

## TEXT FOR SESSION ONE

Esther 1-3

## SUGGESTED HYMN

My Faith Looks Up to Thee (*ELW* 759)

## OPENING PRAYER

Holy God, we seek your voice in the words we read and hear. May we open our hearts to your love. Be present with us in our time together so that we might serve you more faithfully. Amen.

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- Hymnals (*ELW*)
- Blank paper and pens or markers

## NOTE TO READERS

*Gather* is trying something new. Each summer study session will include approximate times for completion of the sections. Also some sections or activities are now marked “optional.” We hope these additions will assist groups with shorter meeting times, while continuing to give groups that meet for a longer period plenty of material to discuss. Reading the Scripture passages ahead of time will also save time.

# *For just such a time as this*

## Session one

Esther the Queen:  
Voices in the king’s court

BY KAY WARD

## USING OUR VOICES

(5 minutes)

I like to think of this Bible study as a letter that I am writing to each of you. You may be reading these words by yourself with a cup of coffee, or you might be gathered around a table in someone’s home or at your church. I invite you to read the book of Esther as if you were preparing for a book club. Please read the whole book before the meeting. It has only 10 chapters.

Writing a Bible study about Esther has been a gift. Recently I suffered a serious case of laryngitis, losing my voice completely for more than two weeks. After beginning to feel better, my voice did not improve. A throat doctor prescribed treatment to heal my vocal cords. For three months, I was not to whisper, sing or yell! In my case, he interpreted the yelling to mean no public speaking.

As I’ve recuperated, I have had a lot of time to consider how my voice has defined my sense of self. I have a very loud voice, and I have always been able to depend on it. Who was I when I wasn’t able to use my voice in the usual way? I have loved using “voice” as a theme for exploring the book of Esther.

The book of Esther is a story of the Jews in exile—this time by the Persians, but there is a long history of the Jews being “carried off” by one conquering army or empire or another—the Greeks and the Romans would follow as conquerors up to



Map of the Ancient Persian Kingdom from Lutheran Study Bible copyright © 2009 Augsburg Fortress. Reproduced by permission.

the time of the first century. The Jews experienced hundreds of years of exile and being carried away from their homeland of Jerusalem—or Zion as it is sometimes called. Over the generations, some rulers allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem, but many Jews chose to settle down and try to make a home in a foreign country. The story of Esther takes place among Jews living outside of Israel, in the diaspora.

In our story, Esther and her adopted father are among the Jews who lived in Susa, living under the rule of Ahasuerus as a captured people. Some think that the king who is referred to in this story is Xerxes I who reigned about 400 years before

the common era—before the birth of Christ. The conquering kings differed in how they ruled, but in Susa, there was tolerance of the Jews as long as they didn't cause trouble (i.e., didn't break any laws). In most cases, these laws were arbitrary and absolute. Trying to maintain the Jewish culture and religious practice was difficult at best and often dangerous. We will see that in Esther's story.

As you read the Book of Esther, find ways that God is present even though God's name is never mentioned in the text. It is a good spiritual practice to always be on the lookout for God's presence in our ordinary lives.

As the story begins, see if you can discover how Esther and Mordecai happen to be living in Susa.

**THIS STORY HAPPENED...**  
(10 minutes)

📖 **Read:** Esther 1:1-9

The first word in the NRSV translation of the book of Esther is the word “this.” Other translations or paraphrases might read “this story happened.” It is the biblical version of “once upon a time.” The writer of the story wants the reader to know the geography as well as the extent of the Persian empire. (It was very large and very rich.)

After displaying his wealth at a lavish banquet for 180 days, the king gives a more modest banquet for just the people of Susa—a small affair that lasts only seven days. The banquet presumably is for all the people of the city, both “great and small.” Many verses are used to describe the décor of the palace.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

1. Look at the map of ancient Persia (p. 23) and locate the areas described. Familiarize yourself with where this story takes place.
2. The text tells us that Vashti, the king’s wife, gives a concurrent banquet for the women in the same palace. What does this tell us about who attends the king’s banquet?

**VOICES AT THE TABLE**  
(15 minutes)

📖 **Read:** Esther 1:9-22

For the king, this banquet is an opportunity to show off his women—in particular, his wife, Vashti. The text says she is known for her beauty. (Some scholars believe she was commanded to appear before the inebriated male crowd at this wild party either unveiled or wearing nothing except her crown. Both would have been insults.) The king can command someone’s presence, and failure to comply can be a death sentence. Vashti knows the law, but she still refuses to come. Her actions infuriate the king. They show a lack of respect for his power in front of the whole male population of the city.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

3. Why do you think Vashti refuses to obey the king? What would give her the impression that she could disobey the king and not be destroyed?

King Ahasuerus, ruler of what was then the world’s largest empire, including lands from India to Ethiopia, had procedures that supported his reign. The text points out that the king made decisions by calling on his cabinet of wise men, a kind of think tank. In the hierarchy of the kingdom, these men had immediate access to the royal throne. They “sat first in the kingdom.” It’s hard to believe that the king would not know what to do in a case when someone disobeyed him, but we will give him the benefit of the doubt since he is now considering his queen’s disobedience. Everyone knows the law. The king has commanded Vashti to come, and she does not come.

