

And This Is Where You Fit In...  
Esther 4:4-17  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
October 14, 2007  
Pastor Dave Carver

As we continue to walk through the Word of the Lord in the book of Esther I'd invite you to take out your pew bibles and look at chapter 4. This morning I'd like to take a walk through that chapter and point out a few items of interest and ask you a few questions. Last week, we heard about Haman's plot to destroy the Jewish people – a group that was already being held hostage in a strange land, and who must have been wondering if God was ready to forget them altogether. The Jew who has gotten the most attention in the book so far is Mordecai, Esther's guardian – the one who had raised this orphan girl and now advised her from afar. When we last saw Mordecai, where was he? Outside the gates of the city. And what was he doing? Weeping and fasting and wailing at the news of the King's decree to destroy the Jews. Look with me at verse 4 to see what happens next:

*[4] When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mor'decai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. [5] Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mor'decai to learn what this was and why it was.*

Now this is interesting. The staff comes to Esther and says, "You know, your uncle is acting strange out there – wearing sackcloth, covered in ashes...he's not right." Now, I know why this is the case. And you know why this is the case. But does Esther know? No! She doesn't know why he's upset. She can't figure it out, and she's a little embarrassed by old Mordecai out there, dressed all raggedy and dirty, making a commotion.

This suggests to me that there's a gulf between the palace and the street. At the end of chapter 3, we heard that the entire city of Susa was "thrown into confusion..." In every province of the king, the Jews are in "great mourning". Yet Esther, in the palace, hasn't heard a word of this.

Isn't this one of the temptations of our lives? The world is so busy, so complex – sometimes it's just easier to check out and see what's on *TVLand* than it is to be aware of what's going on around us. I'm not suggesting that we play into our culture's fascination with disaster – you know, when the hurricane season starts and we all watch the weather channel to see what's happening a thousand miles away, or when a gunman goes crazy in another state and we can't take our eyes off CNN, when in reality there is nothing that we can do. But this may be a reminder to us to pay attention to our neighbors. To listen for "the word on the street". To remember that the call of God is to live in relationship, not isolation.

*[6] Hathach went out to Mor'decai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, [7] and Mor'decai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. [8] Mor'decai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.*

*[9] And Hathach went and told Esther what Mor'decai had said. [10] Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mor'decai, saying, [11] "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law; all alike are to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter that he may live. And I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days." [12] And they told Mor'decai what Esther had said.*

Well, the story unfolds a little bit here. Esther gets the news. How? From Hathach. Who's Hathach? One of the eunuchs who serves at the palace. Now I don't know about you, but when I think of this story, I hear it as a dialogue between Esther and Mordecai – she says, he says. But the reality is that they are not in the same building. The “conversation” that we overhear is really reminiscent of the Middle School lunch room – “Tell her that...” “Oh yeah? Well ask him if...”

Check this out – this is arguably the most important conversation in the entire book of Esther, and it is not a conversation at all – it is a string of communiqués relayed by third parties. And what is significant to me is that the third parties are the eunuchs, the maids, and the rest of the staff. Apart from Hathach, we don't even know their names. Why? Because they aren't “important” enough.

A few weeks ago when we first met the eunuchs, I suggested that we'd revisit their role in this story. At this point, I simply want to note the fact that this story doesn't get told if the poor and nameless and powerless are not being faithful.

You know, study after study has been done concerning generosity and giving. Time and time again, we learn that the poorest people give the most money when measured as a percentage of their income. People who are close to the edge know what it feels like, I think, and are more open-handed and open-hearted when their neighbors are at risk. In the book of Esther, the plan to save one group of marginalized people (the captive Jews) is put into motion because other, similar groups (eunuchs and slaves) are willing to help. This is not a huge focus in this chapter, but it's worth noting as we consider what it means for us to be a people who are attentive to the poor and those who are in some ways powerless.

Back to the story:

*[13] Then Mor'decai told them to return answer to Esther, "Think not that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. [14] For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"*

*[15] Then Esther told them to reply to Mor'decai, [16] "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." [17] Mor'decai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.*

If any of us knew anything about the story of Esther prior to the beginning of these sermons, this is the part of the story that sticks in our minds, isn't it? Here we see Mordecai, putting it on the line: "Look, Esther, you don't have any good choices here. You may die if you go unbidden to the king, but you're sure to die if you don't try. You have power, and with that power you have responsibility. It's up to you to use it."

This is a message we need to hear, I think. For many of us, at least compared with our neighbors around the world in Central America or Southeast Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa, our lives look more like the palace than the do like the street. We need to remember that we are connected to God's children in every place, and that we are to use our voices on their behalf.

