Esther 4:12-14 *Heart Applications: Action*

The Old Testament book of Esther is an interesting book. I do not believe I have ever preached a sermon from the book of Esther.

One of the reasons for this, I think, is that the book is really just one story. There are 10 chapters, so it is relatively long; but it doesn’t really work to break it up into individual sermons, because you really need to know the whole story to get the point. It’s hard to preach a sermon on just Esther chapter 1, is what I’m saying, because the beginning of the story only makes sense when you also know the end.

Another reason you might not hear too many sermons on Esther is that God is never actually mentioned in the book. Rather famously, we have one entire book in the Bible—10 chapters!-- that does not mention God by name. And yet, as I hope to demonstrate in just a bit, we find God’s fingerprints all over this story.

So here’s a sermon on the book of Esther. I’m going to try to summarize the whole story, and then we’ll come back and see what we can learn about the Heart Application of Action.

***Biblical Fairytale?***
The events of Esther take place during the Jewish exile. This is after the city of Jerusalem has been destroyed by the Babylonians and before the efforts to rebuild the city described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This is often referred to as the Jewish Diaspora—or scattering—when the Jewish people are scattered all over the map, attempting to make a living in cultures that are foreign and, frequently, hostile towards them.

This is the time when the Persians are in charge. Based out of modern-day Iran, the Persians established an empire that stretched from Ethiopia to India. The king at the time—who is a major character in our story—is Xerxes. He is the son Darius the great and the grandson of Cyrus the great. Artifacts from the time picture him as towering over his contemporaries. Whether that is because he was truly a tall man, or if--because he was the king—he just preferred to be pictured that way, is hard to say.

In our story, Xerxes comes off as a rather empty-headed, easily-influenced, party-minded, chauvinistic frat boy. The story begins with him throwing a party. It’s a seven-day-rager meant to cap off a six-month imperial fair where he has put on display all of his wealth for the whole world to see. Officials from all corners of his far-flung empire are there, and the Bible is careful to mention the open bar. Esther 1:8 says that “By the king’s command each guest was allowed to drink in his own way.”

Then, round about the seventh day, when everyone was extremely drunk, Xerxes decides to show off in a new way. He has a very good-looking wife. Queen Vashti is reputed to be the most beautiful woman in the world. So Xerxes summons her to come stand before all of his friends wearing her crown and—apparently—little else.

Vashti refuses, and the king is enraged. When you are trying to embody the ultimate authority in an empire that stretches for thousands of miles, it’s not cool to have anybody defying your commands—especially a woman. Vashti is summarily deposed as queen--the Bible does not specify, but I think we can safely assume she lost her life—and an edict goes out to the entire empire proclaiming that “every man should be ruler over his own household” (Esther 1:22). In a culture that was already bad for women’s rights, this undoubtedly made things worse.

Now Xerxes finds himself without a queen. To make up for this deficit, his advisors propose a sort of contest. I’ve heard this part of Esther referred to as a Beauty Pageant; but in reality it is something much more sinister than that.

A search is conducted for the most beautiful girls in the empire. If they catch the eye of one of the king’s commissioners they are brought to the capital city where they are deposited in the King’s harem. There, some 400 girls are treated to a life of luxury. They have access to the finest foods, the nicest fabrics, and twelve months of beauty treatments. It sounds like a female fantasy right out of the pages of Cosmo or Vogue, except this pampering has one purpose: each girl will be sent to spend one night with the King. Afterwards, she will become one of the king’s concubines, kept in his harem where it is possible she will never again interact with the king, but she will also not be permitted to have a relationship with any other man. These girls become pets, essentially human decorations.

One of the women brought into this process is a Jewish girl named Hadassah, also known as Esther. She was orphaned at a young age and brought up in the capital city by her cousin Mordecai. Clearly, she was a beautiful girl, and she caught the eye of one of the king’s “recruiters.” Following Mordecai’s instruction, she kept her Jewish heritage to herself.

As it turns out, when it was Esther’s turn to appear before the king, she appealed to him more than any of the others. And so, Esther “won the contest” and was made queen. He put a crown on her head and threw a royal banquet to show her off to the world.

The story follows the blueprint of a fairy tale. In fact, it sounds a lot like the plot of Cinderella. Orphaned peasant girl heads off to the royal ball where she catches the eye of the prince and is whisked away a to a life of privilege, fame and power. Only, it’s not really all that romantic. There’s a note of terror hanging over this whole story. This is a king who gets what he wants, and the women in the story are treated more like pets than people. (As a point of fact, we may want to reconsider the power dynamics at work in the Cinderella story as well.)

