

14 May 2017

The Good Girl

The Book of Esther; Romans 12:1-3

Our New Testament reading today speaks of sacrifice – not Christ’s sacrifice for us, but ours to God and each other. Keep this concept – of self-sacrifice as worship – in mind as we hear today’s story. We read Romans 12:1-3:

*12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.
3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*

There are two books in the Hebrew Bible whose heroes are women. Last week, I told you about Ruth, a woman who loved generously and courageously and was willing to defy social expectations for the sake of those she loved – in her case, a beloved mother-in-law. She may not have accompanied armies to battle, as did the judge Deborah, or spoken in the name of God, as did the prophets Miriam and Huldah, but Ruth was definitely a role model of strength for both women and men. Ruth was a profile in courage. I remind you of all this because today we move to the other heroine of an Old Testament book, and she’s . . . not so much.

Biblical narrative doesn’t go in for psychological realism. You never encounter there a hint that somebody might be the sort of person he or she is because of lingering effects of childhood trauma, for instance. The Bible is content to let people’s actions speak for themselves, without excuse and often without explanation. But you can’t help but wonder what made Esther such a bland, colorless, gutless person without as far as we can see a single idea or opinion that wasn’t planted there by some man. Was it because she was an orphan, being raised by a very strong-minded older cousin named Mordecai? Was it because she – like all her family – was a Jewish exile during the Persian Empire, living right in the capital city under the thumb of the Persian king, Ahasuerus, who had absolute power over their fate? Or was it because she happened to be breathtakingly beautiful and had always been surrounded by people who were only interested in her beauty, not in who she was as a person?

Let me tell you, that *can* be a trial.

Whatever the reason, though, Esther is the epitome of vapid, empty femininity. We first meet her when her cousin Mordecai, who used to hang around the palace gates, rushes in to tell her that the king is choosing a new queen by holding a year-long beauty contest and Esther is going to compete. (The reason for this new queen business, by the way, is because during an orgy, King Ahasuerus had summoned his queen, Vashti, to come in and show off her beauty to his drinking buddies, and she had told him what he could do with his drinking buddies. That worried the party guests, who didn’t want their wives hearing that the queen had stood up to the king, so they persuaded him to get rid of Vashti and look for a more obedient wife.) Anyway,

Mordecai had heard about the Miss Persia pageant and just knew that his beautiful cousin was perfect. “Come on! Pretty yourself up! We’re going to the palace! Only one thing: maybe don’t tell anyone that you’re a Jew.”

“Yes, Mordecai,” said Esther.

So the way this beauty contest was set up, the most beautiful women of Persia were brought in for a year, given the best food and most expensive beauty treatments at the palace, dressed in the finest clothes and jewelry, and in the end brought in to see if they pleased the king. It was like a year-long spa vacation at the king’s expense. They even had a royal eunuch, named Hegai, to attend to their every need. This was a good thing for Esther, actually. Maybe because she was too timid to behave like a normal teenage girl who had been granted every indulgence, Esther quickly became Hegai’s favorite. He made sure that she had reasonable portions of food and didn’t overdo the makeup and jewelry. When the time came to parade before the king, the women were allowed to dress themselves as they wished, but Esther dressed herself according to Hegai’s advice: modestly and demurely. It worked, the beautiful and compliant Esther was chosen to be the new Queen of Persia. And, following Mordecai’s command, she told no one that she was a Jew.

During all this time, Mordecai was still hanging around the palace gates, listening for news of his beautiful cousin, and it so happened that he overheard two of King Ahasuerus’s servants plotting to assassinate the king. He reported the plot to the guards, and the traitors were arrested, examined, then executed. Mordecai’s part in all this was duly set down in the Royal Book of Records.

But hanging around the palace gates didn’t always work in Mordecai’s favor. Being a Jew, he did not bow in obeisance to anyone but the God of Israel, and that included the important lords and counselors going in and out of those gates. In particular, there was one named Haman, basically the king’s second-in-command, who *liked* it when people bowed to him. There are some public figures like that, not many but a few: people who really only care about being admired. Haman was one of these, and Mordecai was a daily irritation to him. He was told that Mordecai was a Jew and not permitted to grovel before people, but that only made him even more angry. There was a whole people who wouldn’t bow down to him? Something had to be done!

So Haman went to the king with a proposal. “O King, O Blessed Mighty One, May You Live Forever! Did you know that there’s a whole nation of rebels living in Persia, people who don’t follow your laws or respect your rule? What do we with traitors, anyway?”

“We execute traitors, don’t we?”

“Excellent plan, your majesty! I’ll draw up the orders now. Shall we set a date for, say, the thirteenth of Adar? Could I borrow your signet ring?” And just like that, a plan was put into place for genocide.

