

What is going on here? And who are all these people? We seem to have been dropped right into the middle of the story.

Have any of you read the book of Esther and remember what it is about?

It is a fairly obscure story and not one that we often read in church.

The events in Esther take place after the Jews were conquered and taken captive by Babylon. At this time, Persians now rule, having themselves conquered Babylon. While most Jews had returned to Jerusalem, there were still many living in Susa, a capital city in the heart of the Persian empire, in what is southwestern Iran today.

King Ahasuerus is the ruler of the Persian empire, though his name is not mentioned in the part we read. He is also foolish and impulsive, as it seems people with power often are, even today. At the beginning of the book, he throws a huge party, essentially celebrating himself and his rule, that lasts for six months. At the end of the party he commands his queen Vashti to parade herself in front of all the drunken guests. When she refuses, the king banishes her and commands an empire-wide search for a new queen.

Esther is a beautiful orphan girl who had been raised by her cousin Mordecai. Mordecai was apparently a person of some influence in the Jewish community. When Esther is caught up in the search for a new queen along with innumerable other young girls, and sent to the King's harem, Mordecai advises her not to reveal her Jewish identity. When Esther's turn to be with the King came he was then so pleased with her that he made Esther his new queen.

Haman is the villain in this story. He is the newly promoted king's right-hand man. Haman made all of the other servants bow to him, but Mordecai refused. Haman became angry that Mordecai would not

bow down to him. It was not enough though to simply kill Mordecai. Instead, Haman planned to kill all of the Jews and take their belongings. He persuades the king to sign the decree for their destruction, and also promised to pay ten thousand talents of silver to the king's treasury, which probably helped too. When the decree was issued, the Jewish people were thrown into a panic. This is where we pick up the story today.

Mordecai had refused to bow to Haman, because he was obedient to God alone. His faith did not allow him to place anyone else before God. Possibly, he knew this might cost him his life and was apparently willing to pay that price. Yet when Mordecai learns that his faith might cost the lives of his people, he suffers intense grief and anguish, just as we all would if we found that we did something that would cause harm to those we love.

In the ancient Jewish world, tearing clothes and putting on sackcloth and ashes was an intense act of sorrow and contrition. Clothing was expensive, and tearing a garment was a throwing away of material possessions. Wearing sackcloth was a form of self humiliation, and ashes signified peoples mortality, brokenness and ruin. In our world today this seems like an almost alien behavior. Outwardly showing that we are hurting feels like weakness, and we live in a society where strength is considered a high virtue. We are afraid to risk being vulnerable, so we keep it all inside. This might even in part explain why there is a mental health crisis in this country.

Mordecai did not keep his grief to himself. He cried out loudly, and visibly shows his anguish in the public space in front of the king's gate. While he does not yet know what good it will do, he will not keep silent.

Here we meet the last important person in this story, that is, Hathach the eunuch. Without him, there is no way for Esther and Mordecai to communicate. Hathach is trusted to faithfully and quickly deliver

the messages without informing anyone else. We should not underestimate his role. Only Hathach can do that job.

None of the people here are acting alone. Not Mordecai, Hathach, or even Queen Esther. They all have their role to play. This is a reminder to us that doing the work of God's Kingdom is a group effort.

None of us can accomplish much alone. We are meant to be working together in community, each of us bringing our unique talents, and lifting each other up.

When Esther learns that Mordecai wants her to intercede with the king, she is afraid. And rightly so. Entering the king's presence without being summoned carries the death penalty. More foolishness on the king's part. Esther might not even be given a chance to speak, and if she does, how will the king react after learning she is one of those Jewish people that he issued a decree to destroy? What if Haman is there? Speaking truth to power is always dangerous. Yet, powerful men who refuse to accept even basic truth until it is too late are even more dangerous.

Mordecai reminds Esther of who she is. She is both a Jewish orphan and a queen. He asks her: "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Mordecai also trusts that God will find a way to protect God's chosen people even if Esther keeps silent, but that there will be no one to save her if that is Esther's choice. Esther must now decide who she is. Is she a Jewish woman who happens to also be a queen? Is she content to keep her Jewishness hidden? Or is she really just another ordinary woman subject to the whims of the men in her life?

Of course Esther does go to the king in the end. Otherwise we wouldn't be here talking about it.

But, she does something else very important first. She asks Mordecai to gather all the Jews in the community to fast and pray on her behalf. And she and her maids do the same. No food or drink. For three days. Can you imagine going that long without eating or even drinking anything? Medical professionals (at least the competent ones) would tell you that's not a good idea. But even praying for

three straight days seems unimaginable. Just try praying out loud or silently for three minutes. That will probably feel like an eternity.

Fasting and prayer in the community would let Esther know that she had their support. The community would know that Esther was suffering right alongside them. They are all together in asking for God to deliver them from the evil that threatens to destroy them.

Although God is not mentioned directly, the hand of God is visible throughout this story. First, out of all of the young women in the empire, it was Esther, a lowly orphan Jewish girl who became the new queen. Shortly afterward, Mordecai just happens to uncover a plot to assassinate the king. He gets word of this to Esther, who then informs the king. Then, when it came time to decide when the decree to kill the Jews would be carried out, lots were cast for the month and day, which turned out to be the 13th day of the 12th month. That was 11 months in the future at the time. So God put people where they needed to be and made sure they had enough time to act.

In the end, Esther was successful in convincing the king to reverse his decree. She and Mordecai also turned the tables and got revenge on Haman. This is where the debt the king owed Mordecai for getting news to Esther of the plot he uncovered came in handy. If you want to know how it all played out though, you will just have to read it for yourself. The whole book of Esther is actually not that long and you can probably read it in 20 minutes or less.

Finally, the phrase “for just such a time as this” is a fairly well-known expression, though most people might not know exactly where it comes from. This is a reminder that we all have a voice and skills that can make a meaningful difference right where we are. Sometimes just showing up and being willing to do the work is enough. And sometimes we have to take a risk, to be that person that God meant us to be. Just remember that it’s always a good idea to pray about it first, maybe even for three days if you can manage it. Amen.