***The Villain***You might think Esther becoming queen is the end of the story, but it’s actually just the beginning. Every good story needs a villain, and that’s the case here as well.

Xerxes has an advisor named Haman, and Haman is power hungry. He has manipulated the king into elevating him to a seat of power—essentially he is the prime minister. And he’s also gotten the king to decree that when Haman is around, people should bow before him.

This is something all of the royal officials are willing to do except for one: Esther’s cousin and guardian Mordecai.

We don’t get a lot of details, but apparently Mordecai has some influence in the capital city. He was close enough to the royal bureaucracy that he was able to uncover a plot against the king’s life and stop it. For this, he got a mention in the king’s log book. But he is not willing to bow before Haman. The Bible doesn’t explain, but we can assume his reasoning is similar to that of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in to book of Daniel: he is not going to break the first commandment by worshipping a mere human.

This really steams Haman. And rather than just go after Mordecai, he decides to get his revenge by going after Mordecai’s entire race. He finds out that Mordecai is Jewish, so he casts lots—known as the *pur*—and they land on a day about one year hence. Then he goes to the king and convinces him that on this day, one year away, people all over the empire should be given permission to go after any Jews that live in their area—to kill them and plunder their property. It’s basically “the Purge” meeting Hitler’s Final Solution.

The king seems easily manipulated, and he goes along with Haman’s plan. An edict is sent out, and it is sealed with the king’s own ring. Which means, under the laws of the day, that it cannot be reversed. Again, the king has a reputation of power to maintain, so he cannot be perceived as wishy-washy or changing his mind.

At this point, Mordecai enlists Esther’s help. She, of course, has no idea of these events. She’s being kept in a gilded cage, and nobody is consulting her on political decisions. When she finds out what has been decreed against her people, she is understandably upset, but what can she do? The king appears to have lost interest in her, she hasn’t seen him in over a month, and besides—nobody, not even the queen—appears before the king without his express invitation. Remember what happened to the last queen who forgot her place.

But Mordecai is insistent. He sends back this message, **Esther 4:12-14:**

**12**When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, **13**he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. **14**For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

It is a powerful call to action. And Esther hears it. She asks Mordecai to gather up the Jews of the capital city to fast and pray for three days (the closest the book gets to a reference to God) and then she resolves to appear before the king. **She says:**

“I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.” (Esther 4:16)

The first verses of chapter 5 are the critical moment in the story. Again, I’m not sure I can adequately describe the tension. This is a very power-driven environment, with a king who values his unquestioned authority. Esther, despite all of her beauty and charm, is not an equal marriage partner. She is expected to look good and be quiet and—especially—to only appear where she is requested.

When she enters in the royal hall, it is a moment of life or death. Not only for her, but for her entire race.

As it turns out, the King is glad to see her. So glad, in fact, that he promises to do for her whatever she wants. Rather than ask for protection for the Jews, Esther uses her wits to set a plan in motion that will uncover Haman’s wickedness.

She invites the king and Haman to two consecutive banquets. Haman is so excited that he is the king’s favorite—and now apparently the queen’s favorite as well—that he boasts about it to his wife and friends. The only thing that is ruining his mood is that Mordecai is still walking around. So his wife challenges him to do something about it, and he has a 50 foot gallows prepared for Mordecai.

Meanwhile, it just so happens that on the night after the first banquet the king is having some of his old log books read back to him and he hears about the assassination attempt that Mordecai foiled. When he realizes that he never properly thanked Mordecai, he decides to do something about it.

The next morning, he asks Haman for suggestions about how to honor the most important man in the empire. Haman assumes the king must be talking about him—who else could it be?—so he suggest a parade complete with royal robes and escorts crying “This is the one the king delights to honor!”

Xerxes thinks this is a splendid plan and—in one of the funniest scenes in all of scripture—commands Haman to go and throw just such a parade for Mordecai. Thoroughly humiliated, Haman still thinks he can salvage the situation until the banquet that night, when Esther finally reveals her Jewish heritage and her connection to Mordecai. Xerxes finally catches on to all of Haman’s manipulations and orders him hung on the gallows that had been prepared for Mordecai.

