

## PERIL FOR HADASSAH

I have bad news and good news. The bad news is, somebody is going to die. The good news is, you get to decide who.

Terrible! Straight from the halls of Hell. But for just a split second, before the soul can put up the shields, something inside starts to smile. For just one flashing moment before the shields snap up, can you feel the beginnings of a sardonic glee? What if God had attached a rider to the sixth commandment: “If you are very good and faithful, if you are hard-working and responsible, then once every twenty years – without guilt, detection, or blame – you may, if you so choose, blink somebody out of this life.”

I wonder if there is anybody here who would have exercised that option by now. I wonder if there is anybody here who would *not* have exercised that option by now. (How many of you think *you* would still be here?)

It is foolish to presume that we know for sure how people of former ages thought and felt. But sometimes we do wonder if they were less squeamish than we are about blood and pain and death and hatred. The Book of Esther, for instance, tells about the origins and events that established the Feast of Purim as one of the great holy days of Judaism. Today, its meaning is revised to focus on deliverance, providence, and the necessity for speaking out against injustice. But just in case some of you decide to read the rest of the Book of Esther this afternoon, or wonder why we don't read from it more often: it is the story of how the exiled Jews in Persia (around 450 B.C.) were given permission to massacre over seventy-five thousand people. Even though the story makes it sound like simple justice, that is a disturbing event to celebrate. It is hard to know if the world today is more advanced or less advanced, morally and spiritually, than it was in 450 B.C. But at least *we* would be hesitant to turn the bombing of Hiroshima into a national holiday.

So it is a disturbing story to find in our sacred Scriptures. We don't read it or talk about it very much. When was the last time you heard a sermon from the Book of Esther? Well, you may not hear much of one today either, but should you go home and decide to read the whole story, I want you to know that I know the rest of it is there.

Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, maybe), King of Persia, got sick of the telephone ringing all the time and people coming in wanting to know this and asking for that. So he made a law: If *anybody* approached him in the inner court, the sentence was death. If he sent for them, well and good. But if they came to him unbidden, they would be executed. The King could waive the death penalty, of course; if he happened to be in a good mood or happened to like you, he could extend the scepter and waive the death penalty. Nevertheless, it was risky to bank on his affection. He thought highly of his privacy, and his moods could change rapidly.

In 587 B.C., about a hundred and fifty years before our story begins, most of the Jewish population had been carried captive into Babylon. Then Persia conquered Babylon. Intelligent, educated, and diligent – maintaining their own customs and beliefs – some of the Jews had risen to prominent positions in the land. This led, as we would expect, to considerable jealousy on the part of some of the natives, who could not see why they should have to compete with or share jobs and positions with foreigners. This antipathy came to its apex between a Jew named Mordecai and an Amalekite named Haman, the Prime Minister. More on that in a moment.

King Ahasuerus loved wine, and he let it flow freely at his banquets. He instructed his wine stewards to let each guest drink in his own way and to serve each one as much as he wanted. (By the way, such an attitude is one of the telltale marks of an alcoholic.) On the seventh day of one great banquet, the King was feeling quite good, and he sent word commanding that Queen Vashti appear before all his guests, dressed in her crown – and I mean only her crown. That’s one of the parts they usually slough over pretty quickly in Sunday School. In any case, the Queen was beautiful, and the King, in his cups, wanted to show her off and make everybody jealous.

The Queen did not relish the idea or the company (after seven days of drinking), and perhaps she suspected that the King might not remember the incident. In any case, she did not come.

King Ahasuerus *did* remember, and, aside from being severely miffed, he was greatly concerned about the welfare of his subjects. If the Queen could disobey him and get away with it, surely all the wives in the land would begin to be rebellious and disobedient to their husbands. It was clearly a state of emergency. (And/or, we suspect, the King was still drunk.) After consulting with his advisors (who were no doubt also

drunk), Ahasuerus decided that it was only fitting and just that Vashti should never again appear before him, having declined when she had been invited. Therefore, a new Queen should be chosen in her place, one who would be subservient and obedient, not rebellious or contentious. Or, as Scripture says: *“In order that each man might be master in his own house and control all his own womenfolk.”* (Esther 1:22) Letters were sent to all the provinces, in each province’s own language, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household. (Now you know for sure that the King was still drunk.) Soon afterward, the search for the most beautiful virgins began, that the Queen’s place might be filled.

Onto this scene came a Jewish kid named Myrtle. Myrtle was an orphan who lived with her uncle, Mordecai, who was an attendant at the King’s court. She was a knockout and very sexy, as the name Myrtle used to imply: white flowers with aromatic, edible berries, sacred to Venus among the Greeks; among the Hebrews, the boughs of the myrtle were emblematic of sexual love. Naturally, lovely young Myrtle was picked up as one of the many possible prospects for the King’s attention. Mordecai instructed Myrtle not to disclose her Jewish identity. Next thing we know, Myrtle was being called Esther, after the Babylonian deity Ishtar, instead of by her own Hebrew name. No king wants to marry some kid named “Moitle.” Oh, I forgot to mention that in Hebrew, Myrtle is pronounced Hadassah.

Now, it took a whole year of practice and preparation before a girl could be ushered in to spend the night with the King. And after that first night, she would not be sent into the King again unless he expressly asked for her. But whatever it was that Myrtle had, the King wanted it. He kept asking for her, and he finally chose her as his new Queen. And so, the little orphan, Cinderhadassah, rose to highest prominence and became Queen of all Persia. That’s where most Cinderella stories end, but this story was just beginning.

