

Tuesday, June 27, 2017 - Day 177 – Esther 7-8, Psalm 144, II Corinthians 3

Esther is one of the great heroines of the Hebrew Scriptures and her book provides the basis for the Jewish holiday of Purim. Despite its high drama and comedy, it is a book that must be examined critically for its implications of violence against women and for the retribution that Esther and her people ultimately do bring down upon their enemies at the conclusion of the story.

It begins as a tale of sex trafficking in Persia among a community of Jews who remain after the Babylonian captivity. The king, in need of a new queen who will do a better job of obeying him, abducts young women into his harem to compete for his affection. Esther is selected and crowned queen by the smitten Persian king.

At the advice of her uncle Mordecai who believes that she has been elevated “for just such a time as this”, Esther conceals her Jewish identity. Mordecai, however, is less careful and breaks the king’s law by refusing to bow before the king’s prime minister, Haman. The insulted Haman seeks the death of Mordecai as well as the murder of all the Jews. Esther is deeply distressed at this news and decides to petition the king by going to his inner court, though it is punishable by death to do so without his invitation. First, she asks that all the Jews gather and fast and pray on her behalf, night and day for a period of three days. “After that,” she says, “I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.”

When he sees her, the king immediately grants her first request which is the banquet underway at the beginning of our reading. When the king, who does not know that she is a Jew and who does not tolerate disobedience, asks for her second request, she implores that her life and the lives of her people be spared from slavery and genocide. She cleverly links their fate to the suggestion that the king’s own authority has been challenged, making Haman an enemy of the king, as well as of the Jews.

What is remarkable about this story is that there are no supernatural events taking place to assure the deliverance of the people of God—no parting of the seas, no pillars of smoke or fire by night or day, no apparitions in the sky. There is just the divine working through the courage of an ordinary young woman, uprooted from her life in her village and kidnapped into a life of sexual slavery. Esther is a young woman who becomes a champion of her oppressed people. In her example, we see once again that God’s salvation and justice are often achieved through the most surprising and unexpected people in the most surprising and unexpected ways, times, and places. God may even choose us “for such a time as this.”

By The Very Rev. Judith A. Sullivan