

“Summer Reading” 1 - Esther

The Book of Esther

So, what have you been reading this summer?

What’s on your list?

Seems like everyone headed to the beach has a book tucked in their bag –

all over my Facebook feed, friends are offering their recommendations,

everything from the latest variation on *The Girl Who Sat at the*

Window and Saw the Woman on the Train

to *How to save democracy and the climate too*.

Oprah’s got her list, Obama always shares his.

Me, I’m working on two books at once, from your recommendations:

Demon Copperhead, set in Appalachia,

and Abraham Verghese’s *Covenant of Water*, set in India.

Two places that have my heart, two great novels.

Great Summer Reading.

People often ask David and me how we work out the preaching schedule,

and truth be told, there's not much rhyme or reason to it, it kind of just falls into place by the rhythms of our lives.

This year, you didn't hear much from me in July,

but you're stuck with me all four Sundays of August.

So I decided to have some fun with this series of Sundays,

and close out the summer with some summer reading of our own.

Four great stories of the Bible,

each with a whole lot of plot and some great characters, too.

The line-up includes Esther's story, and Jonah's, then a woman

from Samaria whose name we don't know, and finally a complicated guy named Saul.

Each Sunday, I'm going to share the story,

see how God's at work in each of them,

and ponder, with you, what God might be saying to us through it.

The Bible is, after all, one big collection of stories:
stories of human adventure and misadventure and God in the midst
of it,
stories of human struggle and God's grace,
stories of redemption and hope and confusion and joy,
all of it written down by human beings
working with pen and papyrus and God's Spirit,
to make sure that you and I all these centuries later
could hear the stories too.

So let's hear the stories.

Starting today with Esther's story.

It's *quite* fitting, I think, that I'm talking about Esther
in the very week that the Barbie movie was the top-grossing film in
the country.

David and I contributed to the movie's revenues by seeing it earlier this week.

And I see a lot of points of contact between Barbie and Esther, something my seminary professors would have been horrified to hear me say no doubt.

But here's why.

And I promise – no spoilers here for all of you who haven't seen Barbie yet.

Even if all you've seen so far is a trailer or two, or read a review, you know that the Barbie movie

begins by introducing us to our Barbie heroine – blond, long-legged Barbie –

who is living happily in Barbie World, where all is quite perfect.

She's living in that fabulous Barbie Dreamhouse,

with closets full of perfect outfits and shoes –

and she drives her pink convertible everywhere.

(I didn't have the dreamhouse or the convertible growing up, but my friend Kate up the street did,

and we played with her Barbies for hours on end).

And in Barbie world, Barbie does whatever she wants,

goes out to see her friends whenever she wants,

and her friends – all the other Barbies –

well, they're in charge. There's President Barbie, and police officer

Barbie, and Judge Barbie, and Doctor Barbies.

And then, through a plot twist that I won't give away,

Barbie ends up in our world,

on the streets of Los Angeles,

where she is bewildered to find that it's not much like Barbie World.

Walking down the street, she experiences catcalls for the first time,

which leave her stunned and confused –

and when she ends up in a Board room, she can't understand where

all the women are.

Meanwhile, Ken, who has not had the most fulfilling life in Barbie World, is discovering the joys of something called patriarchy.

All of which is – as it happens – kind of the perfect backdrop for the story of Esther.

The Book of Esther is about a smart and courageous Barbie in a super-patriarchal and quite oppressive world.

It's all of nine chapters long, so a quick beach read, but maybe not the *lightest* of beach reads, as you'll hear.

Here's the CliffsNotes version of the story.

The King of Persia, King Ahasuerus – there's a mouthful, gets peeved at his wife, Queen Vashti.

It's the first sign that this is not a great time to be a woman, because what the King is peeved about is that Vashti refuses to let him parade her in front of his drunk friends.

He wants to show her off, and she says "that's not cool,"

and won't leave her room.

Esther may be the star of the book,

but I gotta hand it to Vashti for being the first gutsy woman in this story.

For standing by her principles, Vashti is banished from the court by the King. Nice guy.

So now it's time for Queen #2,

and to find his new bride, King Ahasuerus holds a beauty contest.

Really. That's what he does.

And picks Esther, who is a young Jewish woman,

orphaned and living with her uncle Mordecai.

