

ADVENT 2 DECEMBER 4  
Esther 4:1-17 - For a Time Such as This

Mourning into dancing, fear into joy, death into life – express the themes of Advent - themes that we find in the story of Esther. As the book begins, we have moved from the time just before the exile to the middle of the exile, or just after the exile. Habakkuk came just before the 587 BCE destruction of Jerusalem, its walls and temple. This brought an end to the Jewish monarchy. Annihilation!

The Jews, God's chosen people, are in exile. Jerusalem has been conquered. The leaders of Judah; the intelligentsia, the wealthy, the community leaders, were taken to Babylon in chains during one of the two deportations between 597 and 587. There they were allowed, even encouraged, to assimilate, to blend in and become good Chaldeans (Persians). They were allowed to live as they chose and to do pretty much anything they wanted to do, except go home.

They had been a nation with a king, a holy people in a holy land. The Persians now ruled and the diaspora Jews who made their homes in Susa, were a recognized religious minority in the heart of the powerful Persian Empire. From here on, the holy people were centred around the holy book rather than the holy city or the temple. They were part of the Persian Empire, which replaced the Babylonian Empire. The Book of Esther is dated around 490 BCE and takes place not with the Persian king, Sirus, the conqueror, but a descendant. The scattered Jews are away from their ancestral home, and looking for something that will give them hope. Tales of exile and diaspora,

the longing for hope, fit the liturgical pattern well for the time of Advent, the time of waiting.

Yet, Esther is a strange and difficult book for several reasons, first and foremost because it is apparently *non-theological*. God never appears in the Hebrew version of the book, which is the translated form in most modern Protestant versions. The story of Esther generated its share of controversy. The Jewish rabbis determined that it was sacred scripture, but other early readers were troubled by the absence of God's name. So, as the book evolved in its Greek version, it got a pious makeover. Prayers were added; Esther was made to look less ambitious, less sexy, and less compromising; God got top billing throughout the book.

In the Greek version of Esther, found in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles as well as in ecumenical versions with the Apocryphal additions to Esther, God is frequently mentioned, and the main characters, especially Esther, are shown to be pious Jews who are never far from prayer. But all that "Greek goodness" is absent from the austere Hebrew version, which never once mentions God or prayer, Jewish religion or piety, Jerusalem, Jewish history, or the Exodus.

But did these revisions really make it a more holy book? Probably not. The revisions made what was already there more palatable to the squeamish and more explicit for its readers. It also undermined the narrative power of the Hebrew version by reducing or eliminating the moral complexities faced by the characters.

Scholars believe that the book of Esther was influenced by Wisdom literature as it does not rely on salvation history. It can be compared to Joseph, where God works behind the scenes. Wisdom literature deals with everyday life where God is incognito. To sum up: co-incidences are miracles where God remains anonymous.

Esther's story takes place during the reign of the Persian king Xerxes I, called Ahasuerus. It takes place at his palace in Susa. Ahasuerus holds a six-month drunken feast at the end of which he demands that his wife, Vashti, be brought before the inebriated mob to display her beauty to them. The king tells her to be certain to wear her royal crown, with perhaps the implication that it is *all* she is to wear. Vashti flatly refuses to be shown off in this repulsive fashion, and the enraged king, humiliated in front of his guests, tosses her aside. So, Vashti is deposed as queen.

After some time the king grows lonely and misses his Vashti, or just the idea of having a wife or queen. The courtiers suggest a plan. Why not have a "Miss Persia" contest and invite the most beautiful girls to the capital to compete for the king's affections? Ahasuerus likes this plan and so women are collected from all 127 provinces of the vast empire. Following this beauty contest, he settles on the gorgeous Esther, who has been raised by her older cousin Mordecai. Esther quickly gains the king's favour and it doesn't take very long before she becomes queen of Persia.

What Ahasuerus does not know is that Esther is a Jew. Her Jewish name is Hadassah. She was an orphan raised by her older cousin, Mordecai who was

a descendant of those captured when Jerusalem fell to Nebuchanezzar about a century earlier.

Meanwhile, Ahasuerus has promoted Haman to be chief among all of his officials, that is the Grand Vizier. It's just like the foolish king to choose a most unpleasant fellow for a position of great power. Haman immediately demands that all persons who encounter him bow to his greatness. Mordecai refuses to do so, and Haman is so enraged that he decides then and there to murder not just the Jewish Mordecai, but *all* the Jews to appease him for the slight he had received.

So, Haman becomes the Persian representative of all those throughout Jewish history who have hated Jews for no reason other than the fact that they are Jews. The history of Hitler's Germany and the Russian pogroms, sound very much like the history of the Jews in Persia. The maniacal hatred of Jews, then, and in the 20th century, had no basis in fact, yet the result was the murder of at least six million. And in ancient Persia, without Esther and Mordecai and ironically the Persian king himself, thousands of Persian Jews' lives could have been forfeited.

