

Introduction: Book of Esther

In the Revised Common Lectionary we encounter the Book of Esther only once. The lectionary reading from the Old Testament today is Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10 and 9: 20-22. These verses skip around in the text, and don't include the text I have chosen. Esther 4:1-17. Esther is a brief narrative and these few verses don't do justice to understanding the story. First, some background about the book of Esther. Esther's inclusion in our canon is odd. Set in the time of the Jewish people's exile, it contains no mention of Jerusalem, the Temple or worship of God; no reference to the Exodus story which defined Israelite identity. There is no reference to the Laws of Moses. The heroine of the narrative, an orphan, is advised by her guardian, Mordecai, to conceal her Jewish heritage just as he has done. Esther's story begins in the royal court of Persia's king who is celebrating his victories. He is showing off his wealth and power with a party that has lasted 180 days. By any standard, that's quite a party. After 6 months of partying the king seems to have run out of things to brag about. So he decides he wants to show off his beautiful wife, Queen Vashti. He summons her to attend the party. Queen Vashti does something unheard of—she disobeys the king. She has her own celebration going so she refuses to leave it at the king's command. As you can imagine this challenge to authority did not go over well. The king and his advisors are appalled at this challenge to their power. As a result the crown and its privileges are taken away from Vashti. This begins a search for a "better" replacement: a beautiful young girl who will please the king. Young and beautiful girls are brought to the court from all over the empire to "audition" for the role of queen. Esther is among the girls brought to the court. Esther's sponsor is her cousin, Mordecai. After a year spent living in the harem being prepared for her interview with the king, Esther pleases the king and is crowned queen. For trivia buffs, this is the basis for a trivia question about who was the winner of the first beauty contest: Esther. According to Mordecai's instructions Esther did not reveal her ethnicity when she arrived at court. Mordecai himself serves as a courier within the royal court. He has won favor by serving the king faithfully and even preventing an assassination attempt. But Mordecai's Jewish heritage becomes known to an enemy named Haman. Haman is also a favored member of the royal court. He is jealous of Mordecai and his standing with the king. Haman is also a member of a tribe which has a long standing hatred of

Jewish people. So Haman goes to the king, offers him money in return for approval of a petition to have all the Jewish people within the empire destroyed and their possessions plundered. The king grants his petition and a decree to this effect is issued. So far this story sounds like a plot for a murder or suspense novel, but this is the background to our text this morning, hear now the 4th chapter of Esther.

As we enter this story both Esther and Mordecai, although aware that they are Jewish, seem more inclined to conceal this truth than to worship God. This contrasts dramatically with the behavior of Daniel, also living in a royal court during the exilic period. Daniel is known by everyone including King Darius and his advisors, as a man who prays. They also know whom Daniel and his friends worship and to whom they pray. Considering the dietary and other requirements of Jewish faith which made Daniel's faithfulness to God obvious, that Mordecai and Esther are not known to be Jewish is a clear indication that they are not living faithfully according to their Jewish traditions. They have been silent about their status as God's children. After the decree is issued, Mordecai appears outside the King's gate in sackcloth and ashes, a sign of mourning. This bars him from entering the king's court. When Esther in the harem hears this she tries to get him to abandon his signs of mourning. She wants him to resume his normal appearance. He refuses. Mordecai relays to Esther through a messenger what has been decreed for the Jewish people. Despite not living as a faithful Jew when there is a threat to the people of Israel, Mordecai joins the known Jews in their mourning. More pointedly, Mordecai proclaims that Esther also cannot be silent. Mordecai tells her to go to the king and speak for her people. Esther's first message sent back to Mordecai is a fearful denial of her ability to make a difference. After all she has not been called into the king's presence for a while; to enter there without being summoned is a death sentence. Esther does not want to bring herself to the king's notice. Mordecai's response to this is basically: "Don't think you can hide. You can't achieve safety by not speaking." Then Mordecai indicates that she just might be queen for the purpose of speaking to the king on behalf of her people. Verse 14: "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Additionally Mordecai seems confident the Israelite people as a nation will be saved even if Esther is silent. Although if Esther is silent, she and her father's family will not be rescued. Esther responds by telling

