

McCabe United Methodist Church
“Every Story Has a Backstory”
Esther Series: Once Upon a Time Like This...
Sermon on sel. verses of Esther 1 & 2 (1/10 & 1/11/15)
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Once upon a time, in an imperial dynasty far, far away, there lived a sensitive and sentimental king named Xerxes who was easily influenced by the officials in power below him. King Xerxes loved his queen, Queen Vashti, yet on a particularly public occasion, Queen Vashti disobeyed King Xerxes: his anger and embarrassment burned hot. And so, at the suggestion of his advisors, King Xerxes banished his beloved Vashti. Not only that, but the king also made a law that, everywhere in his empire, wives were *never* to disobey their husbands.

King Xerxes' advisors also suggested the king find himself a new queen: a queen of his choosing who would both please him *and* obey him. As any red-blooded king would, King Xerxes liked this idea.

And so a contest for this new queen was established. Young women from throughout his empire were brought in to the Capital City of Susa, their families perhaps hoping they might be chosen for the new Queen. Over the course of a year, the young women were given extensive beauty treatments: to be beautiful was part of what it would mean to please the king. But, of course, that wasn't all.

After the year of their beauty treatments, each young woman was called in for one night with King Xerxes. [*Ahem.*] As it happens, the young woman who most pleased the king was a Jewish girl named Esther. Not only was Esther particularly beautiful, but she also was an orphan whose parents had died when she was young, leaving her in the care of a male relative named Mordecai. Mordecai adopted Esther, and raised her as his own daughter.

When it was revealed that King Xerxes would choose for himself a new queen, Esther was among the young woman gathered up to “compete” for the crown. Before she was taken to the royal palace, Mordecai warned Esther not to reveal her Jewish heritage to anyone.

Esther was an obedient girl who loved and respected Mordecai, so she told no one about her heritage. And, as it happened, King Xerxes loved her the best

of all the young women. So Esther became Queen and the king held a great feast in her honor.

Not long after Esther was crowned Queen, Mordecai was near the gate of the palace when he learned that two of the king's servants were plotting to kill King Xerxes. Mordecai told Queen Esther of this deadly plot and, when the queen informed the king, the matter was investigated.

The servants were found guilty of treason and were immediately hanged on the royal gallows. And thus began the story Esther.

“Once upon a time, in a land far, far away...” There is just something about those words at the beginning of a story, isn't there? You hear them, your imagination opens, and you allow yourself to be transported to another time and place. *“Once upon a time, in a land far, far away...”*

Of course, the biblical book of Esther does not actually begin with those words. But, frankly, it might as well begin with them.

For the first time in years, a couple of weeks ago, I read straight through the ten chapters of the book of Esther...and, as I read it, I kept thinking to myself, “This is a fairy tale! It's a fairy tale: right, smack-dab in the middle of the Old Testament!”

Nearly every detail of this biblical book is reminiscent of some other story, or of some other narrative theme.

The basic premise of Esther is that a pretty, orphan girl makes good by winning a competition to become Queen. We've heard that part so far today. But there is so much more to Esther's story. There are jealous rivals with manipulative, deadly plots.

The lives of all the Jews in the empire eventually become endangered, thanks to one of these rivals. And, ultimately, through the prompting of her adoptive father, Mordecai, Queen Esther uses her power to save her people.

It's a “rags to riches to hero” kind of story that made me think of little orphan Annie, *Cinderella*, *The Hunger Games*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and even the ridiculous reality TV show *The Bachelor*.

Esther is a *great* story. I'm so excited to spend several weeks on it with you all in worship...and, like every story, the biblical book of Esther has a *backstory* that deserves time and attention.

As many of you are aware, in the midst of my vacation after Christmas, my grandmother died. My time away was extended through last weekend because we chose to have her funeral last Saturday morning in Sioux Falls. My grandmother was 97 and she had lived a long, full life. Though it was sad, her death was no tragedy. And, thankfully, it was also very peaceful. She even died on her wedding anniversary, which added an element of poetry to the sadness.

As family gathered the week leading up to my grandma's funeral, so much of our *family* backstory bubbled to the surface of conversations both large and small: backstory about the joys of the past, as well as many of the significant challenges. Surely you know what I'm talking about...because very family has challenge in their backstory: members whose actions put everything in jeopardy...“black sheep” who never quite fit in...major tragedies that impacted the entire family system. Such challenges can either be crippling to a family, or they can be vehicles through which transformation and healing ultimately come.