There a couple more chapters in the book which describe the new edict put out by the king which allows the Jewish people to fight back. On the appointed day, those who attempt to keep the first edict are soundly defeated, and a new holiday is created, called Purim. It is still celebrated to this day, and in fact was just observed on the 21st and 22nd of this month.

The book concludes by noting that Mordecai took Haman’s place by becoming second in command in all of Persia. **Esther 10, verse 3:**

**3**Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews.

***Heart Apps***That’s the story of Esther. You really do need to hear the whole story in order to get the full impact.

I chose Esther’s story today because we are in a series called Heart Applications. Just as we all have different temperaments and personality types, we are saying that there are different ways of expressing our love for God. And one of these Heart Apps is Action.

**The Heart Application of Action is all about loving God by loving others.** Some of us find that we can show our love to God best when we are loving on those God has made. This can happen in big ways: like standing up for justice when large groups of people are being mistreated: and it can happen in small ways: like tenderly caring for someone who is hurting or overlooked. Anytime we feel the tug to address the consequences of the fall in someone else’s life: whether that is caring for someone who is sick or addressing the consequences of racial inequality; whether it is buying a meal for someone who is hungry or helping to get the story of Jesus to people who do not know Him—we are engaging the heart application of action.

And I chose Esther’s story because I think it is a good illustration of this heart application at work. There are three things about Action that I think we can learn from this story.

***Your Moment***First, **God has positioned us all to make a difference**. We believe that there is a divine purpose governing all of our lives, and so we believe that none of us are where we are by accident. There are situations and needs that we have each been perfectly placed to address.

I’ve mentioned a couple of times that God is not mentioned in the book of Esther. And yet, His fingerprints are all over this story. The story appears to be a series of coincidences: it just happens that Esther is beautiful and is drawn into the king’s harem; it just happens that Mordecai uncovers the plot to assassinate the king; it just happens that Xerxes is in a good mood when Esther appears unannounced before him; it just happens that the king reads about Mordecai on the night of Esther’s first banquet. All these coincidences lead to salvation for the Jews—only the Bible does not believe in coincidence.

As Christians, we do not believe that things just so happen. These are not coincidences, but rather evidence of providence. This is God’s hand at work. One of the reasons I think that the book of Esther does not mention God’s name is because this is how God works in the ordinary course of our lives. There are no big, flashy neon signs to announce that God has arranged this or that, but for those who have the eyes to see we know that nothing is happening by accident.

This is what Mordecai is getting at in his message to Esther **when he says:**

**14**For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

Mordecai says: “Esther, you are where you are so that you can make a difference in this threat to our people. You have access to the king—however dangerous that may be—so that you can do something about this. You are not there by accident. You are there for a purpose.”

And I think the same is true for each of us. We are not where we are by accident. We are here for a purpose. Each of us is uniquely positioned by our giftedness, our circumstances, and our relationships to love God by loving others. This might be in small, interpersonal ways—that person you can encourage with a simple phone call or Facebook message, that friend you can invite to church, that local opportunity to volunteer your time and your talent—or in bigger, organized ways—going on a mission trip, joining an organization that fights against injustice, maybe even running for political office.

The question is: what is your “time such as this?” What are you uniquely and providentially positioned for? Where are you being called to love God by loving others?

I sometimes call this your Popeye moment. Popeye was a sailor man who was as easy-going as they come. But sometimes, when his friends Whimpy or Olive Oyl were being threatened, his frustration would boil over. He would utter his trademark phrase: “That’s all I can stands, and I can’t stands no more!” and then he’d pop open a can of spinach and wreak holy havoc on any who dared to threaten his girl.

The question is: what is your Popeye moment? What causes you to say: “That’s all I can stands, and I can’t stands no more”? What causes you lose sleep at night and boil over with frustration? For Mordecai and Esther it was the threat to their people, what about you?

Maybe it’s people who don’t get visited in the nursing home. Maybe it’s people who are fighting addiction. Maybe it’s the plight of the unborn. Maybe it’s the poverty in Haiti. Maybe it’s…I don’t know. If there are 250 people here today than there are probably 250 different burdens that God is laying on our hearts. 250 different things, where we have been strategically positioned, for such a time as this.

***Expect Great Things, Attempt Great Things***Second, **it is God who makes a difference through our actions**. We believe that when we serve others, when we take steps to change things that are broken, it is God who is going fix things, not us. In other words, God takes responsibility for the results, we just need to be faithful.

