

For Such a Time As This

Some of our scripture is mythic – and mythical! There are major stories throughout the Bible that were never intended to be seen thru black-and-white, historical lens. In fact, much of what we read in the first eleven chapters of Genesis is lifted from the myths of Babylon.

Esther's story, and by extension Mordecai's, is similar; this is pure Shakespeare. This novella is set during the reign of Ahasuerus; the Persian Emperor we know in the West as Xerxes. The period is after the Babylonian Exile among a Jewish community living in what we call "diaspora" in present day Iran. None of this really matters for where we are going, beyond setting us up to see how stories in the Bible, even fictional ones, remind us of how seeing our vulnerability is not really weakness, but is the start of a fresh way forward.

When we stumble across Mordecai in chapter 4 we learn he has learned of some terrible plot. Mordecai tears his clothes and puts on a sackcloth, he puts ashes on his head and enters into a traditional Jewish ritual of mourning, right in the square outside the palace gates. By the time that Esther – his younger cousin and now married to the king – is able to make contact with him to figure out why he is making such a scene, Mordecai tells her that the king plans to kill every Jew in the empire and that she must stop this. He convinces her that her position as spouse of the king may have happened in the first place *for such a time as this*.

To get the whole story we have to step back a bit. Esther's story starts with her becoming an orphan and her older cousin, Mordecai, becomes her guardian. This is all happening in the background of the king getting mad at and then deposing his wife, Vashti. Esther becomes part of the royal harem and after meeting the king, becomes his wife.

Around this time Mordecai has his first heroic moment. He is sitting at the king's gate and overhears two of the king's servants (eunuchs who served the king in the private quarters) plotting to murder the King Ahasuerus. Mordecai tells Esther. Esther tells the king. The plot is foiled and the whole thing is recorded and then set aside.

Five years later ancient bad blood creates a crisis, and the center of the story's plot. A man named Haman is promoted to be the king's "right-hand man." This is a problem for Mordecai. Haman an Agagite, which is a sneaky way of calling him an anti-Semite. The lineage mythically goes all the way back to Esau (older brother of Jacob) who is head of the Edomites, from whom come the Amalekites, from whom come the Agagites, but the real action in the Bible starts while the Israelites are in the wilderness after fleeing Egypt. The Amalekites attacked the Israelites in the wilderness and again during the wars to take Canaan (the Promised Land) and then again later just before King David takes the throne. Just naming Haman as an Agagite means that these men, Haman and Mordecai are sworn enemies.

So, Haman gets the top job in the empire and when he notices that Mordecai refuses to bow to him, he is enraged. When he finds out that Mordecai is Jewish he comes up with a plan to wipe them all out. He takes the plan to the king saying that there is a group in the empire who refuses to obey the king's laws and they must pay for it. He convinces the king, effectively, to order genocide against the Jews. The news of this decree sweeps through the city, which is thrown into confusion.

Mordecai hears of it and tears his clothes to pieces, puts on a sackcloth, and puts ashes in his hair. He then sits in the square in front of the palace mourning very publicly until his young cousin, the queen sends servants to talk to him. The conversation plays out between the two through couriers, culminating with Mordecai telling Esther that her people's existence is on the line and that she may well have been made queen by God, "for such a time as this."

In the coming chapters Esther will plan two banquets for the king and Haman to attend. Haman will again become infuriated when Mordecai refuses to bow to him, this time he plots to kill Mordecai for it. The king, unable to sleep, reviews the records and rediscovers the plot to kill him, asks who it was who saved him, and learns it was his wife's cousin, Mordecai. In the morning, Haman is ushered into see the king. The king asks Haman what would be the right way to honor someone who had done great things for the king, a service beyond any other. Thinking it was about himself, Haman goes on and on about what should be done to honor this person. The king agrees, and says, "Quickly, take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to the Jew Mordecai who sits at the king's gate."

