

Nevertheless, She Persisted: Listening to Women of the Bible

Week Two: Esther

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I. Her-story

Scripture: Esther 2:5-10,16-18

The book of Esther is one of the greatest “feel-good” books of the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish tradition. It takes place during the Persian exile period and it speaks to how the Jews developed their own resistance to oppression during this exile. Throughout Jewish history, the Jews have always had a minority mentality. They were created as a small group of people who were called to do great things in the world; to be a light to all nations. They have always been the underdogs and they have always felt the breath of bigger and stronger nations on their necks with threats of a takeover. This Persian exile was just one among many, but it is in this exile that Esther was created, and from which the Jewish holiday of Purim originated.

The story of Esther is that she was a Jewish orphan named Hadassah, who was raised by her cousin, Mordecai. She was a beautiful child who was always obedient and did her part in the community. The Persian King at the time was a man called “Ahasuerus,” which literally translated means “the man with many headaches”. It could also be interpreted as the man who was always drinking. Ahasuerus had a beautiful Queen named Vashti. And during one of many extravagant parties thrown by the King, he managed to get quite drunk and called on his Queen to come and dance naked for him and his friends at the party. Queen Vashti refused and greatly embarrassed the King in front of his friends. His friends convinced him that not obeying one’s husband was a bad precedent to be setting for the entire kingdom so he should deal harshly with this Queen and begin to look for a new one. Ahasuerus was easily persuaded.

Within the search for a new Queen, Hadassah was presented to the royal court for consideration, but they changed her name to the Persian version which is “Esther”. Literally translated, Esther means “the hiding of the face”. Eventually, through many trials and side stories concerning her cousin Mordecai, Esther was chosen as the next Queen of Susa, and it is within this role that Esther comes to realize most fully her identity, or calling, within her community.

When the Jewish community was threatened to be annihilated throughout the entire 127 provinces of the Persian empire by the King’s right hand man Haman, it was Esther, through her influence with the King, who was able to not only save her people from genocide, but to allow them to seek vindication for the mistreatment they had endured throughout their exile.

Though this story of Esther and Mordecai is clearly a story of the vindication and triumph of God's chosen people in the world, it is ironic that this is also the only book in the Hebrew Bible where God is never even mentioned.

Many stories arise about the *hidden* nature of God in the world during times of exile and oppression for the Jews, for this is when God feels most distant from God's people. Isn't it true that for many of us, when we are feeling most isolated and cut off from our community and traditions, that one of the first questions we ask is "Where is God in all of this?" "Why isn't God coming to save us from this suffering?" It is out of these experiences that legends are born, and Esther is one of those Jewish traditions.

It is generally agreed by biblical scholars that the book of Esther is not historical. In fact most of the Midrash materials concerning Esther claim it to be all a dream of Mordecai. What better way to live with your present suffering than to create a story that speaks to the Jewish people rising up and being totally vindicated as God's chosen people in the world? Does knowing that this book is not historical fact change the powerful truth to which it speaks? If we are listening to the voices of these women of the Bible in order to seek a diverse perspective about God and how God is working in the world, couldn't this story of Esther still be a powerful testimony regardless of its historical status?

In our present times, we too create stories of triumph and vindication, in order to help us persist through uncertain times. The entire comic book industry is founded on this reality. The latest of these comic book heroes brought to life through movies is Wonder Woman. And it is surprising the parallels between Diana Prince's story and Esther's. For both women, it was a question of discovering their identities, working through the obstacles that distract them from fulfilling these identities, and then persisting in helping others live most fully into who they are created to be. I must issue a **Spoiler Alert** here, that as we talk about these identities and obstacles I may be revealing some information that you don't want to hear prior to seeing the movie, so I'll give you time to escape before it's too late.

When we return, we will hear more about the similarities between Esther and Wonder Woman, after we listen for a moment to one more of our more current women's voices. Cup of Jane Women's History Video Clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UHmvnueOiGA>

II. Identity and Obstacles

Scripture: Esther 4:1-17

For Esther, it wasn't until Mordecai declares "*For 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 4:14) that Esther is forced to discern her call

from God and decide if she is willing to take the risks necessary to live into her identity. In her preparation she fasts, and asks all Jews to fast with her, as she readies herself to act on her discernment.

