

*For Such a Time as This*

The lectionary has a way of keeping us honest about the texts that we encounter in worship. We can't gravitate only to the ones that are our favorites, or avoid the sticky ones. In case "lectionary" isn't a familiar term to you, it is the means by which the scripture lessons are selected for any given Sunday. Churches that use the lectionary are all reading the same stories each time we worship. There are four primary texts and two complimentary ones for each Sunday. Most of the liturgical traditions use the lectionary, so when we do so, we are in keeping with our Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran siblings-in-faith.

Every once in a while, though, the lectionary dishes up something that looks eerily coincidental. Frederick Buechner likes to say that coincidences are God's way of dropping handkerchiefs so that we will take notice. The lectionary for this week from Esther is one such handkerchief, in my estimation.

I have always liked the book of Esther; it's a heck of a story.

When I was a child, back in the era where children in church were expected to sit ramrod straight and pretend to be adults without so much as a crayon to color on the bulletin, I would pull the Bible from the rack on the pew in front of me and read.

Esther was short enough to be read during a single sermon when my mind would wander, and it had a story to tell: There are intrigue, high stakes, and a definite and, from a certain point of view, satisfying ending.

Let me recap the story that lead up to our lesson this morning:

The king, his name was Ahasuerus, decided to have a banquet to celebrate something or the other, it really doesn't matter what, because the real purpose was to show off wealth and power. "Celebration" is also a polite term for it; it is simply the pretext for 180 days of drunken debauchery.

So, the king had his party for the men, and the queen had hers for the women of the kingdom.

The text tells us that the "King was merry with wine."

That, too, is polite. The king is drunk. And in a testosterone and alcohol infused daze, he issues a command: the queen, her name is Vashti, is to appear before him and his guests in her royal crown.

And that, too, is a polite translation. "In her royal crown" meant "Only in her royal crown."

Again, the real purpose was for a man to show off his possessions and power over a woman for the benefit of other men.

We aren't really given any insight into Vashti – all the story tells us is that she said *no*.

Remember, she's at her own party. She and the women have also been around for the full 180 days of bacchanalia. The culture of the time was such that women and men were kept separate from each other except in their own households. In all likelihood, the other women with whom Vashti kept company were the king's other wives and the wives of the various generals and cabinet ministers of the realm. I don't know, the story doesn't tell us, but I have to imagine that after 179 days of hauling liquored up spouses back home only to have them crank up partying again the next night, perhaps the women were fed up.

"He wants you to do what?"

All the bible tells us for sure is that she sent word back through the channels of the palace to her husband, and said simply, *No*.

Well, if we're being honest, maybe it wasn't simply, "No." There might have been some modifying expletives attached to it.

And the king says, "Meh. Okay. I didn't want to see you anyway. I'll get a new queen."

Somehow, I don't think Vashti minded a bit.

There's a nationwide beauty pageant, call it what it was, and a power-hungry man enters his niece into the contest in hopes of gaining a foothold with the clear understanding that she has to hide her religious and ethnic identity. She wins, if you can call it that, and becomes the new queen.

After some time, the prime minister gets above himself and starts to fancy himself as being like a king and demands that people bow down and treat him worshipfully. The new queen's uncle refuses, and a feud is started.

The hateful prime minister is so incensed that he schemes to commit genocide against the Jewish people because of the one man, Mordecai in particular. When his intentions become clear, the resourceful Mordecai bullies his niece Esther, the queen who won the beauty pageant, saying to her, "Who is to say that God didn't put you in place for such a time as this," and dreams up a bold Hail Mary pass to save his people, yet again capitalizing on the beauty of his niece. It's a bold plan because it involves meeting the king on her own terms and telling him what is going wrong. And the stakes are sky-high. If the mercurial king is angered by her initiative, the penalty is death.

And, because of her surpassing beauty, the same king with a one-track mind acquiesces to her wishes and in the end, the bad guy gets what he has coming.

It's easy to tell the story of Esther such that it looks like it is a story about the men. To be perfectly frank, that is sort of how the Bible tells it.

But the thing about the Word of God is that it's living and breathing, just like God. And so, as the Spirit gives us insight into the texts, there is more to be seen.

Maybe the story of Esther isn't about the men at all. It's about two women, two strong women, who stand up and say, *no*.

It's a story of a queen who refuses to be treated like an object, who refuses knowing the consequences and bears them resolutely for sake of her own dignity and worth, giving up her royal crown for something so much more valuable.

And it's also the story of a queen who refused to allow men in power to engage in their destructive ways any longer and uses every bit of influence, every advantage she can muster, to turn the tide and write a new story.

So, friends, we have this story with its two strong women, its drunken king and hateful prime minister and his scheming nemesis, what do *you* think is its point?

It would be easy to leave this story thinking of the king as a boorish man with no scruples or morals whatsoever, and surely by the standards of today, his treatment of women was wretched.

And in a few thousand years from now, the stories we tell of women and men will in all likelihood appear as fraught as this one.

But when the king is shown the injustice that was about to be visited on the powerless, he acts.

Perhaps we are intended to reflect that all is not always as it seems. And that no one has to follow a path to destruction when there is a way to change it. And perhaps we are meant to take heart that when the chips are down God is always at work. And perhaps the way that God is at work runs right through you or me.

Or perhaps we are simply intended to be left with questions.

So, here's one final question: what did Esther believe about her god that gave her this kind of strength?

Perhaps we are only meant to overhear the gospel... but if we will hear it, it has word for such a time as this.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.