Mordecai to go and fast; to have all the people fast for three days as she and her maids will. After this preparation, she will go to the king. Within all this talk of fasting, there is no mention of praying. In their distress the people don the sackcloth and ashes of mourning, but there is no mention of addressing pleas to God. In response to this great fear of destruction, the people wail; they lament and weep; they fast; but they do not cry out to God. They do not offer prayers. They are silent before God. How are we to understand this silence of the people of Israel? Why is there no appeal to God for intervention? Is this because the people are in exile and feel abandoned? Do they feel that God has been silent? Our text does not answer this question. The text is not concerned with people's faithfulness. Mordecai, within his warning about the dangers inherent in Esther's silence, states the Jewish people will survive as a nation, even if Esther is silent. But Mordecai also indicates that her position as Queen may have happened precisely so she would be in a position to speak and be heard. I think the book of Esther was included in the Torah and in our Old Testament, for this reason. Mordecai does not name one who will rescue the Jewish people, but Jewish tradition clearly views this intervention as the hand of God again delivering the people of Israel—it is God's faithfulness and intervention in the affairs of man which are described here. During the feast of Purim where this story is recalled and celebrated in the Jewish tradition, it is very clear that God placed Esther, an orphaned Jewish girl, on the throne as Queen. God caused the king to look with favor upon Esther when she approached him unsummoned. In short, Esther was where she was and enabled to do what she did because God had a purpose for her. Despite the people's silence and lack of faithfulness, God was faithful to them. Two messages can easily be lifted up from this story. God has a purpose for our lives. Esther was where she was because that was God's purpose for her. God enabled her to carry out this purpose. The second message is God is sovereign. Even if Esther did not speak, God's deliverance would have occurred. These are both truths and important for us to understand. Both truths are reflected by the ideas about silence and the consequences of silence in this story. Silence is an action. It may seem a passive action, but like all action it has consequences. It echoes with consequences. When I was younger I did not appreciate this aspect of silence. Simon and Garfunkel's song *The Sounds of Silence* was my first introduction into the concept that silence

produces effects. Before that I thought of silence as an absence of anything. It was an emptiness having little or no effect. Later, I encountered another example about silence on the walls of the Holocaust Museum located in Washington, D.C. It was a quote attributed to Martin Niemoller, a German pastor who opposed to Hitler and the Nazi movement. For his opposition, he was interred in concentration camps. The quote begins like this: "First, they came for the Socialists, and I didn't speak because I wasn't a Socialist. Then they came for the trade unionist, and I didn't speak because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I wasn't a Jew, so I didn't speak. The last couplet is very hard to forget. It speaks of the echoes of silence. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me. The message of these lines is very similar to the message Mordecai sent Esther. Silence is an action. It echoes. As Christians we are called to speak on behalf of others. Like Esther, our speaking or our silence may have consequences. In speaking in certain ways, we find and fulfill God's purpose for us and participate in God's providence. We have opportunities to participate in bringing God's reign nearer. When we hear the message of grace and love found in Scripture how do we respond? When we hear Jesus' call to live in such a way that we reflect God's concern for those in need, so do we speak as advocates for them or do we remain silent? Within the story, Mordecai comments that although Esther may have been placed as Queen in order to speak for the Jewish people, their fate does not actually depend on her speaking. Although not named, God will ensure that the Jewish nation will survive to fulfill God's purpose for them. God remains faithful to the covenant made with Abraham, with the people at Sinai. That statement refers to the sovereignty of God. It also refers to something equally important. The people's silence does not affect God's faithfulness. What do I find important in the echoes of silence around Esther, Mordecai and the Jewish people in their weeping and donning sackcloth and ashes while failing to turn to God? I find the grace of God. God who remains faithful when we are silent. The most perfect form of God's grace is found in Jesus Christ, but God's grace is also found in the Old Testament. God's grace is eternal. It is now and always has been a gift to people who are undeserving, but is available because of God's faithfulness. In love and gratitude, let us seek God's purpose for our lives and live to serve him. Amen.