

Proper 21 B Sermon
September 26, 2021
Esther, selected verses

Makeover Madness
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It's a sad truth that there really aren't many Bible stories with female heroines. So, when the lectionary presented a few disjointed verses from the book of Esther for today, it seems like the perfect opportunity to seize on the story of this incredible woman. Rather than limit ourselves to those verses, however, I'm going to highlight a few sections of text, interspersed with my own narrative, in order to paint a more complete portrait of Esther than the lectionary passage offers, without reading the entire book.

By way of introduction, Esther was a young woman, who, keeping her Jewish identity secret, had been made queen of Persia by King Xerxes. Esther's cousin Mordecai uncovered a plot by the King's advisor Haman to wipe out the Jewish people. Mordecai begged Esther to intercede with the king on her people's behalf. Reading now from the book of Esther, the fourth chapter, words of Mordecai:

“Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. ¹⁴For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

Esther agreed to intercede with the king for the lives of her people and invited Xerxes and Haman to a special dinner in their honor. Reading now from the book of Esther, the seventh chapter:

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ²As they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther, “What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” ³Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. ⁴For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.” ⁵Then the King said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?” ⁶Esther said, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

Outraged, the king ordered that Haman be hung and decreed that the Jewish people should defend themselves on the day that Haman’s evil plot was to be executed. A final reading from Esther establishes the celebration of Purim to commemorate Esther’s bold action on her people’s behalf. Reading once more from the book of Esther, the ninth chapter:

²⁰Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Xerxes, both near and far, ²¹enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, ²²as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

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Our American culture seems utterly taken with makeovers. How many of us have seen *Queer Eye*, *Dream Home Makeover*, the *Biggest Loser*, or any one of a number of other shows that deal with the transformations of homes, or cars, or people? To be honest, I'm kind of addicted to home and garden makeover shows. I love seeing the dismal before picture transform into the glorious after picture. Others, maybe even some of us, are equally enthralled with the programs that focus on personal transformations from stout to svelte, from frumpy to fashion-forward. I don't know what it is about them, but whether it's with houses or cars or people, we love makeovers.

Maybe that's why Esther is such a compelling character. In a Cinderella-like, rags to riches story, Esther goes from country bumpkin to Queen of Persia. All it took was secrecy about her religion and ethnicity, a year of beauty treatments in Xerxes palace, and one unforgettable night with the king for all her dreams to come true! That's the stuff of reality TV!

Over the centuries, the book of Esther has been subjected to some pretty serious makeovers of its own. You may have noticed a difference between the biblical text and the story I shared with the kids earlier. Sidnie White Crawford, professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln explains that:

The book of Esther had difficulty gaining canonical status in both Jewish and Christian traditions, mainly because it lacks religious elements. There are no prayers or sacrifices, no mention of Jerusalem or the Temple. Neither Esther nor Mordecai seems to follow or even acknowledge Jewish law. Esther is married to a Gentile, eats non-kosher food, and seems to be thoroughly assimilated into the Gentile world. Most strikingly, and strangely for an OT document, God is

never mentioned.¹

And hence the perceived “need” for a sort of religio-baptism of the text by later redactors. Some 107 verses were added in the late 2nd or early 1st century BCE. These Greek additions to the Hebrew text introduce God taking an active role in the salvation of the Jewish people from Haman’s terrible plot. When Jerome translated the Bible into Latin in the 5th century CE, he removed these additions and placed them at the end of the book of Esther but the makeover didn’t stop there. In the 13th century, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langston, gave these Greek additions, now collected at the end of Esther, chapter and verse numbers, as if they were a continuation of the original Hebrew — which they weren’t.² These additions still exist in many versions of the Bible today. That’s quite a makeover!

If we’re completely honest with ourselves, though, I would imagine that we’re more comfortable with the book of Esther being a story of fait—a religious heroine, the spiritual guidance of a beloved cousin, a sympathetic husband, divinely authored deliverance, and just punishment for the sins of the wicked. But that’s just not this story. The truth is, I think that is precisely the way we church people like to tell our own stories—the stories of our religion, our denomination, our congregations, and even ourselves. We tend to prefer the post-makeover version.

Theologian Frederick Buechner writes that telling the truth about ourselves, “is often just what we fear more than anything else... And so little by little we come to accept instead the highly edited version which we put forth in hope that the world will find it more acceptable than the real thing.”

¹ Sidnie White Crawford. *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.

² Dan Clendenin. *Queen Esther: Unedited*, JourneywithJesus.net, September 20, 2015, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>.

How tempting it is to edit our own stories, our church's story, our national stories in order to make ourselves look better, more spiritual, more pious. But for all our attempted makeovers, we really just look less "real." Less human. Less like Jesus. Less like the ones God shaped us from the dirt to be and called good.

That's not to say that we'll never need to change, grow, improve, or adapt. It is to say that who we *were* and who we *want to be* are both a part of who we *are*. When we at New England Church say that "no matter who you are or where you are on your journey of faith and life, you are welcome here," we *really* mean it. But, we also expect to change and grow and improve and adapt together, in order to better reflect the one we call Christ and better serve the humanity we call family.

Thank God for Esther. She didn't really need a makeover and the liberating truth is that neither do you or I. Let's just be ourselves, on a journey together. That's real Christian community. May it be so with us. Amen.