

The Book of Esther: Sleepless in Susa
Esther 5 & 6
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M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

“I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.” With these words, the curtain closed on Act IV last week and when it opens again, Esther now moves to the foreground, taking the initiative while Mordecai temporarily recedes into the background. From this point forward, Esther is every inch a queen to which her actions and demeanor are an eloquent testimony.

Act V, Scene 1 opens with Esther donning her royal dignity right along with her royal robes. Her uniform stands in stark contrast to the sackcloth and ashes her people are wearing, yet we should not be seduced by outward appearances of luxury. There are two levels of reality in this scene: the inner and the outer. The inner level is dominated by the fast Esther instituted at the end of chapter 4. For three days and nights she and her maids, along with all the Jews in Susa, have gone without food or water. Thus, her inner reality aligns her much more strongly with her peoples’ weakness than her outer reality aligns her with the opulence and power of the court. It’s an important distinction. We should not lose sight of the dangerous disparity in Esther’s situation. Dressing up to visit the king uninvited is a bit like venturing into a snake pit doing one’s best imitation of a viper.

The dramatic tension builds as Esther approaches the inner court and positions herself to catch Ahasuerus’s eye. When the king finally spots her, he extends the golden scepter, signaling that she has won his favor and it is safe to approach. Esther does so, touching the top of the king’s scepter as a sign of gratitude and respect. As the audience, we let out a long exhale, relieved at Esther’s safety. Then, comes the truly unexpected. Not only is Esther safe, the king now offers to give her whatever she wants “up to half of the kingdom.” Whether the king’s largesse is literal or figurative, we don’t know, but either way, it demonstrates again the king’s typical impulsive extravagance.

After the tension of Esther’s entrance and with all that’s at stake, the king’s offer seems to be exactly the providential opening Esther needs to ask for the Jews to be spared. Instead, we are puzzled to hear Esther ask the king to come to a special banquet she has prepared for him—and oh, by the way, why don’t you bring along Haman? In the Hebrew it is much clearer than in the English that Esther words her invitation to the king but then includes Haman almost as an

afterthought. Ever-wise, Esther is very much aware that it must not seem as if she views Haman and the king as equals.

Why throw a banquet at all and especially one for three? The narrator gives us not even a hint as to Esther's reasoning. Perhaps she wants to orchestrate a situation in which she has a stronger position. She has, after all, only just survived her uninvited entrance. Perhaps she views Haman's presence as essential to success in order to have an immediate confrontation. If Esther were to speak now, making her case in the throne room or at a private dinner with Ahasuerus, there would be a gap between the moment of her accusation and the resulting confrontation with Haman. Esther would have no way of guaranteeing her presence at a meeting between Haman and the king, and with Ahasuerus's track record of being easily persuaded by Haman and others, Esther might well lose her advantage.

Whatever her strategy, the king is apparently delighted with the invitation and summons Haman to the banquet with all possible speed. Verse 6 finds the characters already at the festivities and the narrator wastes little time with description. The only detail that slips through is that the king reiterates his question from the throne room while they are drinking wine. The implication seems to be that the king has eaten his fill and is now in a mellow and agreeable mood. What is it that Esther desires? It will be given to her, up to half of the Persian kingdom. Esther has Ahasuerus right where she wants him, yet for a second time she chooses to postpone naming her request. Instead, she asks the king and Haman to attend a second banquet to be held the following night.

Acts V, Scene 2: Once again we don't know Esther's reason for delaying making her request of the king, but we do know that her delay sets up this next scene which is pivotal to the drama and to Haman's eventual fate. Haman leaves the banquet "happy and in good spirits," but his elation is short-lived. Mordecai is in his usual spot at the palace gate and true to form, refuses either to rise or tremble before Haman. This is actually an escalation of Mordecai's previous episode of civil disobedience in which he had simply refused to bow before Haman.

