never again allowed to come before the king.

That’s the first chapter of the story. The second chapter describes a year-long beauty pageant where the king selected the next queen. In the land of Persia there were many Jews, slaves and servants, as a result of the Persian conquest of Israel. Among the Jews was a man named Mordecai. He had a cousin named Hadassah, or Esther in Persian, whose parents had died, so Mordecai adopted his cousin, Esther, as his own daughter. When the servants of King Xerxes began gathering the beautiful young women of the land for his year-long contest to select a new queen, Esther was one of them. And of course, as in all Hollywood movies, Esther is selected and becomes the new queen, although nobody in the king’s household knew she was a Jew.

In time, a man by the name of Haman was promoted to be like the chief advisor to King Xerxes. This man loved his power and demanded everyone to bow down to him when he passed by. Of course, Jews would not bow down to any man – it would be a sign of worship, and they do not worship people, and Mordecai became the prime example of a Jew who would not bow down to Haman. This infuriated Haman, so he set out a plot to destroy the Jews, especially Mordecai. He bribed King Xerxes to issue a decree to exterminate all the Jews. He even built a gallows, a huge gallows, in his own back yard, with the intention of hanging Mordecai and every Jew in the land on those gallows.

As Mordecai learned of this plot he sent word to Esther to intervene with the king for her people. Unfortunately, the custom in the land was that nobody could go to the king unless they were summoned. To go to the king when he didn’t ask for you was punishable by death, unless the king granted special dispensation. Apparently this applied to the queen as well. So she told her uncle that the king had not called for her for the last 30 days, and she didn’t know when he might call for her again. Mordecai told her that just because she was queen she would not be safe if Haman began killing Jews, and she better find some way to get to the king.

Perhaps one of the most memorable verses of this story comes from Mordecai at this point: Esther 4:14: If you keep quiet at a time like this, help will come from heaven to the Jews, and they will be saved, but you will die and your father's family will come to an end. Yet who knows—maybe it was for such a time like this that you were made queen!"

Of course, there is not one of us who are a queen or a king, but each one of us has been blessed by God in some special way. And each one of us may find ourselves in a tough spot, where that special blessing from God may be just what is needed to save the day. We may not use a gift or talent for some time – after all, Esther did not tell the king she was Jewish, but we need to carefully discern when our gifts are needed, and then, we must be ready to offer them in God's service.

At any rate, Queen Esther asked Mordecai to have the Jewish people to pray for her, and she came up with the idea to throw a special dinner for the king, and his advisor, Haman. The king thoroughly enjoyed the dinner, so much so that Queen Esther decided to do it again the next night. She felt that she should not ask the king for help after the first dinner, but to do it a second time, so that the King would be even more disposed toward granting whatever she requested.

This is where our assigned lesson continues: **Esther 7:1-10** ¹And so the king and Haman went to eat with Esther ²for a second time. Over the wine the king asked her again, "Now, Queen Esther, what do you want? Tell me and you shall have it. I'll even give you half the empire."

³Queen Esther answered, "If it please Your Majesty to grant my humble request, my wish is that I may live and that my people may live. ⁴My people and I have been sold for slaughter. If it were nothing more serious than being sold into slavery, I would have kept quiet and not bothered you about it; but we are about to be destroyed—exterminated!"

⁵Then King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who dares to do such a thing? Where is this man?"

⁶Esther answered, "Our enemy, our persecutor, is this evil man Haman!"

Haman faced the king and queen with terror. ⁷The king got up in a fury, left the room, and went outside to the palace gardens. Haman could see that the king was determined to punish him for this, so he stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. ⁸He had just thrown himself down on Esther's couch to beg for mercy, when the king came back into the room from the gardens. Seeing this, the king cried out, "Is this man going to rape the queen right here in front of me, in my own palace?"

The king had no sooner said this than the eunuchs covered Haman's head. ⁹Then one of them, who was named Harbonah, said, "Haman even went so far as to build a gallows at his house so that he could hang Mordecai, who saved Your Majesty's life. And it's seventy-five feet tall!"

"Hang Haman on it!" the king commanded.

¹⁰So Haman was hanged on the gallows that he had built for Mordecai. Then the king's anger cooled down.

Well, that is the conclusion of the story of Esther. But then comes the celebration, which included giving gifts of food to one another, and of course the instruction to remember this day each year and celebrate by sharing food. A portion of this is recorded in the second part of our assigned lesson: **Esther 9:20-23** ²⁰Mordecai had these events written down and sent letters to all the Jews, near and far, throughout the Persian Empire, ²¹telling them to observe the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar as holidays every year. ²²These were the days on which the Jews had rid themselves of their enemies; this was a month that had been turned from a time of grief and despair into a time of joy and happiness. They were told to observe these days with feasts and parties, giving gifts of food to one another and to the poor. ²³So the Jews followed Mordecai's instructions, and the celebration became an annual custom.

So what can we learn from this story? We may never face the kind of persecution and suffering that was about to be unleashed on the Jews by Haman, but we may each face a crisis or a challenge in our lives. Maybe some of the blessings we have already received from God are the very things that we can use to face our challenges. Esther was beautiful, clever and in a position of influence. What are your special talents and blessings? We each have many – God has blessed each one of us. God had equipped us to face the worst that life has to offer, but we need to use our gifts and talents, not just for ourselves, but to help others. And I might also suggest that we must remember to celebrate our victories over adversity and to give thanks to God.

Maybe today you are burdened with some kind of problem, large or small. Take inventory of God's gifts to you, and see which ones you can use to overcome your problems. Because it may very well be that as you are in the midst of your burdens you too can find that it is just for such a time as that, that God has blessed you. May God guide you as you use your gifts and talents, to help one another, and to give the glory of God. Amen.