

Esther/Mordecai Devotion

Esther was a Jewish woman living in exile. Her parents apparently died when she was a child because Esther was raised by her uncle Mordecai. If you will remember from your Old Testament, the Jews were taken captive by the Babylonians and hauled off to Persia to live as exiles, or refugees. God had warned the children of Israel this would happen if they didn't straighten up and act right. Well, they didn't listen and soon found their city, Jerusalem, and the holy temple destroyed and themselves in exile.

There was a king in the region of Persia, King Ahasuerus (identified as Xerxes) who liked to brag and boast and belittle. The story goes that he threw a party with much drinking and merrymaking which lasted for 180 days. Can you believe that? Some commentators suggest that might be an exaggeration to make a point...but, at any rate, it was a huge, extravagant party. Anyway, toward the end of the party he ordered his wife, Queen Vashti to come into the drunken party. It is believed that he wanted Queen Vashti to actually parade around scantily dress for the oogling eyes of the party-goers. Well, to her credit and that of women everywhere and in all times, she refused. Way to go, Vashti! Well, her stance got her demoted as queen and that's the last we hear of Vashti. In all likelihood, she was killed for her bravery.

King Ahasuerus can't live without a queen he thinks, so all the young maidens are rounded up to be in his royal harem. Before she knows it, Esther finds herself being paraded before the king, who takes a liking to her and makes Esther his new queen. Unfortunately, she doesn't have a voice in the matter at all.

All goes along fairly well as Esther settles into her role as the new queen. Who would have ever thought a Jewish woman would be queen in Persia. By the way, taking the advice from her uncle Mordecai, Esther did not reveal her ethnic identity to the royal family. So, Esther is an incognito queen! Things take a turn for the worse when the king's top man, Haman, spies that Mordecai does not bow down to him when he passes by, like all good royal subjects are suppose to do. Haman devises a plan to take care of Mordecai, as well as all the Jewish people. According to some scholars evidently there had been a conflict or feud between these two men and their

families for quite sometime. Haman manipulates the king into signing a decree that will not just kill Mordecai but "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children,.....and to plunder their goods."

It is at this point in Esther's life that Cumberland Presbyterian Women Ministry has sought out their theme for the coming year. Timing is everything. Mordecai believes that all of Esther's life has been leading up to this moment. He suggests, "Maybe you have come into the kingdom for such a time as this." Needless to say Esther doesn't think so.

It takes some convincing, even a little bit of threatening by Uncle Mordecai, but eventually young Esther steps forward to work within the royal system to save her people. Through prayer and fasting, she devises a plan to save the Jewish people and to rid the kingdom of Haman and his evil partners. When Haman and his cohorts are finally hung on the gallows built and intended for Mordecai, the king decrees a time of celebration for the Jews, a two-day event in which the Jews offer thanksgiving to God for gaining relief from their enemies. That celebration continues to this day in the Jewish community. Purim is a holiday filled with feasting and gladness, where gifts of food are sent to one another and presents given to the poor.

Esther's story is an amazing account of courage, strength, and wisdom. Her's is a story that has been told and retold throughout the centuries. In fact, just a few nights ago, we read the story of Esther to our daughter Caroline, from your Children's Bible. It's a wonderful story for guidance and encouragement to us today.

BUT....there is an interesting angle on Esther's life story that you may not have considered. It has to do with the role of Mordecai, her uncle. Some scholars say that Mordecai was manipulative and overbearing in his approach to his niece, Esther. Many suggest that he used a little blackmail in that he threatened to reveal her Jewish identity to the royal court if she did not help him save their people. I don't know whether I believe in that conspiracy theory or not. I do know that Mordecai challenged, conjoled, coaxed, encouraged, and pushed Esther to step out of her comfort zone, to push through her fear and hesitancy to act boldly. She didn't want to risk life and limb. She wasn't crazy about the idea of taking matters into her own hands. But Mordecai was somehow able to convince her to do what she did not think she was capable of doing.

I wonder how differently things might have turned out had Mordecai not been able to convince Esther to the very difficult thing that God was calling her to do?

The question comes to us today....**who is your Mordecai?** Who in your life is able to get you to look beyond your fears and hesitation to step out into a new place? Who in your life is able to say, “Who knows, but what God has placed you at this time and place, for a reason?” Regardless of where you are in your life’s journey...on the brink of retirement, in the “twilight of your years”, in college or just starting out in your career, a new mom hungering for sleep and rest....who is your Mordecai? I’m sure we’ve all had them. There have been a few people in my life who have pushed me to move beyond where I was safe and comfortable, into greater participation in God’s kingdom –

My older, sister Sheila – when she encouraged me to go to seminary and pursue a calling to ordained ministry. Sheila has continually pushed me out of the nest countless times.

A seminary professor named Steve Rhodes – who sent me on my first mission trip to the inner-city of Atlanta to work with the poor and homeless who lived there.

Jim Searcy, a friend and colleague – who talked me through my first funeral, my first wedding, my first communion, and first baptism as a newly ordained minister.

My husband, David – who always tells me that I can do the hard things when I think I can’t (hard things like confrontation, or organizing a huge event (like Convention), or caring for my aging, and ill parents).

This morning I invite you to find a partner, someone sitting next to you and share with each other who your Mordecai is. Tell about how that person has been able to move you into greater participation in God’s kingdom. (Give about 10 minutes - during this time pass out Women’s Ministry note cards to each person.)

I invite any who wish to share with the whole group your “Mordecai”. (This has proven to be a very valuable time of sharing and support. Give about 10-15 minutes for this part. Whatever time you have left).

You've each received a note card. I encourage you to write a note to your "Mordecai" thanking them for their challenge, encouragement, and support. I sent my note last week as I was preparing this devotion. *She is Mrs. Jenny Edwards*, of Dyersburg, TN. She has encouraged me and prayed for me for the past 15 or more years. She was Director of Christian Education when I first met her. I was fresh out of college and working full-time in a CP Church in Florence, AL as a youth director and a lot of other jobs put together in order to have a full job! She confirmed and encouraged God's call in my life to seek ordination in Word and Sacrament. She prayed for me and supported me when she became my predecessor at the Dyersburg Church in 1994, where she had served the previous 15 years as DCE. She prays and encourages me to this very day, even when I don't think I can continue. Her words to me are quite similar to those of Mordecai to Esther..."Honey, God did not bring you this far, or give you this family, to just leave you." In other words, Mrs. Jenny is telling me....."Perhaps, you have come to this place in your life for a reason; 'for just such a time as this'!" Will you pray with me.....

Gracious God, thanking you for calling Esther to do a great work for you. Thank you for her uncle Mordecai, who was able to encourage her to do that hard thing. Thank you that you continue to call women today to do great works for you. May we all be more attentive to your call in our lives – the call that can come from anywhere.....through prayer or by studying your Word, through the words of a parent or child, through a relationship that we have with our spouse or friend, from a book we've read or a movie we seen, from experiencing your glorious creation. Unstop our ears, O Lord, and help us to hear your voice as it calls us to new paths of ministry and mission. May we reach out to serve others in response to your call in our lives. For it's in the name of Christ we pray, Amen

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