The story of Esther is greatly celebrated among the Jews because it is a story of triumph for their people – triumph in the midst of historic tragedy and painful discrimination. So let's get into the history – the *backstory* – behind the book of Esther. Do your best to stick with me here for the next several minutes...

Esther and Mordecai were Jews. And the Jewish people – the people of Israel – have a long history of being “the underdog.” Since they became a people millennia ago, they have been smaller than other groups and have often struggled to hold onto the land they believe God promised to them through their ancestor Abraham.

The Jewish people have a long history of having been defeated by outside militaries and governments, as well as a long history of being discriminated against by people of other ethnic and cultural groups. It is extremely important for us to keep that in mind as we explore the book of Esther.

As I just mentioned, the Jewish people believe God gave them the land we call Israel as part of a promise God made to Abraham and his wife Sarah. In the Bible, this promise is made early in the book of Genesis, the first book of the

Bible. And much of the story of the Jews is a story of how they have, or have *not*, staked their claim on that land.

Well, back around the turn of the 6th Century before Christ – around the year 600 B.C. – the Babylonian empire began to invade and occupy Israel.

Then, starting in about the year 590 B.C., the Babylonians began systematically deporting members of Israel's leading class, forcing them to leave Israel and to move into other parts of the Babylonian empire.

A way to imagine what happened would be to think about if North Dakota were its own country...and some huge outside nation moved in on us with their military and governmental officials...and then started systematically exiling all of the educated professionals to, say, northern Canada or Nebraska and Iowa. (And, of course, you have to keep in mind those in captivity were not free to leave or to communicate with the folks back home.)

Societies are built on a diverse set of people who are interdependent on one another: educated professionals, community leaders, service personnel, farmers, etc. We all need each other and, despite the fact that there are discrepancies between these groups as far as wages and class are concerned, we all have to recognize each other's importance.

So it was culturally devastating when the Babylonians deported the educated, professional, leadership class from Israel and sent them away from their homeland and people. It was devastating for the Jews who *remained* in Israel and it was devastating for those who were deported.

The period of this deportation is called “the Babylonian Exile,” and the Jews who were deported during this exile were called “the diaspora.”

“Diaspora” is from the same root word as the word “disperse.” The Jews of the diaspora were those who got “dispersed” away from Israel by the Babylonians back in the 6th Century before Christ.

Now. There was a time when the deported Jews *were* invited back to their homeland to live again among their own people. This happened with the Persian Empire overtook the Babylonians around the year 540 B.C. However, since more than a generation had passed, many of the exiled Jews chose to stay put, outside of Israel, and they found a way to live as a cultural minority among foreign people.

The Jews who did *not* return to Israel continued to be referred to as the diaspora. And the story of Esther is a story of Jews in the diaspora living in the time of the Persian Empire. It's a story of people in an ethnic and cultural minority group living among those who, decades before, had conquered their people. Are you with me??? Okay.

Now. A word about the importance the book of Esther holds for the Jewish people, to this day...

In the same way we Christians read Scripture from a Bible – both during worship and in our own devotional time away from church – the Jewish people place high priority on the reading of Scripture, both in and out of public worship services. (And, just to be clear, the Scripture of the Jewish people is the books of what we Christians call “the Old Testament” of our Bible.)

Before the advent of the movable type printing press back in the 1400's, the printed word was typically on papyrus, parchment, or vellum – a paper-like material made from animal skins. For centuries, Jewish Scripture was written on these materials in scroll form and, to this day, Scripture is read in Jewish synagogues *from scrolls* during their public worship services. These Scripture scrolls are quite large and many books of our Old Testament require several scrolls to be complete. Because the book of *Esther* is only ten chapters long, however, it is contained within a single scroll. And there is a Jewish holiday every year dedicated to the reading of this particular scroll of Scripture.

The Jewish holiday that celebrates the book of Esther is called “Purim.” P-U-R-I-M. I'll be talking more about Purim throughout this series – especially on the fourth week of the series – but, for today's purposes, it's simply enough for us to keep in mind that this particular book of Scripture is important enough to the Jewish people that it has its own holiday...it's own *holy* day. Purim.

On Purim, the entire scroll of the book of Esther is read, often as a gathered community of faith, in the synagogue. Folks dress up in fun costumes for Purim, they make a lot of noise during the reading of the story, they exchange gifts of food and drink, they make a point to donate to charity, and there is a great feast to celebrate the day.