The Grand Vizier Haman's rage causes him to convince the unobservant king to sign an edict allowing Haman to destroy the Jews. But while Haman's terrible plan moves forward, Esther becomes the queen. The writers of Esther's story along with its earliest readers, understood God to be at work.

In the events the chosen people faced in exile, even when the characters

deliberately obscured their connections to the God of Israel, the notion of hidden identities and connections is central to the plot of this biblical story, as revealed in Esther's name.

Both names of this main character, her royal name, Esther, and her Hebrew name, Hadassah, have linguistic connections to the language of hiddenness. (The name Esther may be related to the Hebrew verb "to hide," while Hadassah may be connected to the word for "darkness.") Mordecai had urged Esther to keep her identity a secret as she entered the beauty contest. Since the Jews were a minority population, and subject to suspicion because of their distinctive beliefs and laws, keeping her identity secret was a strategy of discretion and caution that allowed Esther to gain power and status in the dominant culture. But keeping her identity hidden also meant obscuring the God whose name and reputation was inevitably intertwined with that of the Jewish people.

Esther does finally reveal her identity, at great risk to herself, when the political situation becomes dire and her people are threatened with genocide. Mordecai urges her to do so, saying: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." The implication is that divine providence has been at work, moving this Jewish orphan into a place of prestige at just the right time so that she might protect her people. But even as Esther reveals herself and her affiliation to the king, she does so carefully and strategically. And while Esther works to preserve her people from an evil plan, Mordecai saves the life of the silly, rash, pagan, Persian king.

Mordecai convinces Esther to appear before the king and change his mind. She could only do that at considerable risk to herself. She devises an elaborate plan which sees the besotted Ahasuerus slowly but surely accede to her scheme. Her people are saved by the king who had promised Esther anything she would ask. Before these events, and unknown to Esther, Ahasuerus had been reminded how Mordecai had earlier saved the king from a palace coup. Ahasuerus had taken a fresh interest in rewarding Mordecai, as he discovered that his own Vizier was planning to dispose of him.

But the Jewish problems are not yet over, because when the Persian king issues a decree, it must be obeyed. The destruction of the Jews has been decreed. So Esther begs the king to decree again, this time allowing the Jews their day of revengeful destruction. And here is the great problem of the book. Does this new decree allow the Jews the right of self-defence against their enemies, or are they given the right to slaughter their enemies willy-nilly? The answer appears to be "yes" on both counts. Self-defence or freedom to kill? It does make a huge difference. It does make the book not the simple Good and Evil story it has been made out to be.

In Judaism, Esther is the presenting story for the festival of Purim, a festival characterized by joy, feasting, the giving of gifts, and the presentation of a play based on the tale, often by children, dramatizing the simple division of the world into evil and good. Evil is the character Haman, a Persian official who detests the Jews of his country, and who is hanged on the very gallows he had built for his archenemy, Mordecai. Esther and Mordecai are the Good Jews who, through risk and pluck and with the help of the wine-soaked,

slightly stupid king, Ahasuerus, are able to save the Jews from destruction.

With all its sex and violence, it is the most Jewish tale for Christians. It is the story of Purim, the deliverance of God's people. A Jewish scholar once said that all Jewish holidays can be summed up in this way: "*They tried to kill us - they failed - let's eat.*" Esther is a story of the truth of real life. It is a satirical, comical, fun story.

There is little need to speculate concerning the 'historicity' of this story; the writer is not writing history. This is a story designed to give to all those Jews living in whatever sort of exile, support and courage for their survival.

During the fifth or fourth centuries BCE, there were countless Jews living throughout the Greek empire, an empire soon to become Roman. There was no real Jewish homeland, so living among foreigners was their common lot. Stories like this one were needed to buoy up flagging spirits, and to offer heroes and heroines who arise from time to time in order to save the scattered people. Exiles need hope, and Esther offers hope.

And it has served Judaism for centuries with a tale to provide hope in the midst of despair, and perhaps that is a far more important reason to reflect on it. All of us, whatever exiles we are in, are in need of such stories when the flame of freedom is dying and the spark of hope is dim.

In Esther's story, there is no explicit religious motivation for anything the characters do. If we do see an echo of faith in this book, then Esther and

Mordecai are seen as two people who maintain their commitment to their people and their God while working within the confines of a powerful and sometimes hostile regime. Through their shrewd action and their courage they help their community survive.

While the religious nature of the book may be questioned, the story certainly deals with the effects of power within a society and government on those from minority groups. How do they maintain their identity and survive in the face of both hostile individuals and systems that do not always discriminate or express compassion? Courage and shrewd action are the keys. These qualities do not necessarily negate faith and its commitments.

Esther is not necessarily an account of actual happenings. Some of the happenings in it, especially the later revenge by the Jews on their enemies, are not things we should emulate. We are to read it as a story and see what we can learn from it. As such we could reflect on the difficulties and courage of those who belong to minority groups in our community. Those of us who belong to the 'majority' could ask ourselves whether we oppress or threaten new comers, especially in recent times, in ways similar to those experienced by Esther and Mordecai. Have past actions and attitudes, even of government, toward asylum seekers and refugees forced those same people into situations where they feel threatened or have to resort to deceit? It can be most difficult to live within a dominant, strange culture and try to maintain one's own identity, culture and heritage.