For Diana Prince (Wonder Woman), she discovers her identity as she trains to be a warrior within the Amazon court. She has always been told that she was fashioned out of clay by Zeus and given life to prepare for a day when Ares, the god of war, returns for battle with the Amazons. She is told that Zeus left a special weapon called “the god killer” behind to assist them in this battle with Ares, but Diana was led to believe it was a sword that was kept in a special section of the kingdom. One day, while training, Diana accidentally crossed her wrists in a defensive move and set off a wall of energy that was capable of pushing back a whole field of soldiers on the attack. Experiencing this new-found capability, Diana demanded answers from her mother, the queen, and the other military leaders of her community as to why she had such powers.

It turns out that it is Diana, herself, that is the special weapon Zeus left behind to help the Amazon women defeat Ares. She was created by Zeus and given specific powers that made her an exceptional warrior. Once she discovers her identity, she realizes that she must go out of her community to defeat Ares. She agrees to return with the soldier who has accidentally crashed his fighter plane in their territory and has told them of the war threatening the world he knows. But in this new world there are many obstacles that stand in the way of Diana accomplishing her calling to end war.

For Esther, the obstacles to fulfilling her calling were the royal protocols and the punishments put in place for breaking those protocols. The last queen was exiled for breaking the rules. When Mordecai asks Esther to talk to the king on behalf of the Jews, Esther responds saying *“All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.”* (Esther 4:11)

For Diana, the obstacles were legion. The culture of the time did not allow women much of a voice or entry into the decision-making for the community. And though the soldier knew of her powers and helped her gain access to many places she would otherwise not be admitted, he was certain there were actual rules to the business of war, and did not even conceive of what could happen if he were to push beyond those traditional protocols of war and risk thinking about new strategies. She followed the soldiers and the conventions of the time for a while. She dressed in a long skirt, jacket, and boots even though they restricted her movements. She hung back behind the soldier, taking his lead on how and when to move forward to either gain permission or push through the barriers of the front line. When Diana realized that these protocols and conventions were stopping the soldiers from moving

forward in their quest to end war, Diana threw off her cloak and drew her sword to lead the way through breaking the barriers that stopped them.

In an amazing scene entitled “No Man’s Land,” the soldier tells Diana there is no way through the stalemate at the front and breaking the barriers there was not the job they had come there to accomplish. But Diana enters the fray saying, “It is not why you have come, but it is why I have come.” Diana’s belief and identity overcome the obstacles she faces and allow her to live most fully into who she was created to be.

For Esther, she too draws from her identity to break through protocols that block her from saving her people from genocide. She finds a way to stand within sight of the King in order for him to call her into his presence, allowing her the opportunities she would need to persuade the King to spare her people from Haman’s plan to kill them. In the end, Esther’s plan works and, not only is Haman’s plan spoiled, but Haman and all of his sons were hanged. The Jews were vindicated and Mordecai was welcomed into the King’s court to stop the oppression of the Jewish people in exile.

Thinking on these stories of triumph against war and oppression, what do you think they could be telling us about the nature of God and how God is active in our lives today? Let’s take a couple of minutes during our musical offering to meditate on these stories.

Musical Meditation: *Is she with you* (9:00) *Born for this* (11:00)

III. Persistence

Since this story of Esther and Mordecai never even mentions God, it may seem like we are finding connections that weren’t intended. But the very story itself tells us that the Jewish tradition believes that God is present with them always, even in exile when God seems most hidden from view and the people feel isolated and abandoned. Somehow God makes a way when there seems to be no way, by using the most improbable people to accomplish the most impossible of tasks.

In the face of uncertainty and chaos, God’s love persists. It is this steadfast love that gives rise to the calling of God’s people to live most fully into the people they were created and called to be. If God is for us, who can be against us?

We, as God’s people, are not called to be about “winning” but to be about persisting in the midst of uncertainty, carrying our identity as our sword and shield as we battle our way through all the obstacles we face on any given day. The winning is up to God, not us. Wonder Woman’s calling does not end when that particular war ends. She will be called upon again and again to battle against the many wars of her time. And Esther did not save the Jews once and for all, but rather for her time. The Jews will continue to face oppression and genocide. But Esther persisted as she was called.

Persistence means seeking to live most fully into our identities as God's people in the world, despite all those voices who seek to silence us. God is with us in this calling and will never leave us orphaned or abandoned. God always leads in love for God's creation, and we are called to do the same. Diana tells the community who says they don't deserve her "It's not about what you deserve, it's about what you believe, and I believe in love."
Amen.

IV. Communion