

McCabe United Methodist Church
Behind the Veil: Empowered to Be in Power (part 3)
Esther 4:3-5, 7, 13-16: August 12, 2012
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Today, we continue our series we're calling: *Behind the Veil*. During this series of messages, we'll be talking about women of the Bible. Some of the women are famous and some are not. Each of these women has their own story to tell. And if we listen, we can learn from them. Through these women, it's our hope that God will speak to all of us.

Today, we travel back to the time of the Persian Empire. It's sometime between 500 B.C. and 400 B.C. or *before Christ*. We'll be talking about a Persian queen. She was a beautiful Persian queen. Her name was Esther. Her story is found in the book of Esther right after Ezra and Nehemiah in the Old Testament.

By the way, Martin Luther, of reformation fame, didn't want the book of Esther in the Bible because it doesn't mention God's name . . . not once. I'm glad he didn't get his way.

Xerxes was the king of Persia at this time. Persia was a mighty empire. They had conquered the Babylonians in about 538 B.C. and they would rule over most of the known world for the next 200 years. The people of Israel were a part of this vast empire.

One time, King Xerxes had a party. It wasn't just any party. It was for men only and it was going on its seventh day! Now, that's a party! The wine was flowing like the mighty Missouri. All the men were having a good time, I'm assuming.

On the seventh day of the party, King Xerxes decided to liven things up. And so he ordered his queen to come to the party and parade around the room for all the drunks to leer at her. This was the queen before Esther and her name was Queen Vashti. She was also beautiful.

Queen Vashti had other ideas. The thought of her being paraded around like an animal on display while a bunch of drunken, perverts leered at her didn't exactly appeal to her.

"Over my dead body," she told the men who came to get her. **"You go back and tell that fat-head,"** she didn't use those exact words, but she was mad. **"You tell him that if he wants to see me, he'd better be home for supper tonight or else!"** You kind of get the feeling that *women's lib* was born on that day.

Well, King Xerxes wasn't happy with his queen. **"She said what?"** he probably shouted. **"She's not coming! She can't do that . . . can she?"**

Now, some of the king's advisors were also at the party and they started worrying about their own wives acting up like Queen Vashti. And so they advised the king, **"Look King, if you let your queen get by with this disobedience women from all over the empire will think that they can do anything they want and then what? Who knows what might happen. They might even want to vote or drive the family camel or make us clean the house! No,"** they advised the King, **"you'd better do something about your queen and fast before this thing gets out of hand."**

And so the King did. He ordered Queen Vashti to turn in her crown.

I might be taking some liberty with this passage, but I think it's the spirit of the story.

Well now, King Xerxes was in a pickle. A king needs a queen. It's just the way it's meant to be. And so, King Xerxes ordered each of his 127 provinces to hold a royal beauty contest. This is the first and only beauty contest in the Bible.

One hundred twenty-seven finalists were named . . . one from each province. For their reward, they were shipped off to the King's private palace where he would be the final judge. He would get to choose the next *Miss Persia* who would also be the new queen.

This brings us to Esther and Mordecai. They were both Jewish. Mordecai was Esther's cousin. He was also her foster-father since her parents had died. Mordecai and Esther were close. They dearly loved each other.

Somehow or another, Esther got herself tangled up in that beauty contest and she became one of the 127 finalists. **"Whatever you do,"** Mordecai advised her, **"don't tell anyone you're a Jew. You won't stand a chance if you do."**

Sometime later, in his best Bert Parks voice, King Xerxes announced the winner. Guess who? Esther. It's the name of the book, after all.

Now, Esther found out that being the queen of Persia wasn't half bad. Esther lived in the palace. She had the royal jewels to wear. She had an unlimited clothing budget. She had people waiting on her hand and foot. She had three square meals a day. **"Hey,"** Esther smiled to herself. **"This is queen stuff is alright."**

Now, we come to Haman. I want you to remember that name. Haman is the bad guy in this story. He was rich and powerful. Plus, he was buddies with the King. King Xerxes had made Haman second in command. He was the vice-king, the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense and the Attorney General all rolled into one.

For some reason, King Xerxes made a rule that whenever someone walked past Haman, that someone had better bow down to him or else!

Well Mordecai, the Jew, Esther's foster-father, was someone who wasn't about to bow down to anyone except God and he didn't really care who knew it, including Haman himself.

