

For Such a Time As This
Reading from the Old Testament:
Reading from the New Testament: Luke 1:

Today we travel back in time some 2,500 years to enter a story as contemporary as this morning's *Charlotte Observer* or your favorite sardonic, scandalized television series, be it *Veep*, *House of Cards*, *The Good Wife*, or *Scandal*. There is mystery, intrigue, conspiracy, the dark side of politics, deception, humor, power struggle, and lots and lots of booze.

However, it is not a story from which you can extract one passage to contemplate without considering the whole. Perhaps the best way to approach Esther is to introduce the main characters in the context of the story itself.

The story begins in the third year of the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, and since Xerxes is easier to pronounce, we'll stick with that name for today. The text tells us that Xerxes' kingdom stretched from India to Ethiopia, which is huge, but doubtless was dwarfed by his ego. A devotee of conspicuous consumption, Xerxes wanted everyone to know he was obscenely rich

and gave the most exorbitant parties. With Nicki Minaj he'd be saying, "If I'm fake, I ain't notice, cause my money ain't." Xerxes' house was at the intersection of Biltmore, the Playboy mansion, and Faber College's fabled Delta Tau Chi House. Xerxes' domestic agenda for his kingdom was simple: Party like it's 1999.

Let me put it this way, if Xerxes invites you to a party, pack a bag, rent the house out, and don't forget your hangover remedy because the book of Esther opens with a royal rave for all the politicians and military bigwigs that lasts 180 days! Dean Martin once said, "You're not drunk if you can lie on the floor without holding on." 180 days! And if that's not enough, Xerxes had such a good time he turned right around and threw a week long, over-the-top party for the whole city of Susa that would put a billionaire bar-mitzvah or celebrity wedding to shame.

"There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings tied with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and colored stones. 7 Drinks were served in golden goblets ... and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king." It says, "Drinking was by flagons, without

restraint.” ... Well, that whole “without restraint” thing can be a problem. Diplomatically, the scripture says Xerxes was “merry with wine.” Translation. He was wasted. So, we read that a gassed Xerxes decides it would be a fine idea to parade his beautiful wife, Vashti, around like a trophy. However, when the eunuchs came to get Vashti, her response would make her a hero to all women of every generation. She refused to go. Refused to be objectified for the sake of Xerxes’ ego. “You just go tell King Tequila, ‘Not happenin!’”

So, what did Xerxes do? He hired, not one, but seven divorce attorneys to figure out a way to exchange queens. One of the lawyers went so far as to put this spin on it: “Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. 17 For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands, since they will say, "King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' 18 This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath!” Oh, the horror!

So get this, having watched a few episodes of *Mad Men*, the lawyers decide to hold a beauty pageant to identify, quite literally, a new trophy wife for the king. Enter Mordecai, the son of one of the Jewish exiles carried away from Judah when the Babylonians conquered the Israelites, which was before the Persians put the smackdown on the Babylonians creating the Persian empire that Xerxes inherited.

Now, Mordecai wound up in Susa where he would be responsible for raising his cousin Esther, whose parents had died. Described as *fair* and *beautiful*, Esther wisely heeded the wisdom of Mordecai and kept her Jewish identity under wraps when she was, not surprisingly, drawn into the new season of *Bachelor* where she would quickly become the odds-on favorite to get the rose or wear the crown. Indeed, she would be chosen to be queen. And guess what, they had a big party, Xerxes having undoubtedly attended the Sinatra School of Biblical Interpretation, for it was Frank who said, "Alcohol may be man's worst enemy, but the bible says love your enemy."

After the party, Mordecai, who was skulking around the palace compound to look out for Esther's safety, overheard a plot to overthrow

the king and the plan was foiled once Mordecai reported it to Esther
(Important to remember that factoid later.)

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Every good story needs a villain and around this time the text introduces us to Haman (the mention of whose name should make you want to hiss.) Haman... I would not doubt offers the prototype for everyone from Frank Underwood (*House of Cards*) to Frank Burns (*M.A.S.H.*) to Doug Niedermeyer (*Animal House*) to Draco Malfoy (*Harry Potter*). Haman... loves three things: himself, political power, and himself. Somehow, he manages to manipulate, extort, and beg his way into the role of Xerxes' prime minister.

Yet, because he was a Jew who served the God of Israel, Mordecai refused to join the others in bowing down to Haman... Well, that hurt Haman's... feelings, so Haman plotted to kill all the Jews, convincing the king to set a date to allow any and all Persians everywhere to take it upon themselves to purge their communities of Jews. And then, Haman and Xerxes celebrated their plan by getting drunk.

