



WOMEN'S DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Esther 4:10-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 10) Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, (v. 11) “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law -- all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.” (v. 12) When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, (v. 13) Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. (v. 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.” (v. 15) Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, (v. 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.” (v. 17) Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Scholars trace the historical origin of Women’s Day in African American churches to Nannie Helen Burroughs. While serving as the Corresponding Secretary of the Women’s Convention auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention, Burroughs first made the recommendation to institute Women’s Day during her Auxiliary report at the September 1906 National Baptist Convention in Memphis, Tennessee. She suggested that the fourth Sunday in July be known as National Women’s Day. While the primary goal of Women’s Day was to raise money for foreign missions, this day was also important to Burroughs to help uplift women.

In 1909, three years after instituting Women’s Day, Burroughs founded the National Training School for Women and Girls. Her Washington, D.C. based school, which was renamed Nannie Helen Burroughs School, Inc. in 1964, provided a Christian environment where academics, domestic skills training and cultural enrichment for women were taught. Thus, Burroughs advocated that Women’s Day provide the opportunity for women to highlight their training in public speaking, leadership and other artistic and musical talents. Since the Convention voted to accept Burroughs’s recommendation, wonderful and inspiring Women’s Days have been celebrated annually in African American churches all across the nation.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Esther 4:10-17

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

We live in a critical time where sustained support of foreign mission work on behalf of women and girls in war-torn African countries is greatly needed. In West African countries reeling from civil war such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d’Ivoire, females continue to be raped and subjected to other sexual violence with impunity. Women and girls fleeing ethnic cleansing in Darfur are raped and become victims of violence even in the camps where they have sought refuge. The foreign mission fields are desperate for Women’s Day celebrations in African American churches that achieve Burroughs’s original objectives to raise money to support mission work and empower women.

In America, African American girls and women continue to recover from their perpetual denigration in popular rap music and videos. Furthermore, African American teen girls have the highest rate of the most common sexually transmitted disease (STD) which causes cervical cancer. Presently, the women’s prison population has risen by 75% in the last five years, and African American females constitute 80% of that population. Thus, Women’s Days promoting the positive uplift of the image, health, integrity, and intellectual and artistic talent of African American females is especially needed.²

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Verses 10 -17 of the fourth chapter of the Book of Esther capture the challenging decisive moments in Esther's life, during which she experiences the divine interruption and interference in her spirit that unfolds the depths of her personal integrity and purpose, cultural identity, spiritual fortitude and faith-filled gift of leadership. Indeed, the design and manifestation of a blessed contemporary African American Women's Day liturgy should generate the setting and opportunities for women to observe and experience similar vital moments of self-realization or reconnection with God's presence, purpose and plan in their lives.

There are at least two notable features about the historical context of Esther's life as she lived in Susa, capital of Persia, around the fourth century B.C.E. She was one of perhaps 15 million Jews that lived scattered throughout the Persian Empire which spread from India to Ethiopia (1:1). Israel was also under the rule of the Persian King Ahasuerus. Thus, when Esther's people faced extermination at the hands of Haman, they had few places to which they could flee. It is important to make a connection to the palpable feeling of powerlessness and the inability to escape oppression that plagued Esther's community. Poignant parallels can be made between Esther's experience, and African American women's experiences of powerlessness in the face of any number of oppressive realities that plague the African American community and women in Africa who need mission help today.

While Esther was evidently lovingly raised by Mordecai, a male relative who became her guardian when her parents passed away (2:7), her plight as a woman was governed by the customs of Persia during a time when women were unmistakably controlled and exploited. Indeed, the reason King Ahasuerus removed his first Queen, Vashti, from the throne was because she disobeyed his request to be paraded before a banquet hall of drunken male guests at a feast. Her action suggested that she was uncontrollable. Vashti's defiance could not be condoned by the King, or any other males, or else it could become a precedent for other women to follow (1:17). Thus, the King's process for picking a new Queen based on her physical beauty and ability to please him further established the lack of expectations of respect and uninhibited expression of the deeper qualities of integrity, positive cultural identity and spiritual character that Esther possessed. There are many women sitting in the pews of our churches today that are abusively controlled and exploited by the men in their lives, and can readily resonate with the cultural context of sexism and misogyny that undergirds Esther's culture. But an emphasis on precisely the God given character and leadership that is quickened in Esther through the divine awakening of her spirit will personally inspire similar divine awakenings in women's spirits during the Women's Day worship experience.