Haman found out about Mordecai's disrespect. He was mad. He was furious at Mordecai. He found out that Mordecai was a Jew and so he started planning revenge.

He came up with an evil plan. Haman visited King Xerxes and convinced him that the empire would be better off without the Jews. **"They're bad people,"** he told the King, **"They're stubborn, unruly, and not very sociable. The empire would be better off without them."**

And so, Haman proposed a hunting season. It would be a different kind of hunting season. The Jewish people would be the game and all non-Jewish people would have licenses to bag as many as they wanted . . . no limit.

The king agreed to this evil plan and gave the royal order: *On such and such a date, in the Persian Empire, a royal hunting season will be held on all Jewish people including men, women, and children.*

Oh and one more thing, the Jewish people were not allowed to defend themselves. Mordecai heard about Haman and his evil plan. He ripped off his clothes, put on sackcloth, and he covered himself in ashes. He went around the city yelling and screaming. In other words, he didn't like Haman's idea and he wanted everyone to know it.

Meanwhile, Queen Esther heard about Mordecai's strange behavior and asked him, **"What's up? Why are you acting crazy?"**

Mordecai told her about Haman's evil plan. And then he told her that she must use her influence with the King to get him to change his mind.

This would be risky for Esther. Seeing the king wasn't easy. Back in those days, a person didn't just waltz up to the king and start talking to him, even if that person was the queen. No one was allowed near the king unless the king invited you. They had a law back then that went something like this: *if anyone came into the King's presence without being invited, that person could lose his or her life. No questions would be asked.*

But Mordecai and the Jewish people were desperate. He asked Esther to take the risk.

Queen Esther wasn't too excited about the idea. She hadn't talked to the king in about 30 days. She was worried about barging into the king's presence without being invited. She could lose everything including her crown . . . even her life.

Plus, by this time, she had grown rather fond of her new life. She played golf and tennis every day. She had unlimited use of the royal health center. She had a ring for every finger and designer jeans hanging in her closet. What's not to like?

"I don't know," Esther said to Mordecai. **"A lot of things could happen. It's so risky. Mordecai,"** she said, **"couldn't you find someone else? In case you haven't noticed, I have it pretty nice around here."**

Mordecai replied, **"Don't think that just because you live in the king's house you're the one Jew who will get out of this alive. If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this."**

What would you do if you were Esther? Have you ever had to risk something because it was the right thing to do?

We follow a Risen Savior who knows all about risk taking. After all, he was taken to the top of Calvary's hill, nailed to a cross and he died. And he did it for all of us.

As followers of Christ, few of us will be asked to risk of our lives in some faraway mission, but we are all called to serve and follow Christ here and now even if it means taking some risks.

Following Jesus means trying to be as *Christ-like* as we possibly can. Being *Christ-like* means not being afraid to risk our time, our money, our skills, our reputations to serve God.

A funny thing happens to people who follow Jesus and take risks in his name. God empowers them to do the job.

I know McCabe church and I know that God empowers many of you. God empowers many of you to be teachers and educators. God empowers you to serve at funerals and weddings. God empowers you to fold bulletins and mail newsletters. God empowers you to support our youth programs and our *Say Yes* program. God empowers you to give rides to people, visit people and call them. God empowers you to visit our visitors. God empowers you to serve as ushers and greeters, sing in the choir, play in the band, and run the sound system. God empowers you to mow the lawn and plant the flowers and take care of them. God empowers you to serve on work areas and boards. God empowers you to pray for others and help them every way you can. God empowers you to go to Haiti and Arkansas on mission trips. God empowers you to help support the church with your finances and many of you have already contributed to the purchase of the house to the south of us. You wouldn't have to do any of these things. No one is forcing to risk your time and talents and resources, but you do.

It's called empowerment. Empowerment means we receive power from God. It means we are given the power to do what might require courage and risk-taking.

You . . . me . . . all of us, we are empowered by God to be God's people in this world and to make a difference.

There's more to Esther's story. I encourage you to read the book for yourself. It's only ten chapters long.

Let's just say that when Esther was asked by Mordecai to risk her good life she was also empowered by God. She responded to Mordecai with these brave words, **"I'll go to the king, even though it's forbidden. If I perish, I perish."**

God will never call us to do something without empowering us to do it. We've been given God's power, to be God's people in this world. What more do we need?