*DEVOTION*

August 21 - 26

*People of God: Esther*

**Monday, August 21 Esther 1:1 – 2:18**

*“He set the royal crown on her head and declared her queen”*

The theme of power – who has it, who receives it, who loses it – will recur throughout the story of Esther. In the first chapter, the all-powerfulness of Xerxes (in Hebrew, *Ahasuerus*) is revealed as a sham; he does not even have power over his own domestic arrangements. First his wife successfully opposes him, and then he must turn to his advisers to tell him what to do about it. It is not enough to declare that one has power, the story is saying. To truly have power, one must have the accompanying wisdom and skill to exercise it.

The theme of power appears again in the second chapter with the juxtaposing of the power of the king and his court, who can disrupt the lives of every family in the empire at will by requiring their daughters to enter his harem, and the powerless status of Mordecai and Esther, an exile and an orphan respectively. The comfort of a young girl is nothing beside the desire of the king! This is an ironic foreshadowing; by the end of the story, the powerless exile and the orphan will control the Persian Empire.

*You use the powerless, Lord, to overthrow the designs of the powerful. Amen.*

**Tuesday, August 22 Esther 2:19 – 3:15**

*“Mordecai refused to bow down”*

Mordecai’s action is that of a righteous man performing a good deed without the thought of reward. Even after the rebels are executed, Mordecai does not seem to expect a reward, nor does Esther request one for him. They simply do what is right and then go on about their business. This behavior will prove a sharp contrast to the later actions of Haman, who wants the reward without having done the good deed. Scripture presents Mordecai and Esther as models of wise and righteous conduct.

The theme of racial hostility is evident and it allows a personal quarrel to become a national crisis. Haman seems to feel that Mordecai’s insult is motivated by his Jewishness. He resolves, therefore, to wipe out the entire Jewish people, evidently assuming that all Jews would behave in a similar fashion. Generalizations such as these have fueled fires of ethnic and racial conflict in many parts of the world throughout history. Races and ethnic groups exist. But there is no reason, as we will see by the end of the book of Esther, that they cannot coexist peacefully.

*All are created in your image, Lord, and are worthy of being loved. Amen.*

**Wednesday, August 23 Esther 4:1 – 5:8**

*“For such a time as this”*

The actions of Esther in chapter 4 present us with an all-too-human portrait of a person’s response when faced with a demand for action in a situation that she neither created nor asked for – a resounding “No!” Often life locates us in situations where we are capable of taking action on behalf of another person or people, but with possible negative consequences for ourselves. Esther’s consequences are clear and absolute: She faces death.

Mordecai is convinced of two things: Help will come for the Jews from somewhere, whether from God or from humans, and Esther, given her favorable circumstances, must act. If she does not, she (and her family) will be held responsible for her cowardice. This more than anything else in the book of Esther implies belief in the activity of divine providence, even though God remains unmentioned. Esther experiences the dilemma of every believer: How does one find the courage and faith to do what is right in the face of opposition. Esther’s example gives us courage to reach beyond ourselves and act on behalf of others, placing our trust in God.

*Use me, Lord, to act on behalf of others even if it means hardship for me. Amen.*

*DEVOTION*

August 21 - 26

*People of God: Esther*

**Thursday, August 24 Esther 5:9 – 6:14**

*“Haman hurried home dejected and completely humiliated”*

The contrast between Esther and Haman in these verses is a contrast between godly wisdom and human foolishness. Esther has become a model of the wise person, not only for the biblical Jews but for us contemporary readers. From the beginning of the story, she has heeded the advice of others: “Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advice (Proverbs 12:15). And, she is careful in her speech: “Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives; those who open wide their lips come to ruin” (Proverbs 13:3).

Haman, on the other hand, with his anger and pride, is a living example of the proverbial fool: “A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back,” “A persons’ pride will bring humiliation, but one who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor,” and “Better to be poor and walk in integrity, than to be crooked in one’s ways even though rich” (Proverbs 29:11, 23; 28:6). Finally, Haman should be reminded, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what the day may bring” (Proverbs 27:1).

*Teach me wisdom, Lord, so I will not make a fool of myself. Amen.*

**Friday, August 25 Esther 7:1 – 8:17**

*“The king’s decree gave the Jews in every city authority to unite to defend their lives”*

It may seem strange that a law would have to be made allowing the Jews to defend themselves. Sometimes people get so caught up in legalism and seeking to be law-abiding that they lose sight of the moral ground on which the law should be based. “If the law says to attack the Jews, then we should attack the Jews whether we want to or not. If the law does not say the Jews can defend themselves, then they cannot, no matter what the natural response would be.” This attitude denies the principle that morality ultimately rests in God and that humans are called to be moral because they are created by God.

In Judaism, the law is not good in and of itself. Rather, it is good because it was given by a good God; its purpose is to make Israel “a holy nation” (Leviticus 19:2). Therefore, Mordecai and Esther are justified in their attempt to overturn a legal decree, for that decree violates the higher law of God, which views each human life as precious. As Jesus put it, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

*When your law conflicts with human law, Lord, I will follow yours. Amen.*

**Saturday, August 26 Esther 9:1 – 10:3**

*“This celebration is called Purim”*

Purim has proved to be a festival of enduring popularity. Purim begins on the fourteenth of Adar (usually sometime in March in the Western Calendar), but is preceded by a minor fast, the Fast of Esther, on the thirteenth of Adar, during which observant Jews fast from sunup until sundown. On the fourteenth of Adar, the Scroll of Esther is read publicly in the congregation. In some traditions, this reading is accompanied by sound effects from the congregation. For example, there will be booing and stamping of feet whenever Haman’s name is mentioned.

The fifteenth of Adar would later be added, extending Purim to a two-day festival. In Jerusalem there has also been a tradition of a three-day festival. Purim as a modern celebration is characterized by feasting at home and sending gifts of food to others. Charitable giving is also emphasized. It is now customary for Purim parties to be held, especially for children, for which the celebrants wear costumes, dressing up as Esther, Mordecai, Haman, Xerxes and Vashti.

*The story of your deliverance, Lord, is always a cause for our joyful celebration. Amen.*