Esther became Queen, and Haman became Prime Minister. And wouldn’t you know, Mordecai refused to bow down before Haman or do obeisance before him. Discovering that Mordecai was a Jew and that Jewish people did not bow the knee except before their God, Haman determined to exterminate the Jews. He told Ahasuerus about the misfit band of people within the kingdom who wouldn’t cooperate with the customs or obey the laws of the King, but who insisted on obeying their own laws in their own way. So the King gave Haman his signet ring

(power of attorney), and told him he could deal with the troublemakers however he saw fit. And that is where we come into the story in the Scripture reading this morning. I'm really sorry I don't have time to read the rest of the book to you.

Nevertheless, there is much in this story to muse about, far more than we have time for this morning. Esther has been thrust into this situation without design or request on her part. She has risen from an orphan dependent on her uncle, to the Queen of Persia who has most anything she wants. We sense from the story that she likes it at the top, and that she is just beginning to understand and enjoy all the benefits of her new glory. Why can't life stay simple, with her only problem being to keep the King happy?

When Esther learns of Haman's plot against her people, she clearly wants no part of it. She would prefer to be ignorant of what is going on. Next to that, she would like to be left out of it. Next to that, she would like to insist that there is nothing she can do about it. Oy veh! Why can we never read a story without seeing ourselves there reflected?

Mordecai had insisted that Esther keep her Jewishness a secret. Now she seems to be on the verge of forgetting it altogether. Why should an orphan risk such new and glorious heights for an old identity, an old God, and an old way of life? Oh why couldn't the whole mess just disappear or drift on by?! Why couldn't somebody *else* do something? Oh please, dear God, not now! Not when I'm just on the brink of ... Isn't it strange how often we are on the brink of something when God calls?

Have you ever had that sinking feeling: "I'm the one for this. This is my assignment, my trouble, my issue. This one has my name on it ..."? Poor Esther! I can just imagine her tossing and turning and pacing and anguishing. To have to risk it all, and after all the years of hoping and working and wondering and dreaming. And now, when the dream has almost come true, suddenly real life comes thundering in with great urgency. And real life often carries with it the threat that our lives are about over.

Remember, the whole affair had come about over the issue of obedience. Wouldn't the King be watching carefully to see if Esther would abuse her Queenship? Wouldn't he be eager to make an example of her also, if she showed the slightest inclination to be contentious? If she walked in at the wrong time – to make demands, to interfere in the

King's business, to reveal that she herself was one of the Jews whom Haman hated – what were her chances of survival? Very, very slim, from any practical, logical perspective.

Looking from the bottom up, it always seems clear that if we had some high position, we could make a lot of changes and do a lot of good. From the high positions, however, somehow all those advantages seem to melt away. Here is Esther, the Queen of all Persia, feeling helpless and thinking, "There is nothing I can do. If I stick my neck out, I will lose it, and all for nothing." On the other hand, she cannot shake that sinking feeling: She is the one. It is her turn. The task belongs to her, win or lose.

It is peril for Hadassah.

It's not a big deal, I guess, but I cannot help noticing the juxtaposition of submissiveness. The story makes a big point, for instance, of the obedience Esther gives to her uncle, Mordecai. He instructs her in many things, and she is much praised for her submissive spirit and her obedience down to the smallest details. Clearly the story is making her an example to all Jewish girls and women. Then suddenly it becomes imperative that Esther be a bold, courageous, fearless woman who would dare to defy the King's law and walk in on him, risking death on behalf of her people. Esther almost cannot bring herself to do it. Her training in submissiveness very nearly costs the lives of all the Jews in Persia. And the storyteller never seems to realize this inherent contradiction. Or maybe he waits for us to realize that when Esther's submissiveness reaches to her prayers with God, then everything straightens out again.

Is Esther ever assertive again? Or is this the only time? For that, you must read the rest of the story.

What reaches me most is the inner spectrum of the story. The physical peril was great. No doubt about it. But was not the spiritual peril even greater? What if Esther had decided to remain silent? What if she had decided to keep her privileges and luxuries and enjoy her new position and all that went with it? What if she had decided to let whatever befell her people remain none of her business, while all of her people perished all around her? She could have spent the rest of her days sitting on velvet cushions, wondering what would have happened if she had been a *real* person (a *mensche*) – an actual living soul.

So there was peril for Hadassah. She had to risk her position, her prosperity, and her life, all in the hope that she might save her people. This she did, finally, asking all her people to join in prayers for her:

that she might not lose courage, and that she might present herself in the very best manner possible. And she said, "If I perish, I perish." But the real peril was greater than that – greater than the loss of her life. She might have done nothing, and lost her soul.

God made the sun –  
it gives heat, light, sight, even life.  
God made the moon –  
it gives tides, moonbeams, romance, and mystery.  
God made the stars –  
they give beauty, inspiration, direction, awe.  
God made the air –  
it gives breath, coolness, balmy breezes, great winds.  
God made the clouds –  
they give shade, beauty, rain, imagination.  
God made the earth –  
it gives grandeur, solidity, resources, gems, nourishment.  
God made the seas –  
they give fish, plants, transportation, majesty, nurture.  
God made the trees –  
they give perfume, lumber, fruit, shade.  
God made the birds –  
they give beauty, grace, fragrance, color.  
God made the beasts –  
they give companionship, meat, milk, wool, hides.  
God made you –  
what do you give?

I have bad news and good news. The bad news is, some things are going to die. The good news is, you get to decide what. It really is *not* a joke, is it? People and things do die. And it maybe is not very good news, but in very real ways *we* decide who and what will die in our world. We do not even have to hate or hurt. If enough of us withdraw our interest or our concern or our support, any person, thing, church, idea, concept, or faith will die upon the earth. That is the peril for Hadassah, and that is the peril for all of us. What shall we let die? Ourselves? Our neighbors? The Christ? And sometimes, to choose to survive is the death of the soul.

But then, I guess that is exactly what the man was trying to tell us when He said: "*Whoever would save his own life shall lose it. Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*"