Haman is not thrilled. He goes home to his family to mourn this turn of events, but is called back away to Esther's banquet. Over dinner Esther tells the king of the story of a plot to kill her people – for the first time revealing her own identity – and names Haman as the culprit who used the king's power to set into motion a personal hate crime.

Haman is put to death on the very gallows he built for Mordecai. Mordecai is given Haman's position at court. The Jews are rescued from destruction by Esther, and there was much rejoicing. In fact, this story is the origin for the Jewish celebration of Purim.

Just like we began, this is a Shakespearean-level story of intrigue, with plots to kill the king and power plays at court. It is also a huge, sweeping love story, set in one of the most important centers of empire in history. Yet, when we strip all of this away there is a story of trust in the good providence of God and an understanding that God calls people to take action. I think that the heart of it lies in chapter four.

While all the action swirls in the chapters surrounding the fourth, it is here that Mordecai's faith rises to the surface. It is here that he changes course on his long-standing advice for Esther to hide her identity. It is here that Mordecai is able to see his place within a much larger plan to save the Chosen People. If the story of Mordecai is told in full, then he becomes a messenger of change. He knows he cannot save his people alone, but his act is courageous, it is just, and it is a symbol of faithfulness.

I would say that it all starts with vulnerability. Up until this moment (chapter 4) Mordecai has almost worked in the shadows. He has instructed his young cousin to keep her real identity a secret for fear of being discovered and hurt. Even as she has become queen, there is a sense of marginalization in the story. When Mordecai hears about the plot to kill the Jews, all the Jews, he mourns; he recognizes the injustice, he sees how vulnerable he is – he could be killed and doesn't matter that he is "family" of the queen. He sees how those who want to do evil can often do so while those in power are indifferent.

Most people want their relationships to be safe places where they are supported, where trust is deep and implicitly guiding the direction. Most people also struggle to be completely open about their fears for fear of rejection, or misunderstanding, or for being thought less of. The anticipation of any of these fears locks us up and holds us back from the very thing we want most – security in the relationship. Being vulnerable means being out in the open without defense.

Mark Manson, an author of books that are both wonderfully honest and also have titles I cannot reprint in a sermon, describes vulnerability like this, “*vulnerability* is consciously choosing NOT to hide your emotions or desires from others.”

So, this is the part where I share the meaning of life (sshhh). Life is about relationships and love and real connection. Life is not about what we ultimately succeed and fail at, or the toys we accumulate; it is only about connecting with others in support, safety, and trust. This is what is plastered throughout the pages of our scriptures and almost every telling of God at work is a telling of love on display.

The life, death, and resurrection of Christ is a telling of a God willing to be fully and completely vulnerable, even to death, even a death that is curse in our very scriptures. The heart of our scriptures is a promise that God is with us and for us no matter who we are or what we have done. It is a promise that makes it possible to be vulnerable. Why? For real connection.

Mordecai comes face-to-face with vulnerability and recognizes that the only way forward is to be fully revealed. The resolution in the story is only able to take place when Esther – who has been put in this place by divine providence – reveals her identity to the king as part of her plea to save the people. Seeing one’s own vulnerability is a window on who we really are, and is a way for us to move forward. Mordecai is not the hero in the story, that is Esther’s role, but it is he who sees that revealing that which should have brought shame and danger, is the only way forward.

In our own lives we face shame, we deal with circumstances out of our control, we fear loss. Most of the time we seek to control the situation. In these days of national crises (yep, multiple) there is much to fear and much that leaves us feeling without support, that there is no safety to be found, and little to trust. Mordecai knows he cannot control anything. He sees clearly that those in power can hurt him – they can wipe out his people. Instead of controlling, Mordecai becomes a messenger; he uses the voice he does have to speak openly, with courage, about what needs to be done. He lays his fear aside.

It is a story, reminding us to see and name what we are afraid of, and a promise that those things in our life we most fear cannot keep the love of God and others out. It is an invitation to live courageously and honestly about who we are, because this is the only way to life the secret of life.