But Mordecai, who does seem to have heard everything that went on in court, found out about the order. He apparently was not allowed to send a message directly to his cousin the queen, so he went into full public mourning mode – sackcloth and ashes and all that – in the street outside Esther’s window. Sure enough, she saw him and sent a servant out with some clean clothes for him. Mordecai told the servant, “I have to get a message to the queen! Tell her . . .” and he told the servant all about Haman’s plot. “Tell the queen she *must* go to the king at once and have this stopped! Thousands of lives are at stake!”

Queen Esther replied, “But I’m not supposed to go to the king unless I’ve been invited.”

It isn’t always easy to identify with, or even like, every biblical hero and heroine. I have to admit, I find Esther incredibly frustrating. Even if, as I suspect, she was raised to be exactly the sort of simpering miss that she became, devoid of will-power or independent thought, at some point – at *some* point – you have to take some sort of stand, don’t you? But here’s the thing: I think the biblical author is just as frustrated with her as I am. The far more admirable courage of Queen Vashti was included for a reason, as a contrast to Esther’s wimpiness. But – listen to this; it’s important – the Bible doesn’t compare people to each other. Think about that for a second. It seriously doesn’t happen. The Bible doesn’t care if Esther is more or less courageous than Vashti or Ruth or Deborah. The Bible only cares about this: given that Esther is the sort of person that she is, how will she respond to the crisis before her? It’s never about what someone else might have done. In the Bible it’s always about what this unique individual will do.

So what did Esther do? She asked Mordecai to have the Jewish exiles pray for her, and at the end of that time – shaking like jello, I’m sure – she went to the king uninvited. Now she had reason to be nervous; this was a true autocratic dictatorship, and the king could have people executed for disturbing a nap. But he welcomed her. “What can I do for you, my queen?”

She couldn’t say it. Couldn’t get the words out. Finally she managed to stammer, “Could you and . . . and Haman come to dinner in my apartments this evening?”

The king accepted, and Haman was thrilled. They came to dinner in the queen’s rooms, and as they lingered over the after-dinner wine, the king said, “Queen Esther, something is troubling you. What is it?”

“Could you . . . could you come for dinner tomorrow night, too?”

So close. So close. Now, a brief interlude. On his way out from dinner that night, Haman saw Mordecai – waiting for word from the queen – and he *still* didn’t bow. Haman decided that he couldn’t wait for the official genocide day. He had to execute Mordecai himself. During the night he had a gallows built – 75 feet high – and first thing in the morning he went in to see the king to ask permission to hang Mordecai up. But this was bad timing. King Ahasuerus had had a bad night and had called for a servant to read to him from the Royal Book of Records, figuring that would put him to sleep. There he had heard about how Mordecai had saved him by reporting the plot against his life, and discovered that he had never been rewarded. So when Haman rushed in, the king greeted him with, “Haman! Just the man I need. What should I do to show honor to someone who has served me greatly?”

Haman smiled happily. As usual, he thought of himself and of public adoration. “Put him in some of the king’s clothes – big jewels and all – and on one of the king’s horses, wearing the king’s crown, and have an important man lead him through the streets calling out ‘Thus it shall be done to the man the king loves to honor!’”

“You always have such good ideas, Haman!” exclaimed the king. “Go at once and do that for Mordecai the Jew.”

It was a terrible, awful, no good, very bad day for Haman. And it got worse. Barely had he gotten home from leading Mordecai around the city when he had to dress and go back to dinner at the queen’s apartments. There, once again, King Ahasuerus asked, “Esther, what is it? There’s something more on your mind than dinner parties. What can I give you?”

And Esther said, “My life?” They both stared, and Esther said, “I’m a Jew. I’m one of the people that Haman – this wicked Haman – is planning to slaughter on the thirteenth of Adar. And I don’t want my family to die. And I don’t want to die.”

The rest of the story is easy to wrap up. The king apparently couldn’t revoke his genocide decree – and no, I don’t understand why not exactly – but instead he issued a new decree, granting the Jews the right to arm and defend themselves, with the result that the thirteenth of Adar became a day of victory for them rather than a massacre. And Haman, well on top of everything else, when he heard Queen Esther’s speech that night, he threw himself at her feet to beg for mercy and ended up falling all over her in front of the king, who did *not* take kindly to Haman pawing his wife, and . . . well, there was this brand new 75-foot tall gallows in Haman’s front yard Providential, you might say.

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I don’t especially like Esther. She strikes me as a beautiful bore. I’d rather meet Ruth, or Vashti. But one more time, the Bible – and by extension God – doesn’t care what someone is compared to someone else. What matters here is whether you are willing to rise above who you are for the sake of others, and Esther did. The truth is, none of us are all that impressive in God’s eyes. But all of us have it in us to look, however briefly, like Christ and sacrifice our own comfort or our own safety for the sake of those we love. Think about that on Mother’s Day. And go and do likewise.