Let’s go back to Mordecai’s challenge to Esther one more time. **He says:**

**14**For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

Did you notice Mordecai’s confidence? He fully believes that relief and deliverance is going to come for the Jews. If Esther does not do something, Mordecai still believes the Jews will be saved. Where’s that deliverance going to come from? Obviously, even though God is not named, the implication is that God is going to intervene. Mordecai is saying that, one way or another, God is going to prevent this holocaust.

So that’s great, right? That let’s Esther off the hook. She doesn’t have to risk her life by going before the king. She can just leave it for God to figure out another way. Right?

That’s not at all what Mordecai is saying. Rather, Mordecai’s logic is that if God is going to deliver, it might as well be through Esther. She’s perfectly positioned, for such a time as this, so she might as well take the risk and see what happens. The outcome is in God’s hands. She’s not ultimately responsible for whether the king is favorably disposed to her or not. She is responsible for answering her own calling.

I think this is so important whenever we feel the tug to take some action on God’s behalf. There’s always risk involved. The risk that things won’t work out the way we had hoped. The risk that the person we tell about Jesus won’t want to hear it. The risk that our offer of help will be rejected. The risk that our efforts to bring justice will fail.

But God wants us to know that He’s in charge of results. He is simply asking us to be faithful. And when we are confident that He is bigger than the problem at hand then we can be confident to jump in regardless of the results.

I’m reminded of the story of William Carey, often called the founder of modern missions. Carey was an Englishman who had a passion to bring the story of Jesus to India at a time when the church did not believe in missionary work. The common belief at the time was that if God wanted the heathen to know about Jesus, He’d tell them Himself. God is big, so they believed He did not need our help.

But Carey didn’t accept that. He agreed that God was big enough to evangelize whomever He wanted, and that’s precisely why Carey wanted to be a part of it. His motto became “Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God.” It was because Carey believed God was going to do great things that he was willing to take the risks of jumping into action.

What about you? If you have had your Popeye moment—your Esther moment—do you believe that God is big enough to fix this thing with or without your help? And if so, then you might as well jump in and be part of it. What have you got to lose?

***A Servant’s Heart***Then, third, **put the needs of others before your own**. We have been called to follow the example of Jesus, who was the ultimate servant king. Jesus did not insist upon His own rights or needs, but sacrificed in order to benefit others. As His followers, we are called to do the same.

Ultimately, I believe both Esther and Mordecai are foreshadows of our Savior. Both of them typify they kind of selfless love that Jesus showed for us.

You see this in just about everything Mordecai does: he takes in his orphaned cousin and raises her like a daughter; he catches wind of a plot against King Xerxes and he acts to protect the King; he stands up against the wanton destruction of his people. The last verse of the book is **a tribute to Mordecai’s selflessness**:

**3**Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews. (Esther 10:3)

He worked for the good of his people. He spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews. Can you think of a description for your own life that would carry more weight than this?

And then there’s Esther herself. At the crucial moment in the book, when she must make the hard decision, it is her courage to sacrifice that stands out. **Esther** **4:16**, she says:

If I perish, I perish.

If she must sacrifice her own life in an effort to save her people, then so be it. It is precisely this decision that Jesus made when He went to the cross.

This is a servant’s heart. This is a willingness, as Philippians 2 says, to consider others better than yourselves (Phil. 2:3). This is a desire to put your faith in action by loving others as you love yourself, even if it means great cost to yourself.

This is what Jesus has done for us. He was brought to a moment such as this where He saw the sins of the world and the great penalty that would fall upon us. He knew that God was big enough to do something about those sins, and so He was willing to be a part of the solution. He did not consider His own life to be something to held on to, but put our needs before His own. And so he went to the cross, and so our sinful brokenness was healed.

And as those who follow Him, shouldn’t we serve others in the same way?

The night before Jesus went to the cross He went to supper with His closest friends. There were no servants available, and so there was no one to wash the dirt and grime off their feet. When no one volunteered for the humiliating task, Jesus Himself stepped forward. He took up a towel and a basin and He went one by one, serving His friends in love.

When He was done, He looked at **His followers and said:**

 **15**I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (John 13:15)

That’s the battle cry of the heart application of Action. It’s the desire to love God by loving others. It’s the imitation of the servant heart of Jesus.

That’s the heart of Esther, the heart of Mordecai. What about you?