In an uncharacteristic display of self-control, Haman restrains himself and goes home. There, he holds what can only be called a "pity party" in which he boasts to his wife and friends about his achievements before ending with the grandiose conclusion that "all this does me no good so long as I see the Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate." Haman's out-sized ego is fully on display in the way he enumerates his honors in front of the very people who already know of

them. Then, there's the excessive nature of his obsession: one uncooperative underling completely outweighs all his accomplishments. Everything in this scene conspires to create a ludicrous parody of the preceding one. There, a humble woman reluctantly takes on the trappings of royalty and risks her life to save others. Here, a megalomaniac who thinks he's royalty plots to destroy others.

Haman's fan club is quick to suggest a solution to his "Mordecai problem." In a proposition worthy of the excess of Haman's ego, they propose that he build a gallows 75 feet high on which to execute Mordecai. This wasn't a gallows like we think of, with a noose for hanging, but a large stake—in this case a huge stake—on which to impale someone. The real irony here is that Mordecai is already a condemned man. All Haman has to do is wait for the edict to take effect, and Mordecai, along with the rest of the Jews, will be out of his hair forever. But, patience is not one of Haman's virtues. Eleven months is too long to wait when one's ego is being assailed. Only a special public humiliation on an accelerated schedule will do. Not surprisingly, Haman loves the idea and immediately summons Susa's best carpenters to work through the night. His new project restores Haman's good spirits, and he looks ahead to the following night's banquet. Clearly, there's nothing like anticipating a good impaling to whet one's appetite.

Act V, Scene 3: On what could well be the last night of Mordecai's life, Ahasuerus has a sudden attack of insomnia and calls for the royal records to be brought to his bedchamber and read, obviously hoping that will have a sleep-inducing effect. This is the first major "coincidence" of this scene and the second occurs right after it when the king's servant just "happens" to turn to the account of how Mordecai saved the king's life. This is hardly the kind of bedtime reading that is likely to lull the king to sleep. Now wide awake, he asks, "What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" to which the servants bluntly reply, "Nothing has been done for him." (6:3)

In order to appreciate the significance of these two coincidences, let's backtrack for just a moment. We know that Esther is planning another banquet for the following evening, and we hope this will be the occasion at which she wins a reprieve for the Jews from Haman's edict. Yet we also know that Haman has fast-tracked Mordecai's execution. Unless something happens, Mordecai may well be dead by the time of the banquet, in which case even a royal reprieve won't do him any good. Esther can't possibly intervene for him *before* the banquet because she knows nothing of Haman's plans. Enter the "coincidences."

Just as the king begins to ponder his obvious oversight with regard to Mordecai's reward, something catches his eye out in the court. In apparently another coincidence, Haman, too, seems to be having a sleepless night, though his is apparently caused by being overly eager to get the king's permission to execute Mordecai. The king is so preoccupied that he does not stop to ask Haman the obvious question, namely, what are you doing here at this hour and what do you want? Instead, he blurts out the question that eclipses all else: "What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?"

Anyone with an ounce of modesty or sense would have paused to wonder about the context of that question, but of course, Haman has neither and assumes the question is about him. I mean, isn't everything? Just as the king is preoccupied with how to honor Mordecai, Haman is now preoccupied with how to honor himself. Their mutual preoccupation makes for hilarious misunderstanding, with the humor hinging on the fact that the audience knows more than either of the characters. Haman and Ahasuerus are having a conversation that only we really understand.

The speed with which Haman comes up with the ideas in verses 7-9 suggests that he has entertained this fantasy before. The king's own royal robes and horse and crown are to be given to the honoree. To wear the king's own clothing and to ride the king's horse and to wear the royal crown was to have the power of the king himself. Haman already has Ahasuerus's signet ring; these additional items would represent a virtual clean sweep.

The fantasy gets better and better as Haman urges Ahasuerus to appoint one of his palace officials to act as valet, escort and herald to the intended honoree. Clearly, Haman is on a roll. We can almost hear him saying, "This is going to be great."

