

The Bold and the Biblical Esther
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As we continue our lenten series on the theme of stories, I have to draw your attention to one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible - Esther. The book of Esther plays out like a modern day soap opera. She is an orphaned Jewish girl raised by her older cousin, Mordecai, in the kingdom of Persia. In his third year of reign, the king of Persia throws a lavish dinner party that lasted seven straight days! On the final night of partying the king summons his wife, Queen Vashti, to appear before him and all his men. We never learn exactly why, but Vashti refuses the king's demand (smart woman!) and he is absolutely furious! Rather impulsively, he has the queen ceremoniously kicked to the curb with nothing but the clothes on her back. Then, to spare his fragile ego, he declares there will be a kingdom wide beauty contest to find a new wife, Vashti's replacement. Mordecai enters Esther into that contest. Not much is revealed about Esther's character. She is only identified as exceptionally beautiful and obedient, the antithesis of Vashti. Or is she? Stay tuned!

As it turns out Esther ends up winning the beauty contest and her reward is a place in the king's harem! When her turn comes to spend the night with the king, he is actually quite overcome by her beauty. He falls under her spell and immediately makes Esther his queen. But, Esther has a secret. During this whole process, at the insistence of cousin Mordecai, she conceals her Jewish identity. However, not a hot second after Esther is named queen does cousin Mordecai get into a pissing contest with one of the king's top officials. The royal official, named Haman, convinces the king that Mordecai, and all Jewish people living in Persia should be killed - all because Mordecai failed to bow in Haman's presence. Learning of the plot, Mordecai warns Esther and now urges her to use her influence as a Jewish queen to intervene on behalf of her people. NOW, Mordecai wants Esther to reveal her carefully guarded secret - despite the fact that doing so puts her at great personal risk. In his determination for Esther to act, Mordecai reminds Esther that she been placed in this untenable situation for a reason. No pressure Mordecai! The very man who got her into this mess now postulates, "Perhaps you're in this place of privilege for such a time as this". Is Esther just a pawn in this exhibition of power? Stay tuned!

Now, there is no doubt, Esther has heard stories about Queen Vashti around the palace. After all, Vashti's disobedience prompted a well organized smear campaign coordinated by the king's noble court men who were threatened by her inner power and hutzpah. Vashti's decision to stand up against a powerful man is a really radical move. Some say unprecedented in Biblical literature. While there are other biblical women who refuse to do a man's bidding (the midwives around Pharaoh at the time of Moses come to mind), they do so in stealth, masking their defiance. Vashti's defiance is overt. As a result she is banished from the kingdom and left with nothing. No one would want to find themselves in this situation. Least of all young Esther! This is a moment of crisis for Esther. She finds herself caught between two powerful men. She is struggling with conflicting

obediences. Esther feels a sense of loyalty and responsibility for Mordecai. And at the same time, her royal status, identity and quite possibly her life are all closely tied to her abject obedience to the king. In this fateful moment, Esther takes a good long look at herself in the mirror. Her next steps dictate the narrative and trajectory of her life and the very existence of her people. Will she remain obedient and silent in order to protect her privilege as queen? Or will she summon the courage to act on behalf of her people? Don't miss out on the next exciting chapter of the Bold and the Biblical!

I told you this is a dramatic story! And I'm only giving you the reader's digest version.

I encourage you to read Esther for yourself and invite you to put yourself in the story. How would you respond if suddenly you found yourself in a compromising situation? What would you do if someone in a position of power and influence tried to press you to engage in something that goes against your values, your identity and who you know yourself to be as a child of God? Would the way you handle a situation like this be influenced by pleasing others or choosing to do what you believe is the right thing to do? Would you be prepared to accept the consequences of your actions no matter what you choose?