The heritage of Women's Day sanctioned women to transcend and take action to change the oppressive realities and limitations established to control them as Esther does in her day. Divine interruption and interference is a major theological theme in vv. 10-14 that

facilitates Esther's ability to rise above oppression and exploitation. Central to Esther's concern in v. 11 is entering uninvited in King Ahasuerus's court and interrupting and interfering with his rules and schedule, which could lead to her death. Mordecai reminds her that in order to make a change, the King must be interrupted; his way of doing things must be interfered with. If she does not interrupt the king, Mordecai makes clear to her that she could still lose her life, and he tells her that a divine interruption and interference of the King would still occur to liberate the Jewish community. Thus, in v. 15 Mordecai challenges Esther to consider that a divine interruption and interference is the catalyst in her life that put her in the position of Queen to effect further change for her community. In other words, it is not an accident, or just a coincidence, that Esther won the beauty contest and became the Queen. Women's Day programs and liturgies should be intentional about interrupting, and interfering with the normal order of service to awaken a new encounter with God for all that participate in it and are ministered to.

Esther's bold statement, "If I perish, I perish" (v. 16), is not fatalistic, nor a declaration of resignation, but a statement of theological defiance and fundamental belief in the divine providence in her life. The statement exudes a spiritual wisdom that affirms that to perish while standing up for what is right is to be reborn into the life of the spirit. It is a statement of the deepest faith and confidence in the interruption and interference of God in her life, to continue to live spiritually in God even if the King kills her physically.

Celebration

In verses 15–17, the divine intervention and interruption in Esther's spirit moved her from being a "passive beauty queen and royal ornament to an active agent of change."³ She also nurtured the involvement of the community at large by asking them to fast and pray. Preparing women for leadership was a passion of Burroughs, and the exhibition of women's developing leadership skills and other talents was, and still should be, a highlight of Women's Day. Thus, the positive image, beauty, intellect, talents, leadership and God-fearing, transformative faith of African American women are all celebrated on Women's Day.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Time: Mordecai's statement, "for just such a time as this" (v. 14), emphasizes the theological themes of divine purpose, providence, and God's ever-determined presence in our lives. It is the acknowledgement of the timing or moment when Esther becomes fully conscious or awakened to the divine interruption and interference of God in her life. Furthermore, it is a moment in which she is divinely empowered to interrupt and interfere in the King's life on behalf of all her people; and

Fasting: Esther turns to the common and deeply spiritual practice of fasting (v. 16) as a personal and corporate or communal act of preparation that would ready and steady their faith, remove all physical distractions hindering her and the Jewish community at large

from experiencing God's move in their lives spiritually, and establish the predisposition for her and the Jews to receive God's grace, love and deliverance. Esther's call to fasting highlights further the personal evolution of her leadership, as she makes a proactive decision and a decisive move to put in place a plan to open up and receive spiritual direction and help.

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

- Suggestions by Alice Gantt for planning a three-day retreat for women leading up to Women's Day and ministering to the whole person include:
 - * Studying the history and purpose of Women's Day;
 - * Studying foreign missions;
 - * Provide workshops on women as daughters, sisters, mothers, wives, and servants of God;
 - * Exploring contemporary women's issues in-depth;
 - * Affirming women (regardless of their choice of vocation — housewife or seeking employment outside the home);
 - * Providing opportunities to encourage women to affirm each other; or,
 - * Choosing an organization to spend time with that week (Spouse Abuse Center, Rape Relief Center, Women's Prison, etc.). Also see:
http://www.nccusa.org/nmu/mce/womens_day.pdf.

- Host fireside chat type events that encourage intergenerational discussion between elderly and younger African American women in your church in order that the wisdom derived from telling Esther's story can emerge from the story-sharing that will evolve between today's women. Capture these stories in biographies, videos and audio tapings to develop a heritage of storytelling about women's lives in your church.

- Establish women's reading groups around the celebration of Women's Day. Consider as topics of discussion works by African American Christian authors such as Dr. Katie Cannon, Dr. Emilie Townes, Dr. Renita Weems among so many other talented, thoughtful African American women preachers, scholars and evangelists who have authored historical and provocative texts that often provide reflection and discussion questions to guide deeply engaging and spiritually constructive discussions, prayer circles, community service, foreign missions and other women projects.

Notes

1. For further historical information consult: Gantt, Alice. "Women's Day." National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Online location: http://www.nccusa.org/nmu/mce/womens_day.pdf accessed 2 March 2008
2. For further information consult: Jones, Ann. "The War against Women in Africa." Pambazuka News. 20 Feb. 2008. Online location: <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/46280> accessed 2 March 2008; "Darfur:

Women Raped Even After Seeking Refuge.” Human Rights Watch. Online location: <http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2005/04/11/sudan10467.htm> accessed 2 March 2008; Gupta, Sanjay. “New CDC Study: Many Teens Have STDs.” Online location: <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/HEALTH/conditions/03/11/teen.std.ap/#cnnSTCVideo> 3:29 - accessed 2 Mar. 2008; “Women in Prison--The Issue: Sexual Assault and Misconduct Against Women in Prison.” Amnesty International. Online location: http://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/women_prison.pdf accessed 2 March 2008

3. See, Porter, Jeanne L. Leading Ladies Transformative Biblical Images for Women's Leadership. Mineapolis: Augsburg Fortress Pub, 2004.