As we will discover throughout this series, the story of the book of Esther is both tragic and triumphant for the Jewish people...and, because it *is* a story of ultimate triumph for the Jews, this story is very dear to them.

Christians throughout the centuries have often struggled with the book of Esther for a whole host of reasons, the primary of which is, despite the fact that Esther has a place within our holy scriptures, there is not one mention of God in it.

Let me say that again...and then just kind of let this factoid settle into your brain: despite the fact that the book of Esther has a place within our Bible – our *holy* Bible, our story of God's saving love from the beginning of time – despite the fact that Esther is found within our holy Bible, there is absolutely *no* mention of God anywhere in it.

Women's Bible study author Beth Moore did a study on Esther and I watched many of its video sessions as I prepared for this sermon series.

In the first video session for her Esther study, Beth Moore talks a lot about how God is never mentioned in the book of Esther. She said she got very concerned about the idea of writing an entire Bible study on a book of the Bible that never mentions God: “I was so afraid I would miss Him!” she exclaimed.¹

But then she went on to talk about how, just because God isn't *on the pages* of Esther, does not mean God wasn't *there*. And goodness knows life can feel like that for us, right? Like God isn't anywhere “on the page”? Like we can't feel God's presence with us, or we're struggling to discern what God is calling us to do or who God is calling us to be.

Sometimes it feels like God isn't on some of the pages of our lives. Yet, as people of faith, we trust that, even when it *feels* or *seems* like God isn't there, God is, in fact, with us. Always remember that.

The most famous words from the book of Esther are ones we'll really focus on next week, but they are the source of the title I chose for this series: “Once Upon a Time Like This.”

¹ From session 1 of Beth Moore's study *Esther: It's Tough Being a Woman*. (May not be verbatim.)

The most famous words in Esther are from verse 14 of chapter four. An evil plot had been hatched by one of the king's advisors to kill all of the Jews in the empire. Mordecai got wind of this plot and he tried to convince Esther to use her position as Queen to get King Xerxes to put a stop to the planned genocide.

As he tried to convince her, Mordecai said, "It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!" Other translations of the Bible put it a bit more eloquently...the *New Revised Standard Version* is my favorite: in that version, Mordecai says to Esther, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Despite the fact that God is nowhere on the pages of the book of Esther, Jews and Christians alike understand this story to be the story of a holy calling on Esther's life.

It is, indeed, a rags-to-riches-to-hero kind of story: the little orphan girl from the minority culture, the daughter of exiled Jews deported from their homeland by an outside military superpower, makes good and becomes Queen – and then saves her people, to boot.

We look at the story of Esther and read it as the story of a holy calling, the story of an individual who found herself in a position to bring mercy and help and triumph to her people.

"It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!" *Once upon a time like this...*

I had just graduated from high school when my calling to become a pastor crystallized. And, just a few months after I began telling people this is what I thought God was calling me to do, I was able to attend a nationwide event put on by The United Methodist Church for young people who were discerning a call to church ministry.

The event was called "Exploration" and it is an event our denomination holds every couple of years to this day. When I went, I had such a great time! I was with my people: other youth and young adults who, like me, were trying to figure out what it might mean that God was calling us to serve professionally within the church.

The year I went to Exploration the theme Bible verse of the conference was Esther 4:14, though, instead of using the language of “Queen” or “royal dignity,” the planners of the event had taken a bit of creative liberty.

The theme was “[God called you] for such a time as this!” And it was a powerful theme. It caused us to think not only about what it meant that God was calling us to pastoral ministry, *in general*...but also what it meant that God was calling us into ministry at *this particular time*.

So this book of the Bible has been very special to me for nearly 20 years now. I connect it to the story of my pastoral calling. But every single one of us has a calling. And it's a calling for this particular time. It's a calling “for a time like this.”

Today. Here and now. God calls each of us. Regardless of our backstory – in fact, *because of* our backstory – God calls each of us, in the fullness of who we are, and in the fullness of our own stories, to bring mercy, help, and triumph into this world.

Once upon a time like this...there was a bunch of people in a city called Bismarck, North Dakota, at a place called McCabe United Methodist Church...and God called them to make an impact for good in their community and beyond – God called them to bring mercy, help, and triumph to the lives of others.

That's us, folks. Are you ready to answer this holy call?