These are difficult questions for Esther. And certainly for the first queen as well. The way Vashti's story played out ultimately brings Esther to her moment. When, with great courage she resolves to do what she can to save her people she channels Vashti's boldness. But the success of Esther's action depends on a meticulous plan executed with laser point precision. Standing up to both sources of male authority in her life, Esther assumes control of Mordechai's plan, changing and amending it as she sees fit. Instead of following his suggestion to simply make her petition before the king while bating her eyes, Esther gets her Vashti on. She throws a series of parties (as Vashti did) and like Vashti, she appears before the king only when she decides that the time is right. The compliant and obedient Esther becomes a woman of action! After a few days, with clarity and conviction, she declares "I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish". And so she does. Through a series of remarkable coincidences and plot reversals, Esther manages to demonstrate that Haman is actually the one who poses the greatest threat to the king and his kingdom and Haman is ... let's just say, removed. Through these bold and beautiful acts of courage, Esther, remembers who she is, reclaims her identity and saves her people. The End!

The book of Esther belongs on your must read list. It's intriguing to note that this story almost didn't make it into the Bible. Scholars argued that it did not belong in the Bible because it never references God directly. Eventually it did find its way into the Hebrew canon because it is a sacred story that helped the Jewish people understand their own story. Seen or unseen, heard or unheard God is always present and working behind the scenes through the human initiative of characters like Vashti and Esther. Two different and similar women. One is overt, the other more cunning. Both are bold and courageous. They live in a world with limited resources for women yet they know there is more to their story than the limits society has placed on them and they act on it!

Recently, I heard a story about a member of our society. Like Vashti and Esther, he also has little resources but still manages to use his life to change the trajectory of another's. It's a story that comes from Father Greg Boyle who oversees Homeboy Industries, a gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in Los Angeles. He tells a story about Mario. A shy, quiet, humble, hardworking, ex-gang member, homeboy who traveled with Father Greg to appear before a large audience of college students and faculty. This is not familiar or comfortable territory for Mario. He comes from a very different world and he questions why this group of people would want to hear his story. But, at Father Greg's invitation Mario shares the circumstances that led him to his participation in the Homeboy program. He leaves nothing out. He speaks honestly about a childhood filled with such trauma none of us would have survived. He shares about life in a gang, drug abuse, violence and tattoos. He is covered face to feet in tattoos. He closes by telling the audience about the new beginning he was given at Homeboy Industries and how the program both saved and gave him his life back, allowing him to be a "real" father to his children about to enter their teens. When Mario is finished sharing his story he briefly looks out to the audience searching their faces for signs of fear and disapproval and then takes a seat - grateful for the opportunity to hide in the back ground. Father Greg makes his way to the podium assumably to answer questions about the program. The very first question is for Mario. The woman at the microphone and asks him, "What wisdom do you have for your children?" Visibly shaken and fighting back tears Mario returns to the podium. And responds, "I just don't want them to turn out to be like me." After this raw, vulnerable statement of truth hangs over the transformed crowd, it's the woman's turn to cry as she responds, "Why WOULDN'T you want them to turn out like you? You are kind, you are loving, you are gentle and wise. I hope your kids turn out to be like you!". Now the audience is on their feet, crying and applauding. Mario is broken wide open as this gathering of strangers remind him who he is. And make no mistake about it - the audience is returned to themselves as well. Father Greg refers to this moment as a kinship of mutuality. He says that in kinship, "we serve as enlightened witnesses, helping each other 'return to ourselves.' In that moment when Mario understood that his story was more than the mistakes he had made or the trauma he has endured, he was returned to himself giving the audience, and all of us, permission to do the same.

We all have a story. A story that has lead us to such a time as this. We have choices to make like Esther and Mario. Will we choose to give up our privilege for the sake of doing what is right and just in our world? Will we give up the false narrative that we are not enough and let our lights shine so that others may learn to do the same? I hope the answer is yes to both those questions. In case you didn't know, your story is important to God. All of it. God doesn't sort our stories into good or bad, right or wrong, worthy or unworthy. And neither should we because our stories, yours, mine, Esther's, and Mario's are all a part of God's story.

Author Marianne Williamson says it this way: "[You] are a child of God. [You] were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within [you]. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone."

So, child of God, I ask you:

How is God calling you to be bold and courageous in such a time as this?

Who needs to hear your story today in order to remember their own?

Sometimes it takes just one brave person to stand up, and speak out to change the trajectory of an individual life, or even a nation.

May you know the wholeness and holiness of your story.

Amen