Esther

Moravian Women’s Sunday Sermon

(Please personalize with your salvation story

and anything creative you desire)

*Opening Prayer –Loving Savior, we thank you for the Bibles You have placed in our homes and in our hands. Take away our distractions so that we might study your Word and grow in our relationship with You and become the people You created us to be. Creator of life, we thank You for Your divine plan and we are so unworthy of being your children. Forgive us when we neglect, ignore, or doubt You. Teach us how to treat each other with love in Your world. By your grace and the empowerment of Your Holy Spirit, help each of us to read our Bibles and be challenged by the message within, be comforted by it and ultimately be blessed by it. Amen.*

Esther is the only book in the Bible that does not mention God’s name nor is any verse in Esther quoted or referenced in any New Testament book. But Esther is a tribute to God, and He is at work behind the scenes, directing all of the seemingly insignificant coincidences that ultimately save the Jews from destruction. The word *Jews* is mentioned over fifty times in Esther.

It is easy to see God in the miraculous. It is not easy to see Him in the mundane and most of us live in the ordinary. We live without seeing handwriting on the wall nor hearing thunder from Sinai, or even the still small voice.

As we look at the story of Esther there are six main characters at play: Xerxes, Vashti, Haman, Mordecai, Esther and God (though not seen nor mentioned).

The Persian King Ahasuerus also known in the text as Xerxes, reigned over 127 provinces which extended from India to Ethiopia. During the time of Esther, King Xerxes ruled from his royal throne at the fortress of Susa. During his reign, thousands of Jews chose not to return to Palestine under the direction of Zerubbabel, Ezra or Nehemiah.

The book of Esther opens with King Xerxes hosting a six-month drunken brawl to celebrate himself. His first wife, Queen Vashti was a strong-willed, independent-minded woman who refused to cooperate with her husband’s drunken demands. This disobedience angered King Xerxes and he had Vashti removed as queen. “After these things” (Esther 3:1-2) is vague and does not identify the date, but it was probably shortly after Ahasuerus was defeated in the wars he waged on Greece in 480-479 B.C. This lapse of time gave the king’s anger toward Vashti a chance to subside, leaving him despondent without the companionship of a queen. His attendants noticed the lingering loneliness and prescribed a beauty pageant as a remedy.

But first, King Xerxes promoted Haman, son of Hammedatha, over all the other nobles, making him the most powerful official in the empire. Because the king commanded it, the king’s officials bowed before Haman to show respect whenever he passed. Haman’s bitterness toward the Jews can be traced to his family tree. He was a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king whom Samuel finally killed. The Amalekites were bitter enemies of the Jews.

*Esther 2:5-7 states, “At that time there was a Jewish man in the fortress of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair. He was from the tribe of Benjamin and was a descendant of Kish and Shimei. His family had been among those who, with King Jehoiachin of Judah, had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. This man had a very beautiful and lovely young cousin, Hadassah, who was also called Esther. When her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her into his family and raised her as his own daughter.”* Esther was the orphan daughter of Mordecai’s brother.

Esther 2:8 says that Esther *“was taken*” denoting that it was not volunteerism, rather she was a foreigner taken by force. It was against the code of conduct for a Jew to marry a Gentile. Esther was a shapely and stunning Jew of conviction. Esther’s reluctance and inner beauty eclipsed the jealous, greedy, self-absorbed women of the harem and Esther was noticed by the eunuch Hegai. In Hebrew, the first sentence in Esther 2:9 states, *“She lifted up grace before his face.”* This quality exudes a pleasantness, charm, and elegance. She also displayed unusual restraint and control. Esther knew the value of verbal restraint. Even when she became queen, she kept her Jewish heritage a secret as Mordecai requested.

Esther did not let becoming a finalist in the beauty pageant go to her head. The process of preparing for the pageant was lengthy and expensive. No doubt most of the other women went on an extravagant and unrestrained shopping spree. Esther made no demands but instead listened attentively to Hegai and complied with his advice. After winning the beauty pageant, Esther went from the humdrum life of an orphan to the palatial life as queen to one of the most powerful men in the world.

Esther had a humble respect for authority. She was modest and authentic. She still submitted to Mordecai’s advice, even though she was queen. And it is that respect for Mordecai’s counsel that later catapulted her to heroism and secured her a place of honor in Israel’s history.

Mordecai’s loyalty to God prevented him from kneeling to Haman, the prime minister. This enraged the petty, arrogant, self-centered Haman so much that he determined to make the whole Jewish population pay with their lives. Word of their impending doom spread throughout the Jewish community. Haman foresaw great wealth in his future. Ten thousand talents of silver equaled 375 tons, estimated to represent two-thirds of the annual income of the entire Persian Empire. No doubt Haman planned to make good on his pledge by confiscating the assets of those he annihilated.