Catching wind of the edict, a distraught Mordecai sent message to Esther, pleading with her to appeal to the king on behalf of her Jewish compatriots. And though she first hesitated, fearing for her own safety because the king did not yet know that Esther was a Jew herself, Mordecai impressed upon her that her life was in danger anyway. "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 14 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."

With this challenge, Esther responds in a way that places her in the pantheon of heroes for all Jews and all women in perpetuity. Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, 16 "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."

Esther then proceeds to approach the king with the notion of inviting Haman... over for a lunch she would make special, just for

them; and upon receiving the invitation, Haman's... ego swells even more. Insufferably bragging to his friends about how important he had become, he says, "I'm the only one she asked to tear a pheasant with the king." Yet, Haman's mood darkens at the humiliating memory of Mordecai's earlier refusal to bow to him. Egged on by his friends (*how he has friends at all is a mystery to me*), Haman... builds a high-rise gallows on which to hang Mordecai, and in the morning, heads over to the king's house for his power lunch prepared for him by none other than the queen.

Well, while Haman... was building his gallows, Xerxes was having trouble sleeping. So, he reviewed his quarterly reports, and it struck him that he had never written Mordecai a thank you note for foiling the coup. It was then that none other than Haman... all cheesy grinned and ingratiating shows up at Xerxes court to suggest Mordecai's hanging, and the king, still distracted asks him, "What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?"

Haman thought to himself, "Whom would the king wish to honor more than me?" So Haman chose the go big or go home strategy thinking that whatever he suggested would all come to him. "For the

man whom the king wishes to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and a horse that the king has ridden, with a royal crown on its head. Let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials; let him robe the man whom the king wishes to honor, and let him conduct the man on horseback through the open square of the city, proclaiming before him: "Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor." Then the king said to Haman, Brilliant!! "Quickly, take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to the Jew Mordecai who sits at the king's gate."

In a picture bible, this would be a good place to put Edvard Munches painting, *The Scream*, for Haman's stock market just crashed. And, guess what? There's just enough time before Esther's lunch for Haman to suffer the indignity of humiliating himself while honoring his nemesis, Mordecai, the very one Haman... had hoped the king would hang, the cousin of his host for lunch.

One moment his head is swollen by his ego and the next, Haman's wife is suggesting his head is about to be stretched by a rope. Lunch is ready. How about some wine? In appreciation, the king says,

"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." 3 Then 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. 4 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." 5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" 6 Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" So much for dessert. The Jews are saved and Haman's gallows would be put to use after all, though certainly not in the way he intended.

It's a great story, though it is not overtly theological. You know, God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, and scholars debated its inclusion in the canon up to the time of Luther. Luther, himself, was not a fan, dismissing it as full of "pagan naughtiness." However, through the ages Esther has evolved into an archetype of courage, advocacy, strength and savvy leadership, particularly wherever

circumstances have called upon people to risk their own safety and security for the benefit of an individual, a cause, or a people when a threat looms large. It may be a simple act or word that you know may blow up in your face, yet has the potential to have a profound, even transformative impact on the life of an individual or a cause or a people.

Rosa Parks refuses to go to the back of the bus and a movement catches fire. A student stands before a tank on Tiananmen Square and the whole world takes notice of the value, the price of freedom. Last week I read about the shooting of Syrian activist, Raed Fares, who to the end defiantly reported on *Radio Fresh* about the atrocities in his country wrought by the brutal dictatorship of Bashar al Assad, creatively and stubbornly availing himself of every trick or means that would get the message out to the world about Syria's suffering.

Deborah Lipstadt, a history professor at Emory, has diligently worked to expose the antisemitism fueling the propaganda of Holocaust deniers. Upon winning a case against Holocaust denier, David Irving, Lipstadt, who was featured in the recent Rachel Weisz film *Denial*, went to hear the book of Esther read at a synagogue, which is a tradition during the feast of Purim. Upon hearing the message of

Mordecai to Esther in chapter 4 – “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this,” Dr. Lipstadt writes, “It made me think: Who knows if not for this very reason I got the education I got, I got the upbringing I got, my job – maybe we’re all meant to do one something really significant. And some of us do it on the public stage, and some of us do it by helping a child. Nobody knows of it, nobody sees it, but we’re all meant to do something. And maybe this is the something I was meant to do (*The Jerusalem Post Magazine*).

A young adolescent girl, whose biggest burden should be nothing greater than an algebra test or getting her braces tightened, is told she is bearing the child who will turn the world upside down, ushering in the reign of God. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

What about you? Esther and Mary invite us to ask ourselves what our one significant something may be. Who knows, perhaps you have come to the place where you are ... for just such a time as this. Amen.