

**Christ Community Covenant Church**

**Queen Esther: For Such a Time as This**

**Pastor Gloria Merritt – February 19, 2012**

I'll stand with head high – and hope abandoned

In awe of the One who made it all

I'll stand, my soul, Lord to You surrendered – All I am is Yours!

It's easy for me to imagine Esther singing, looking in the mirror, rehearsing, talking to herself, convincing herself, pacing, praying, wondering as she faced the most difficult task of her life – going before the King without being summoned by him first! After all, she had already experienced the tyranny of a king who got whatever he wanted. He openly deposed Queen Vashti and then required that all the young girls of that region leave the comfort and familiarity of their homes to be forced into the king's harem. It was the Old Testament equivalent of one of our modern reality shows, only back then it would have been called "**Who Will Be Persia's New Queen?**" Perhaps the spa treatments, manicures, hair appointments, and wardrobe fittings became routine after awhile – not to mention the pressure of the paparazzi. And then of course came the young woman's "night with the King" – the predecessor to our modern day reality show "The Bachelor". You see, as Solomon has said in the book of Ecclesiastes, "there's nothing new under the sun."

Chapter 20 of The Story is the book of Esther and it's juxtaposed among the stories about the Jewish exiles and is filled with all the intrigue of a great movie. In fact, it has been made into a great movie. Have you seen it – it's called, "One Night With the King."

Oh, before I forget, would you please pray with me? ... That reminds me of a little story that Martha Schrock sent to me a few days ago – Martha sends out some of the best emails! Here it is: The preacher's 5 year-old daughter noticed that her father always paused and bowed his head for a moment before starting his sermon. One day, she asked him why. "Well Honey," he began, proud that his daughter had been paying attention while he was preaching. "I'm asking the Lord to help me preach a good sermon." Without hesitation she said, "How come He doesn't answer it?"

Ah yes, so moving right along...There are several interesting details to note in this week's story:

- 1) God's people were first called Jews in the book of Esther.
- 2) God's name is never actually mentioned in this book of the Bible and yet the Upper Story of God's sovereignty is seen again and again woven within the coincidences.
- 3) I noticed in particular that Esther is like her predecessors Joseph and Moses and even Daniel in that God allowed all three of them to rise to royal positions within pagan cultures that were steeped with idol-worship. The Lord of all Creation, Yahweh, was making Himself known among the Gentiles through the influence of his own people.
- 4) It's important to remember that Haman's hatred of the Jews was linked to the historical conflict between God's people and the Amalekites. This isn't just another story of anti-Semitism. God's people have always been hated for their worship of the Living God – the God who rightfully claims Lordship over all of Creation and over all other gods.
- 5) Also, I had completely forgotten the part of this story where, in the end, details are given on how the Jews triumphed over their enemies by actually facing them in battle and defeating them with the sword. However, this was not covered in the Veggie Tales version! Nor were the gruesome details about Haman's death included in our friendly Veggie Tales animated version of Esther.

But, I have to tell you that the thing that really stuck out to me this week in re-reading the story of Esther was her response to the horrific edict that her people were to be destroyed in a matter of months. Not only did she have this response, but so did her cousin Mordecai and the Jews within Susa. Do you remember what that was? Let's read it - - from Esther, chapter 4.

**<sup>12</sup> When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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?"**

**<sup>15</sup> Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: <sup>16</sup> "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. 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."**

I am struck by this verse that tells us that when Esther and her people were told that they would be annihilated, they responded with fasting. It also occurred to me that the Jews were under the rule of a despot and that their only chance for appeal was with God Almighty himself. They couldn't write to their congressmen or create some snappy television commercial to draw attention to their plight. And, by God's grace, they didn't seek out the pagan gods around them to deliver them! Granted, I have not been confronted with anything as serious as this, and perhaps you haven't either, but this idea and practice of fasting as mentioned in the Lower Story of Esther got my attention and I started to study and dig deeper and to listen to what the Holy Spirit was teaching me.

Last week Dave mentioned five things, five spiritual disciplines or practices that foster a greater intimacy with God. He talked with us about prayer, the study of scripture, fellowship with other Christians, worship, and suffering. Well, I'd like to propose, with Dave's blessing, that fasting is another spiritual discipline that brings about greater intimacy with God. It can also be an accompaniment to the other topics of prayer or suffering.

We probably think of fasting most often around the time of Lent. This week we begin the Lent season on Ash Wednesday, and I hope you'll come to the special contemplative service planned for that evening. Many are aware that Lent is a time when fasting is encouraged – and it can include giving up something in the way of sacrifice, or it can include giving over to God a sin that is especially hindering to us. Simply put, **fasting is abstaining from food or drink or activity in order to focus more on God and His spiritual resources.** Fasting can be done during normal activity, but the idea would be that our attention is drawn to our relationship with God instead of toward whatever it is we're giving up.

The truth is: we are not required to fast as part of our Christian experience, but the truth also is – it is beneficial to our spiritual life in the same way that exercise is beneficial to our physical being. In the Old Testament, God's people were required to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement – the day when the High Priest offered sacrifices for all of the sins of all of the people. He entered the Holy of Holies and performed the highest priestly duties there. The practice of fasting was meant to represent and underscore the sorrow of the people for the sins they had committed. But now that Jesus has fulfilled His role as our High Priest, once and for all, through his death on the cross, that yearly fasting is no longer a requirement of the Law that must be observed.

So, if it's not required, does that mean it is now irrelevant to do so? No, we can look to the New and Old Testaments and find plenty of examples of fasting that were always linked with the spiritual discipline of prayer.

So, why would Esther and the Jews nearby choose to participate in a fast of 3 days without food and water? Sometimes drastic situations call for drastic measure!