Esther 4:1-13 states, “*When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. But he went only as far as the king’s gate because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.”*

It was common in those days to wear loose-fitting, dark-colored, coarsely woven garments made of goat’s hair to signify repentance; sitting in a pile of ashes was a way of showing bitter remorse. So, for Mordecai and the other Jews, doing these things was an acknowledgement that they were in utter ruin and that only God could restore them.

Mordecai appealed to Queen Esther and asked her to stand alone before the king. Esther 4:7-8 tells us that Mordecai did not hide the truth from Esther, but neither did he exaggerate. He did not estimate numbers; he was exact. He did not pass on rumors, he provided Esther with documented information. Mordecai was careful to pass on accurate facts because he wanted the queen to be well informed and to get involved.

One person can make a difference. Usually, the people God selects to perform His work are unexpected and seem unqualified. In using the most unlikely of people to bring about His victory, God brings into sharp contrast the greatness of His sovereign power. Although no one can solve all problems, everyone can be part of the solution to a few problems. Whatever a person has in terms of power, position, prosperity, or prestige, it is at their disposal for good or for evil. Each of us should decide to do good and display God’s love.

**Esther was elevated to such a high position “for such a time as this…” (Esther 4:12)**

God is always at work in, around and through us. He is going about the work of saving and redeeming people from their unbelief and its consequences. God is still doing this today and He wants to use you like he used Esther and Mordecai. God puts His hand upon available individuals, inviting and empowering them to be a significant part of His redemptive work in the world.

If Esther did nothing, sooner or later the fact that she was a Jew would have been learned and she, together with the entire Jewish race, would be destroyed. However, God’s promise to His people is greater than Esther’s willingness to be involved. Genesis 12:1-3 tells us that God would make a great nation of Abraham. God’s plan will remain. The adage attributed to Saint Augustine states: *“Work as if it all depends on you, pray as if it all depends on God.”*  Esther believed in the power of prayer which led her to act bravely on her convictions.

King Xerxes had chosen Esther to be queen based on her beauty; God chose her on the basis of her character. And her character rose to the occasion with heroic resolve: “If I perish, I perish.” (Esther 4:16) Esther went from fear to faith.

During times of prayer, fasting and waiting, God prepares not only our hearts but the hearts of those who oppose us—even those who are unpredictable and hostile. In Esther 5:2 “she obtained favor in his (Xerxes) sight.” Calmly, Esther unfolds the first step of her clever plan. Esther’s self-control allows her to sidestep the king’s question and instead issue an invitation to a banquet where the king vowed to grant the wish of his troubled queen. Haman was elated at the invitation.

Esther is a perfect example of peace and patience. She does not panic because her confidence is not her own. Her waiting has produced in her an inner strength. Esther embodied Romans 5:3-4 which states: “we can rejoice when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation.”

God watches over His beloved even while they sleep. Psalm 127:2 states*, In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat – for he grants sleep to those he loves.* King Xerxes had insomnia on a fateful night and had his legal journal read to him. Again, God working one of His many sovereign acts behind the scenes. (Esther 6:1-2)Although the edict of Haman could not be revoked, the king allowed Esther and Mordecai to draft a separate edict after the death of Haman. Their edict did not annul the first one, but it effectively gave the Jews the right not only to defend themselves but to take severe retaliatory action and this averted genocide of the Jewish population. (Esther 8:11-13)

The book of Esther records the institution of the annual festival of Purim to keep alive for later generations the memory of the great deliverance of the Jewish people during the reign of King Xerxes. The word *Pur* is an ancient word for “lot”. Haman cast these lots to determine what day would be most auspicious for the Jews’ destruction. (Esther 9:16-32)

The book of Esther ends with a time of extermination being turned into a time of celebration. One of the reasons it is possible to go on despite struggles, disappointments and heartaches is because we know that in the end, God wins. Before we get to that triumphant ending, however, we may have some difficult chapters in our own lives. Chapters where the plot is convoluted, however, we can be assured that no matter what tragedies we have to endure, God will triumph for He has declared in John 16:33 “take heart I have already overcome the world”.

The book of Esther ends with God’s people emerging triumphant over the forces that sought to exterminate them. It is a story of God’s providential care and of a woman who was willing to take a chance and put her life on the line for her people.

So the question to ponder on this week my sisters and brothers is, “what are we willing to do for the sake of God through Christ unto each other?”

**Closing Prayer:**

Dear Heavenly Father, show us how You want us to change. We want to be Your faithful children. Teach us how to be flexible, to listen to You and be obedient. We want to please You and be the children You desire us to be. Help us to apply scripture lessons to our daily lives. Forgive us when we fail and lead us in Your path of righteousness. Lord, forgive us our bad decisions when we fail You. Help us be the witnesses you would have us be. Lord, so often we listen to the world rather than listen and obey Your quiet leading. Help us to reach out to our neighbors and tell them about Your plan of salvation and Your love for them. In Jesus’ name, Amen.