And Esther is convinced. She says, "Fine – I'll risk it. But get people praying for me." In other words, she's putting the secret out there. She's letting the world know that she's identifying with the Jews. And in a remarkable display of solidarity, her non-Jewish maids are fasting with her. Again, the vulnerable looking out for the vulnerable.

This passage in Esther brings me to two questions with which I have wrestled for a number of years. Here, a young woman who has struggled and achieved a great deal in her short life experiences what we would clearly call "a defining moment". She's got a choice to make, and the decision she reaches will clearly impact her for the rest of her life.

You and I may never be in the same situation (in fact, I can just about guarantee that I'll never win a beauty contest and be the Queen of Persia), but we all have such defining moments in our lives. A Christian man I know was having difficulty in his marriage. He shared his relationship troubles with a woman from his church. One of the defining moments in a number of lives came on the evening when this other woman – another man's wife – walked up to the man and took his hand and said, "You know, I'll always be here for you if you

need anything.” Do you see? A defining moment!

About ten years ago I was on a retreat with a number of other pastors. An acquaintance of mine, Saleem, sat across the table from me and we started in with the typical small talk. He asked how things were going for me, and in a moment of clarity I realized that I could tell him what he wanted to hear (“aw, shucks, you know, things are just great...”), or I could tell him the truth (“you know, I’m having a tough time now...”). In a defining moment, I told him the truth. That conversation lasted for 2 hours and led to the formation of a small group within the Presbytery that is helping half a dozen pastors and their congregations. That’s a defining moment.

What are your defining moments? God puts you in places where you have options...God gives you chances to make decisions. Which are the significant decisions that you have made? What are your defining moments? How do you prepare for them?

“Now hold on, there Rev.,” you might say. “Sure, we all have decisions to make all the time, but often, we don’t know which ones are the most significant ones until we have the benefit of hindsight.”

That’s true, isn’t it? Do you think Esther woke up that day thinking, “Maybe crazy old Uncle Mordecai is going to present me with a life-or-death decision that will affect thousands of people right now and millions in the future. Maybe I’ll have the chance to make a decision that will change history”? Of course not – most of the time, we don’t. You make a split-second decision to call a friend, or not. To take a different way home from work or school. To accept a job offer. And sometimes, years later, you see how that decision was for you or for someone else, a “defining moment”. You wouldn’t have guessed it at the time, but it was. So how do you know you are making the right choice in those moments, when you’re not even sure when those moments are?

That leads to the second question that this passage from Esther brings to me. If the first question is, “What will I do in the defining moments of my life?”, the second question is, “How can I live so as to be ready for those moments whenever they arise?”

When we first met Esther, back in chapter two, we noted something unique about her. When we met her, the narrator did not call her “Esther”. She was introduced as “Hadassah” – her Hebrew name – before she was introduced with her Persian name. Esther is the only person in the story with two names. And now, getting the reports from the eunuchs and her uncle Mordecai, living in the palace, eating the King’s food and living the high life, but hearing about the problems that face her countrymen, Esther has to decide: who am I, really? Am I Hadassah, a name that comes from the Hebrew word for the myrtle tree? Or am I Esther, a name that comes from the Persian word for star? Am I someone who is out there shining my own life, burning my own energy? Or am I someone who has been planted in a particular place at a particular time for a particular

purpose? Am I floating in space, choosing my own destiny? Or am I rooted to an identity and a people?

Do you see? How does the Queen of Persia live? In our reading from today, she decides that even though the nameplate on the door is “Esther”, her core identity is “Hadassah”. And she has the grace to act wisely in what becomes the defining moment of her life.

How will you live so that you are ready when your defining moments come upon you? Already today, you’ve had to make a dozen choices about spending your time and your money. You’ve told some people the truth about yourself. You’ve lied to others.

Beloved, I’m begging you to root yourselves in the reality of God’s care for your life. To move ever more deeply into practices that will allow you to affirm His guidance and care: commit yourself to worship. Be a part of a group that is seriously studying the scripture. Pray. Fast. Decide right now that you are going to act like a child of God – and decide what actions you will take in the next three days to live more closely into that.

You are not yet the person you are going to be – you are the sum of all the defining moments you’ve had so far. I’m here to tell you that you are here, now, for such a time as this – you are here so that you can hear my invitation to align yourself ever more closely with God’s intentions for your life so that the next time you are faced with a potentially life-changing decision, you will behave as one who has roots and will bear fruit, not as one who is floating through space in isolation.

God is up to something huge. Right here. Right now. And I’m begging you to be in on it – for your sake. And for the sake of those who are not yet here. God has called you for such a time as this.

This is the word of the Lord – thanks be to God. Amen.