Whether Haman is finished with his fantasy or not, dream soon turns to waking nightmare as Ahasuerus interrupts with words Haman never expected to hear: "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. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned." We are left to use our imagination as to the magnitude of Haman's shock & horror at having to stoop to honor the one man in the world he hates above all others.

It is important to note that Ahasuerus does not seem to notice the incongruity, to put it mildly, of honoring a man who is condemned to die. The king clearly knows that Mordecai is a Jew—he says it outright in verse 10. Haman,

if you recall, had never specifically named the Jews as the “certain people” who so offended him in chapter 3 which leaves us to wonder if Ahasuerus has ever actually seen or read a copy of the edict he gave Haman permission to write. His detachment from the consequences of his actions rears its head yet again.

Haman does his duty and carries out the king’s command to the letter. We can well imagine how odious and humiliating this was for him, and the narrator tells us that after it was over he, “hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered.” The story tells us nothing, however, about how Mordecai felt about this experience. Surely, the irony was not lost on him, but all we are told is that he returned to the king’s gate. Perhaps this was the only option that seemed appropriate under the circumstances. A party, after all, would hardly be the thing to do with the edict still hanging over the heads of his people.

One of the comments I’ve heard throughout this sermon series is how timely Esther’s story is, how it continues to speak directly into our lives. That is certainly true today as it deals so dramatically with two very human preoccupations: fear and ego. It is tempting to downplay the very real danger Esther is in as she seeks an uninvited audience with the king. But, don’t forget, Ahasuerus has already been shown up by one disobedient queen; he is unlikely to want to be challenged in front of his courtiers by another wife acting out of turn. Esther literally puts her life on the line, courageously doing what needed to be done not because she wasn’t afraid, but in spite of being afraid. It may not be as dramatic as Esther, but living as God’s people will at times ask us to do things that are new, risky or scary. We’ll be pushed out on the proverbial limb, with only our faith in God to hang on to. It might be we sense that we need to speak to someone about a difficult subject; give money we don’t think we can spare; become a tutor or mentor someone who’s mentally or emotionally challenged. It could be a thousand different ways God is asking us to grow or stretch or step out of our comfort zone to serve him. If we wait to be faithful until we’re not afraid, we’ll never take that leap of faith.

That doesn’t mean we leap in the dark. Esther dealt with her fear by preparing herself spiritually and mentally, and then she got ready physically. Make no mistake. Esther was dressing for success. Those royal robes were a power suit if ever there was one. Being prepared, savvy and smart is not the antithesis of faith but part of what it means to be faithful. So, what steps is God inviting you to take so you can be prepared to respond to his call with a resounding “Yes, I will”?

There are so many analogies to draw from the hubris and ego on display in today's scenes that it's hard to know where to start. It's tempting to point the finger at an obvious narcissist and gloss over the invitation to examine our own egocentric attitudes and actions. The truth is that the ego in each of us is flawed, wounded and easily broken. We get angry when we feel that someone doesn't respect us, acknowledge us, or give us the deference we think we deserve. We develop our own obsessions—I know I'm right! Who does he think he is? It's not fair! We secretly gloat when someone we dislike stumbles and falls. It's quite alright with us if they get what's coming to them, and we even fantasize how we can help their downfall along.

What we don't realize is that these are all forms of modern day bondage. We tend to think of slavery or bondage in terms of addiction, a compulsive behavior, or consuming feelings of shame or unforgiveness. But, when we indulge that small part of our ego that can only feel better about ourselves if someone else fails, we are in bondage. When our happiness depends on someone else's approval, we are in bondage. When we obsess over that "problem person" in our lives, we have given them power over our joy and life. We are no longer free. We're in bondage.

Esther's story is an invitation to honestly confront our fears and ego that keep us trapped in self-absorption, anger and feelings of entitlement. The truth is that there is some of Haman in all of us, and repentance is the only way to experience the true freedom, joy and peace that is found in Christ. Amen.