In the story of Esther, God is behind the scenes. So often in life, God's



activity is hidden - no burning bush, no bolts of lightning - no angels singing "Glory to God in the highest." God's activity in life is hidden. God's presence can be discerned only indirectly. This is characteristic especially during advent as the redemptive action moves from sorrow into joy, yet the activity is hidden. God is hidden yet active, never named, in the background.

The heart of the story lies in these echoing words, "Perhaps you have come to this place, to this moment, to these people, to this challenge, for just such a time as this." And it was for "such a time as this" that God sent God's Son to save the world from itself. Throughout history God has sent people for "such a time as this": Schindler saved thousands of Jews from the gas chambers. Martin Luther was there for "such a time as this" to reform or change people's relationship with God; Nelson Mandela was there for "such a time as this" to fight the chains of apartheid; Martin Luther King Jr. was sent for "such as time as this" to challenge racism.

Perhaps God has put us right here, right now, for just "such a time as this"; for climate justice; for Truth and Reconciliation; for helping God's children dealing with addiction; for our homeless neighbours; for refugees from all corners of the world, fighting political unrest, gang conflict and wars.

Esther listened. Without Esther there would have been no Jesus, because there would have been no Jews. Will we listen? Will we do what Esther did, realize the reality of our situation, seek all the help we need, plan carefully, fast, and put ourselves in the hands of God? Has God put us right here, right now, for just such a time as this? As we wait with great anticipation for our

God, Immanuel, perhaps God is waiting for us - to bring justice and peace -  
to bring God's kingdom here on earth!

Amen.

## ADVENT 2 PRAYERS - DECEMBER 4, 2022

Loving God, as once again we prepare for Christmas, help us to set regular time aside in our busy lives, to quiet our racing minds, to spend time with you in our thoughts and in prayer. Help us settle into stillness that we may reflect upon the wonder of your love and allow the story of the Saviour's birth to penetrate our hearts and minds. So may our joy be deeper, our worship more real, and our lives reflective of all that you have done for us through the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

God of peace ... **Remember your people.**

We pray for the church: For the wider Christian family who will be celebrating this festival in so many different ways, and for those who dare not celebrate openly, fearing for their personal safety; For Christians in countries where there is persecution; For Christians in our own country, with whom we will share our celebrations; For our Church family and friends of Grace Lutheran. Grant that all who come into our church this Christmas time be encouraged and enabled to renew their relationship with you. Help us all to be glad of your presence, and to rejoice at the coming of Jesus. May your blessing be upon all who worship with us. Give us grace to live as faithful members of your family, that we may learn each day afresh to love and to serve you.

God of peace ... **Remember your people.**

We pray for peace: Give lasting peace to the world; Give peace to the victims of war, the refugees, the widowed and the orphans; Give peace to family and friends; to those who have quarrelled and need to be reconciled; Give peace in our own divided hearts. We know that without justice there can be no peace. Let peace come so that all people are respected, regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity. Let peace come when trading weapons of mass destruction is a crime. Let peace come when the earth's resources are used wisely for the common good. Let peace come when money is used to serve and not enslave the world. Let peace come through the transformation of our lives that we may do justice, love and kindness and walk humbly with our God.

God of peace ... **Remember your people.**

Your Son came as the Prince of Peace and brought a message of Peace for all people. Help us to be peacemakers in our own homes, in our workplaces and wherever we meet others, so that the peace and goodwill of Christmas can find a place in the hearts of all people.

God of peace ... **Remember your people.**

We pray for all unhoused people especially now as we enter the cold winter months, for those living in precarious and transient situations, and for refugees who have no country to call their own. May your peace come to be present and felt in their lives. Let your blessing and provisions be with those who work to help the homeless, the poor, and the forgotten this Christmas. Give to all of us the desire and determination to reach out with generous hearts to help however and wherever we can.

God of peace ... **Remember your people.**

We pray for people who are lonely, those who are lonely because they have lost a partner; those who are lonely because they are separated from the ones they love; those who are lonely because no one seems to care; those who are lonely because of physical or emotional disabilities, substance abuse, or illness. Let your presence be with those who are alone during this season of friendship and may we bring your lovingkindness and friendship to those whom we know will be alone this Christmas.

God of peace ... **Remember your people.**

We pray for friends and family who are ill at this time, and remember them in the quietness of our hearts. We bring them to you in the confidence that you love them and know their every need and that your healing power remains available to them each new day. Bless all that is being done for their healing, recovery, and rehabilitation and answer our prayers as you see best.

God of peace ... **Remember your people.**

O God, our guide and help in alien and contentious places: as Esther prayed faithfully and worked courageously for the deliverance of your people, so strengthen us to speak truth to power, to confront the oppressor and free the oppressed, so that all people may know the peace, justice and unity of your kin-dom come near through the coming of your Son, Jesus the Christ.

**Amen.**