

Purim—Rescued Again

Esther 7:1-6; 9:20-22; Psalm 124

Our lives are full of traditions and routines. They help us cope with the stresses and uncertainties of daily living. They help us mark off seasons, commemorate important events, bond as families or friends, structure our lives, and accomplish the necessary tasks of life. Special celebrations should do more than that, however. Familiar traditions should also encourage us to think, reflecting on the meaning behind the special celebrations of life. What do our religious traditions teach us? Do we allow them to impact our lives?

Esther is one of those enigmatic portions of the Bible. It was perhaps the last book to find acceptance as part of the Hebrew Scriptures. Esther never mentions *Yahweh*, nor any other deity. The book never mentions anything to do with religion. There is question as to whether the events described in the book ever occurred. Even so, Esther details the framework for a special tradition for the Jews, a festival called Purim.

Purim never made it into the Christian church calendar. It is a celebration that recalls God's use of a Jewish girl to enact the deliverance of her people during the Babylonian exile. You have heard the story of Esther, the exiled maiden who became queen and given the opportunity to save her people from annihilation. You may not have known that the Jews today recite and celebrate Esther's story every year in the spring.

What is so special about Purim, after all? It is not part of our Christian calendar or our traditions of faith? We are not even positive the events described actually happened. We are unfamiliar with this Jewish celebration. What we can easily grasp however, is that Purim is a celebration of deliverance—a deliverance that takes us by surprise. In many ways, Purim is a re-cast version of the Exodus saga. It is a reminder of God's constant care for his people. Do we need reminding that God cares for us?

When Karen and I left seminary to serve as Church Planter Apprentices in Mexico, we had little idea of what awaited us. I knew the language to a degree, but Karen had never studied Spanish. We had read a little about Mexico, but there were many unknowns before us. I thought the term "Apprentice" meant that we would be taught and directed by a seasoned missionary. We learned quickly that we were on our own to find ways to minister in a new setting, culture, and language. Well, not quite on our own. God did not leave us alone. God chose to use means we were not expecting to guide and open doors for ministry. As Esther learned to take responsibility beyond leaning on Mordecai, so we learned to lean upon God for direction we expected from other sources.

The Exodus was the central event of Hebrew theology. It was the event that defined what it meant to be part *Yahweh's* people. The redemption from Egypt united the people, but also gave them an identity. Purim reminds us that God not only redeemed the people from Egyptian oppression, but delivers the people in other contexts as well. God is still the God who rescues and redeems, whether in Egypt or in Babylon. God is in the business of rescuing people from bondage that we might become the sons and daughters of the Almighty.

We don't tell stories of the past simply for entertainment. A good story is also entertaining, but it should do much more than that. Stories teach and involve our lives and emotions in the events of another

time and place. In the safety of a setting other than our own we can question, challenged, and prod the players in some other drama. Our lives, however, are not so different from the characters of another time and place. We are just as prone to difficulties, uncertainties, and the need for God's intervention.

Igreja Batista do Passo D'Areia needed a new sanctuary. Termites had eaten the support beams, the pews, and every other bit of wood. The roof threatened to cave in on them. They desperately needed to tear down the crumbling structure and replace it with a new one. There was something else they needed worse, however. They needed to learn to trust God for redemption.

They looked at all the reasons why they could not accomplish the task before them. It was easy to see the financial difficulties they faced. It was easy to see that a new construction would cost much more than the church was able to pay. It took a step of faith to face the problems and trust God to see them through. Just as the Exodus required the people to place their faith into action before *Yahweh* came through, so Passo D'Areia had to tear down their building before finding God's provision for its reconstruction. We know that God has been faithful in our past. Faith, however, is trusting God to carry us faithfully into the uncharted future.

While Esther's story does not mention God, God's action is present behind the scenes, placing Esther in a special position to aid her people. We can easily identify the good guys and the bad guys in the story. We see how some like the king change their stance under influence. We identify with Esther's fear in approaching the king, lest she incur judgment for her actions. We understand that she is in a difficult position. Regardless of the choice she makes, she may be killed for it. We can identify with her uncertainty and the desire to recoil from the harsh realities she faces. Can we identify with her trust for God's provision?

Our stories of faith do not call us into the past. They call us forward into the unknown. They do not call us to a comfortable life. They challenge us to review where God would lead us, trusting God to rescue us again. The stories of our traditions and celebrations must do much more than lull us to sleep in the repetition of cycles of celebration. They must call us forward into the challenges of today's faith adventures. When Esther knew that the rescue of her people lay upon her own initiative, she turned to God, asking Mordecai and all the people to fast and pray on her behalf as she prepared to face the king. Do we likewise turn to God as we face the issues of life?

The Jews speak of making the stories of faith our own. We must find our own involvement in the narratives of the Exodus, of Esther. We must reflect on our own participation in the stories of faith today. How will we build our own lives as we face the challenges of being the presence of Christ Jesus in this world?

Reciting the stories of long ago is wonderful. It is meaningless, however, if we do not apply the lessons from the stories, traditions, and celebrations to our own lives. We will celebrate with Esther. We will celebrate with the Hebrews released from Egyptian bondage. We will celebrate with the disciples gathered around the Lord's table. Will we make something for ourselves out of the stories of their faith?

God has brought us into this place and time for a purpose. May we have the courage to face the uncertain future with eyes and hearts of faith. Without it, our faith is no more than another's story.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*