

The One Who Serves

Luke 22:19-27; Esther 2:1-15

The first verses of this morning's passage show us Xerxes the Persian emperor, sorting through his thoughts and feelings after his very public divorce from Vashti his queen, who was the bride he'd hoped to honor on the night of his coronation. And Xerxes doesn't stew about it for six weeks or even six months! If you're watching the time markers in Esther, you'll realize that Xerxes spent something like three full years trying to sort out what had happened to him that night and where he would turn next for some solution to make his reign whole with king and queen side by side, ruling the realm as he had hoped before everything went so badly and publically wrong with Vashti.

It was a dilemma that would find new life 500 years later in the parables of Jesus as he taught about weddings and banquets and invitations and honored guests, who were all too often so unimpressed with the king and the prince and the wedding and the food that, in Luke 14, they offer shop-worn, half-hearted alibis and beg to be excused or, in Matthew 22, they rudely shove aside and even attack the servants of their own king as if the king were an enemy and not a friend trying to offer them food.

And the response of the hosts and kings in Jesus' parables was not very different from what the young men in Xerxes' court propose to help the king to fill the seat next to his throne with a bride who wanted to be loved and honored by the king. What happens in the gospels? Jesus has the king's servants take to the highways and byways of the land, crying welcome to high and low, every kind of soul they can find, so determined is their king, their host, that his hall be filled with joy and laughter and wine and song for that moment he appointed to set his prince on the throne and his realm into motion.

And so, 500 years before Jesus, the young men of Xerxes' realm sound surprisingly like they want to live in one of Jesus' parables. "Time to get a queen." they tell their somber, moody monarch! And this time let's not go to the usual suspects!" they tell the king, "This time, let's send your officials to the village wells and city squares of the realm to find a different sort of queen than comes from the noble families."

Which was a wild violation of the ordinary protocols of ancient royalty. Which says to me that the king's advisors had had their fill of the spoiled and arrogant princesses that the noble families had been sending to live in the harem of the king. The plan they sold to Xerxes was essentially to fill the office of queen from a whole deck of wild cards, each card gathered from a different highway and byway in Persia.

And it's here that the silent, invisible hand of God begins to move in our story. Because one of the wild cards in Xerxes' bridal shuffle belongs to God, a Jewish orphan, Hadassah, being brought up by her much older cousin, Mordecai, gets drawn into the king's deck of cards and

finds herself in the care of the king's eunuch, Hegai, the man the king trusts to rule over the women in his harem.

That God's people have come upon hard times is evident by the names they bear in this story. Mordecai means "Devoted to Marduk", one of the pagan deities of the east, and Hadassah's Persian name, Esther, likely means "Devoted to Ishtar" who in ancient Middle Eastern mythology was the female consort of Baal, the god whose worship had driven Israel into exile in the first place. So both Esther and her cousin foster father were absolutely at the mercy of the foreigners who gave them pagan names and under whose rule they had to live. But we've already said that this is a book where no one and nothing is entirely what it seems to be.

So God has placed a Jewish orphan in the imperial harem precisely because she possesses exactly the qualities that God's Bridegroom needs beside him to rule his realm. Because, in this book, I believe that Xerxes is a stand in for Christ and Esther, as his bride, is a stand in for us, the church Christ came to love and save and invite to a wedding banquet. So there are lots of things to learn from Esther about love and faith and courage and loyalty as her story goes on. But the one key feature in this passage that broke Vashti and made Esther is how each of them react to the servants, the "*eunuchs*" the king appointed to lead and guide his queen in the exercise of her office. I noted as I've studied Vashti's story last week and Esther's story this week that the word "eunuch" appears three times in each woman's story

This matters because in the ancient world eunuchs in and of themselves were next to nobody. Eunuchs were male palace slaves who were surgically neutered so as to be able to serve in sensitive areas of the palace without being a threat to the line of succession. So a eunuch in the ancient near east could become quite powerful without being considered or treated as entirely human since they had no marriage or family or any other sort of life of their own independent of their palace service.

Again, this matters because Vashti was invited to the king's coronation by a delegation of seven eunuchs who are carefully named in the passage we looked at a week ago. The text tells us that she would not answer the king's summons "*delivered by the eunuchs*" and the eunuchs are mentioned again in the official indictment against Vashti which resulted in her banishment. So my guess is that the reason Vashti stood up her Bridegroom on coronation night is because Xerxes chose people she considered subhuman to escort her to the place of honor.

Esther, on the other hand, was an orphan from an obscure, subjugated ethnic group, brought up by a cousin in a foster home. Esther had no such haughty notions about who was fully human and who was not. Her foster father, her relatives, her neighbors in the Jewish quarter in Susa all would have been little more than servants in the Persian scheme of things. So her response to Hegai, the eunuch over the harem, would have been entirely different than Vashti, likely a princess from a noble family out in the provinces where she was always first in line anywhere she went.

Which should matter to us because, both here in the Persian palace and in the gospels of Jesus 500 years later, one's standing with the Bridegroom is built upon how our hearts respond to the servants he sends to invite us to the banquet. Think how often in the parables of Jesus the servants of the king are ignored or persecuted or even hounded to death by people too high and mighty to take the servant or the invitation seriously. The point being that the word we need to save our souls and change our lives often comes to us in clothing so plain and humble that we fail to hear it as a message from the king.

Because the power of the gospel is most often not to be found in the sight and sound and bearing of the messenger. The gospel gains power in our hearts and minds and lives when we see and take to heart the greatness and goodness and power of the king no matter how humble the messenger he sends us. Our passage says of Esther that, once she was in the palace, "*...she found grace from everyone who looked upon her.*" People loved her because she was happy and grateful to be loved, even by people who looked to be lesser and smaller. The way to be loved by the Bridegroom is to learn and to practice the love and respect he holds in his heart for underdogs.