

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
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“The Insider”
[The Book of Esther, Chapter 7]

The Book of Esther is found in the Old Testament between the books of Nehemiah and Job. It is the story of Purim, a Jewish holiday celebrated in the spring. The story asks an important question: how can the Jewish people maintain their identity when under foreign rule? One answer was to separate as much as possible from the foreigners. The story of Esther proposes another answer: work from the *inside*; join the culture, but do not ever forget who you really are.

The story of Esther was written in the fourth or fifth century B.C.E., which, as you may remember, means “Before the Christian Era.” It is set in the Persian court, when the Jews had been carried off as captives to the seat of the Persian empire. The King is named Ahasuerus and he seems to have a penchant for choosing strong and feisty wives. In the first chapter, he deposes Queen Vashti from the throne when she refuses to appear before him at a drunken brawl. The King then decides to sponsor a beauty contest in order to pick the new queen. Among the contestants is Esther, a young Jewish woman of outstanding beauty. Esther’s uncle and mentor is a Jewish merchant named Mordecai, who cautions her not to reveal the fact that she is a Jew, lest it diminish her chances of winning. Esther does win, and is bestowed with all the honors fitting to the wife of a Persian emperor.

Mordecai, meanwhile, discovers a plot against the King’s life, passes the info to the King through Esther, which means that the King is now forever indebted to her. Enter at this point the bad guy, who’s name is Haman. In Jewish Sabbath schools, in order to emphasize Haman’s nastiness, they pass out noisemakers to all the children. During the telling of the story, each time Haman’s name is mentioned, the kids twirl their noisemakers, boo and shout. He really was a nudge!

Anyway, Haman gets promoted to right hand man, which means that all subjects must bow to him as if to the King. Mordecai refuses, since his only true king is the Lord God. Haman becomes enraged and is able to convince the King that all the Jews in the kingdom are dangerous and ought to be destroyed. A decree is issued and the day of execution is determined by the casting of “Pur” - lots, which fell on the thirteenth day of the Jewish month Adar. Hence the remembrance of the story is called the Festival of Purim, the Lots.

As the date of killing approaches, Mordecai pleads with Esther to advocate for her people. Now is the time to “come out” to the King, and to plead for her people’s lives. “Do not think,” says Mordecai, “that in the King’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews....Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this”[4:13-14]. So Esther undertakes a risky and brave plan. First, she approaches the King. Now the law was that anyone who approached the King without having first been bidden could be put to death! But Esther gets all dolled up and the King is smitten! He raises his golden scepter, a signal that Esther may approach without fear. “What is your petition?”, he asks. “It shall be granted, even unto the half of my kingdom.”

Esther adds to the suspense. She invites the King and the evil Haman to a banquet on the next day. Haman is beside himself with joy. But he tells his family that he still wants to destroy Mordecai, and then his joy will be complete. Meanwhile the King has a bad night and orders the book of records to be brought for him to read - what better way to put oneself to sleep? The King discovers that Mordecai had saved his life and the next morning asks Haman what should be done to honor him. Thinking the King means him, Haman suggests all kind of finery and honor. But he goes ballistic when he discovers that Mordecai is to be the recipient. Still deep in the dumps, the King's eunuchs arrive to carry off Haman to the Queen's banquet.

Well, you heard the rest. Esther confesses her family background, reveals the plot and asks for the lives of her people. The King is astonished and asks who is behind this dastardly deed? "A foe and an enemy," Esther replies, "this wicked Haman!" The King leaves in a rage, only to return and find Haman slobbering all over Esther, pleading for his life. It's the final straw! The eunuchs cover Haman's head and he is taken out to be hung on the very gallows that he had constructed for Mordecai. The King's anger is calmed and at Esther's further request, an edict is issued saving the lives of the Jewish people. All's well that ends well!

A wonderful story, don't you think? But it is, after all, just that - a story. So let's not try to over-analyze lest it lose its power. Instead let's look at it as a whole and see what stays with us.

What stays with me is the contrast between Esther and Mordecai. She was the insider and he was the outsider. Mordecai stayed outside the court walls. He protested to the powers that be from the outside. But he was proud and a bit obnoxious and risked the lives of his whole people because he wouldn't give in to a single request, to bow down to Haman. On the other hand, Esther used her beauty to become an insider. Surely that was not her original intent. She was after all just a young Jewish princess trying to get a good position in life. But she was taken inside. She kept her identity a secret. She didn't ruffle feathers. She lived very comfortably in the King's court.

Probably very few of us are like Mordecai - the outside prophet, exposing injustice at every turn. No, most of us live on the inside of the power structures of our day. We are comfortable in society, even though we know, deep down, that our affluent lifestyles perpetuate a certain amount of poverty and exploitation and violence. Esther had Mordecai to keep her honest, to remind her of who she was, even though she lived on the inside. Who reminds us that the values of society or of the workplace are not always "native" to Christians? Who reminds us that the violence and prejudice and consumerism of society are not our own values? Does the church serve to remind us that we have another identity, another culture? Are there enough outsiders in our lives that we don't forget who we are?

There came a time when Esther had to "come out," to give up the comfort of anonymity in the court and to plead for her life and the lives of her people. Perhaps there will come a time when each of us will have to "come out," to speak up for someone close to us. Who are those people? Who are we? For whom are we called to be an advocate? Who is the group with whom we find our home?

I remember very clearly several times when I was called to play the role of both the insider and the outsider. One time was during my ministry among the deaf. On the one hand, there was the Diocese, always looking for ways to re-

channel monies away from my program budget. In that case I functioned as the insider, speaking for the deaf, and their many needs. But on the other hand I was also always the outsider. Since I was not deaf myself, there was no way I could completely understand what it was like to be deaf. I was also the outsider to parishes, reminding them of who they were and of the injustice living in their midst. It was part of the tension shared by every Christian who takes seriously the call to follow Jesus.

On the one hand we are insiders, part of a family-sized group of Episcopalians living in a small mountain community. We know the people and how they think. We have learned how to work with them on the inside and get things done. On the other hand, we are also outsiders, because most of us were not born here. So there are times when we will have to speak out in print or in person against a culture hell-bent on destroying its environment. It's a choice we have to make carefully.

I like to be the insider most of the time. Believe it or not, I can be a very subtle person! Sometimes it's even fun! You can be an insider, too. All you have to do is to make a pledge to work with some of the King Ahasuerus's of our area. A pledge is simply a promise to do your best in an area of life that is important to you. No one will send you a bill - rather it's a statement of intent so that others will know what to expect and how to plan ahead. So let's all make a pledge to be like Esther, working on the inside to improve the kingdom, but ready to speak out whenever injustice rears its ugly head.

It's so much easier to be an insider. Unless, of course, you really like the idea of sitting outside the gate like Mordecai did, dressed in a gunny sack with ashes on his head!

Inside or outside - it's your choice!