

**Sept 27      Putting Your Life on The Line      Esther 4:6-17**

I've heard stories from the WWII battlefield; stories about landing on Omaha beach; about snipers picking off soldiers on the march into Germany. And I've heard stories from Vietnam; about jumping from a helicopter into a hot LZ; about moving through jungles in search of Vietcong. This is putting your life on the line.

Test pilots, fire fighters, policemen and others, while not in as much danger, nevertheless risk their lives at times.

In the story of Esther, or **Hadassah**, her Hebrew name, we are faced with two figures that put their lives on the line. One is our heroine, Esther, and the other is the villain, **Haman**. They put their lives on the line in different ways for different reasons and the result is also a contrast. Let's get into the story.

**King Xerxes** of Persia was very upset. He had sent for his wife **Vashti** and she had refused to come to him. He consulted with his advisors and then issued an edict. And I quote: *he sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house*. Can I hear an amen?

The queen was banished from the kingdom, which meant Xerxes was in the market for a new queen.

Xerxes was advised to have try-outs, so all the beautiful young virgins in the kingdom were gathered in Susa. They were prepared for 12 months to meet the king. And I quote: *this was the regular period of their cosmetic treatment, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics*. So even if you weren't chosen, you got 12 months at the spa. Not bad.

Each girl appeared before the king and the text says each girl went to the king in the evening and returned to the harem in the morning. This is the part of the story you won't hear in SS, but it was the way of kings.

Of course, Xerxes chose Esther to be his new queen. In the literal reading of the Hebrew, she was a looker. The king did not know, however, that she was Jewish. She and many other Jews in the kingdom were descendants of Jews who had been taken into Babylonian captivity. They were therefore descendants of the best and brightest of their time.

**Mordecai**, Esther's cousin, who had adopted Esther after both her parents died, overheard a plot to assassinate the king. He reported this to Esther who reported it to the king who discovered that the plot was real. Xerxes thanked his new queen but Esther told him it was Mordecai who saved the king's life.

Enter the villain, Haman, the highest official in the kingdom. Haman loved his position of power, especially that everyone was to bow in his presence. Everyone did bow except for Mordecai who would bow only to God. This infuriated Haman every time it happened and he hatched a plot to get rid of this insolent Jew. He decided he would rid the land of all Jews. Sound familiar?

Haman told the king that the Jews were a threat to his kingdom. He offered the king a great sum of money for permission to kill all the Jews in the empire on a designated day. The king had no reason to doubt his second in command Haman, so he granted his wish.

Hitler quietly moved Jews to death camps over time. Haman posted news briefs throughout the kingdom naming the day that all Jews would be annihilated.

When these posters appeared throughout the land, Mordecai and all the Jews began to pray and mourn. Mordecai sent a message to Esther about what was planned and asked her to intercede with the king. Esther sent a message back saying it was death to anyone who went to the king uninvited. Mordecai replied, *'Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 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.'*

After three days of fasting, Esther entered the king's chamber and said that she had a petition for the king. Xerxes was willing to give her anything up to half his kingdom. She told the king that she wanted to have a banquet for the king and for Haman and that she would make her petition then.

Haman's ego was even more inflated for being the honored guest. Xerxes was very pleased with the banquet and wanted to know what his queen desired. She told him that she wanted to have another banquet the following night, again inviting Haman. At that time she would make her request.

On the way out of the palace, Haman saw Mordecai who once again refused to fall down before him. This ruined the evening for Haman who went home fuming to his wife and friends. The wife advised building a gallows 75 feet tall so that Mordecai could be hanged upon it for all the people to see. This idea lifted the spirits of Haman who ordered that the gallows be built.

Haman didn't sleep that night but the next morning set out for the palace to condemn Mordecai. Little did he know that Xerxes was a man who kept records and liked to read them from time to time. That morning, he read about the plot on his life and how Mordecai had saved him. And he realized that he had never honored Mordecai.

So when Haman came to the king, Xerxes asked his high official to answer a question. *If the king wanted to honor someone, how would he do it?* Haman, thinking that the king was thinking about him, said that the man should be given royal robes that the king had worn; that a crown should be placed on his head and a royal ring on his finger; and that he should be mounted on the king's horse and led throughout the city with someone crying out, *this is what shall be done for the man whom the king honors.*

Xerxes thought it a grand idea and said to Haman, *go now and do this very thing you have described for Mordecai the Jew who sits at the king's gate.* But Haman rushed home in madness and mourning. Soon he was summoned by the king's servants to the second banquet.

After they had eaten, Xerxes asked again about Esther's petition. *Tell me what you want up to half my kingdom.* So Esther told the king: *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. For 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.*

The king was furious and asked Esther to name the man who would do such a thing. Conveniently, he was sitting there with the king. So Esther said, **it is a foe, an enemy, this man Haman.** The king was furious and walked out to his garden to think. Haman realized his life was on the line and fell on Esther begging her for his life. Then the king came back in and saw Haman throwing himself on the queen and he said, *will this man also attack my queen in my house. What will I do with Haman?*

One of his servants had an idea. *Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high.'* And the

**king said, 'Hang him on that.' So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.**

This has been called one of the best short stories ever written. And of course, the wisdom found here is plentiful.

For Esther, the question was not *should I save my people or save myself*. It was *do you want to die trying to save your people or die because your Jewish*.

When a hand grenade is thrown into a foxhole, the desperate decision is not *do I want to live or die*. It is *do I want to die along with my comrades or do I want to die trying to save them*. **Most heroism is born in this caldron of conflict.** It's born in desperation; when there are no good choices.

We complain or despair when we are dealt such a hand; when we lose a job; when we face an illness; when our child goes astray. This story tells us we might be missing the opportunity to be heroic. To do something we wouldn't do if we weren't under pressure. Sometimes desperation brings us to the place of doing something great for God and for humanity.

Esther put her life on the line for her people. Haman put his life on the line for his ego; his pride; his ambition. He put it on the line by lying and conniving.

I think the most intriguing part of the Esther story is how this particular crisis ends: ***So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai***. Many have called this a picture of what happens to us when we are bitter, when we hate, when we want revenge, when we cannot forgive. It's a boomerang effect. What goes around comes around. We end up receiving the sentence we had planned for our enemy.

Bernie Madoff took away the future of many and so his future was taken. How many priests, pastors and politicians have acted as the morality police only to fall in some moral scandal themselves?

Jesus taught us a better way. *Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.*