Something important to note here:

There were Jews living throughout the Persian Empire then,

but living under constant threat of persecution,

and living under the weight of prejudice and oppression.

It would be nice if that part of this ancient story was ancient history,

but instead, it's a reminder that the sin of anti-Semitism

has plagued humanity for thousands of years.

And with that very real fear,
Esther chooses not to reveal to the King
that she is, in fact, Jewish herself.
Instead, she moves into the palace,
where she has lots of beautiful Barbie clothes,
but it's hardly a Barbie Dreamhouse –
you stay in your room, you stay in your place,
unless the King calls for you.

In fact, the penalty for going to see the King *without* being called for
is death.

Yeah. It's definitely not Barbie World.

And then comes Esther's defining moment.

The moment she has to decide who she really is
and what she's really made of.

What happens is that one of the King's advisors, a man named
Haman,

who is evil and an anti-Semite,

comes before the King with a request to rid the kingdom of all its

Jewish inhabitants,

and King Ahasuerus agrees, and issues a decree declaring imminent annihilation.

It's a chilling foreshadowing of history yet to be written.

And there's Esther:

The Queen to this brutal king, and a hidden Jew.

Her uncle Mordecai sends word to her:

You must speak to the King, he says. You must tell him that these are your people. Only you can save us.

And then he writes these words, the words that Tony read earlier:

“Who knows,” her uncle says, “but that you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this.”

For such a time as this.

Remember that to approach the King was punishable by death,

even for the Queen.

But Esther responds to her uncle by saying

“I’ll do it. If I perish, I perish.”

She does it.

Esther goes before the King,

speaks the truth about who she is,

speaks out against evil, and saves her people.

I’m not doing Esther justice here – it’s worth a read of the last four chapters to see just how quick-witted and brave she had to be to pull this off.

But the point is, she does, and this remarkable woman --

first chosen for her beauty --

turns out to be one heck of a courageous superhero.

If her story sounds a little familiar to you,

it may be because every year on the Festival of Purim,

in Jewish congregations worldwide,

the story of Esther is remembered and celebrated with joy.

And it's a story that we should celebrate, too.

A story that we should remember.

Why?

Why did I pick it for our first summer read?

First, quite simply, as a reminder.

As a reminder that the evils that plague us, the sins of oppression, have long been with us,

and that our work, our fight, on behalf of what is true and what is good must never falter.

And as a reminder that there have been people of extraordinary courage and faith in every generation,

people who fought the good fight long before us,

millenia before us,

even as there are heroes among us now doing just that, still.

As a reminder that those people of courage and faith, those heroes, included women whose names we know, like Esther, and a whole lot of women whose names we will *never* know.

Named and unnamed, they deserve our honor and our thanks.

Those reminders are among my reasons for this ‘summer reading’ pick.

But there’s another reason.

For me, it’s that message that Uncle Mordecai sends to his niece, those words he says to Esther when a hero is needed.

You remember what he said:

Who knows but that you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this.

In other words, this is **your** time.

This is your moment. Seize it.

And Esther does. She seizes her moment,
she claims her place, and she speaks the truth.

Well, each one of us, I truly believe,
is given an Esther moment, maybe many of them.

A moment when God places us somewhere *for such a time as this*.

Each one of us finds ourselves in moments that are our time to
speak truth,

to do right,

to work for good, to *fight* for good.

The key is to recognize those moments,
and to have the courage to claim them.

There's a lot that's been written of late about the importance of
being not bystanders but upstanders –
to be those who speak for what is right
rather than keeping quiet;

those who do what is right rather than waiting for another.

Those are the moments when God whispers to us

this is it – you are here for such a time as this.

There's no predicting when, for each of us,

that moment may come –

but what we can be sure of is that those moments *will* come.

Those times when we are where God needs us to be,

and we are called to do what God needs us to do.

Whether we're speaking up for another when it's not easy,

or acting in love when it takes courage,

each of us will find ourselves in moments when we know, we know,

that God has put us there *for such a time as this.*

For some of you, that moment may come this week at work,

when you realize what you what you need to do.

For some, it may be a moment with a friend, when you know the

time is now.

Some of you are heading off to college in September,
or just back to school,
and that's where your moment will come,
your moment to say or do what is most needed.

The message of Esther is this:

look for those moments and claim them as your own.

Be just who God needs you to be in such a time.

In such a time as this.

Amen.