So the wise men continue to speak. News from the royal court travels fast, and the advisors believe that when Vashti’s refusal reaches the ears of other women, they, too, will refuse to obey their husbands. The leaders of this vast empire seem to be suffering not only the effects of too much alcohol, but deep insecurity and emotional impulsivity. For the sake of the married men in the kingdom, the

king's advisors say he must act. Here is where we hear about the law of the Medes and the Persians. When these two kingdoms agree on some issue of law, it becomes irrefutable.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

4. How did the king's advisors raise the stakes in Vashti's actions?
5. What are the two mandates of the edict, and what does the edict guarantee?
6. "Every man should be master in his own house." How does this saying fall on the ears of women in the 21st century? How does it fall on your ears in particular?

**INTRODUCING QUEEN ESTHER**

📖 **Read:** Esther 2:1-4

After the edict has been sent to the provinces, the king does not have a queen since Vashti has been banished from the kingdom. The king once again turns to his advisors. They devise a procedure to help the king choose a new queen. The plan is not to choose a queen based on leadership skills or alliances, but to gather up young women from all the provinces and prepare them for an audience with the king. At first glance, this might sound rather egalitarian, but keep in mind that the women collected in this way are required to be beautiful, to be virgins and (whatever their previous hopes may have been) to live out their remaining days as concubines in a harem.

📖 **Read:** Esther 2:5-18

Chapter 2, verse 5 moves this story in a very different direction. Here, readers first learn who Esther is and that she and her adopted father (her older cousin) are Jews. The story had centered on the people of the Persian empire, with no acknowledgement that the empire included groups of people who were strangers—not Persians. The empire tolerates strangers who have been carried away from their homeland and brought as captives to Persia, as long as they obey the laws of the king. Esther is taken into the king's palace where she is looked after by Hegai, a eunuch. The girl pleases him, and he provides her with the necessary beauty treatments and her portion of food to advance her in the harem. Esther continues to obey Mordecai and does not reveal her Jewish identity. Mordecai tries to keep watch over his daughter by hanging around the court of the harem.

The beauty treatments and preparations last 12 months, and the text is very specific about what those treatments were. When the young women are summoned to the king's residence each night, they can take whatever they want from the harem to the king's quarters. In the morning, the young women are re-assigned to a "second harem" where "the concubines" live. A young woman will only return for another night with the king if he "delighted in her" (verse 14). In other words, the king is sleeping with the young women, one by one. Amid this backdrop of debauchery, the text highlights that when Esther is summoned to the king, she takes only what Hegai advises her to take. The dates are noted for when Esther was summoned and when she won the favor of the king. Esther becomes queen, and a banquet and a holiday are held to celebrate her selection.

Probably not an appropriate text for children, the book of Esther would be unlikely to earn a PG rating. Earlier we learned about eunuchs, and now we are witnesses to a young girl being summoned in the evening to go to the king and returning in the morning as the Queen of Persia.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

7. Do you think Esther went to the palace willingly? What choices would she have had once she had been chosen for the harem?
8. “Esther was given her portion of food.” How might that food have compromised her faith as a Jew? What other issues might have arisen as she participated in the harem?
9. What about Mordecai? How do you think he felt about what was happening to Esther?

**Optional activity (5-10 minutes)**

10. Imagine a modern-day re-telling of Esther, where all the women in the harem use Facebook to talk to their families or Twitter to talk to the world. Write a brief first-person message or “tweet,” limiting yourself to 16 or fewer words. Consider ending with a hashtag you’ve heard or created (i.e., #GoVashti, #MeToo, #MotivationMonday, #Kosher, etc.).

**TROUBLE IN THE COURT**  
(15 minutes)

📖 **Read:** Esther 2:19-23

Meanwhile back at the court of the harem, when the virgins are being gathered together, Mordecai is on duty checking on his daughter, and he overhears two of the eunuchs who guard the king’s threshold, complaining about the king. They are really doormen or gate keepers, and as happens in many workplaces, the employees are complaining about

the management. The guards become angrier and angrier and make plans to assassinate the king. When Mordecai reports this to Esther, who in turn tells the king, the two guards are hanged. Most importantly for the plot of the story, the event is recorded in the annual report prepared for the king.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

11. What do these verses tell us about the absolute power of this king?

📖 **Read:** Esther 3:1-7

“After these things” Haman is promoted to the top seat in the royal court. “After these things” may refer to Haman’s encounter with Mordecai. That encounter may have called attention to Mordecai’s role in the reporting of the guards. Whatever happened, Haman uses his new power and demands that the guards and Mordecai bow down to him to prove his authority. Mordecai will not bow down. The guards are curious about his refusal and try to persuade him to comply. Eventually Mordecai reveals that he is a Jew. Haman considers it beneath his station to kill Mordecai so instead uses his power to destroy all the Jews. The lot (Pur) is thrown to determine when this massacre will take place and a date is chosen. We will hear more about Pur in the last two chapters.

📖 **Read:** Esther 3:8-11

We should make special note of verse 8. It is a rationale that has been used since these ancient days to separate people from one another. It feeds on our worst inclinations to be suspicious of folks who are different from our own people. Some take from this suspicion an idea that strangers should be treated as enemies.

*There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them (Esther 3:8).*

Haman lays out his plot to get rid of the Jews and raises the ante. He will pay for this massacre to take place to the tune of 10,000 talents of silver. And the king agrees, once again unquestioningly following whoever is advising him. To seal the deal (a pun intended) the king gives Haman his signet ring which he uses to close deals in the kingdom. Verse 10 identifies Haman as the *enemy* of the Jews.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

12. Is it possible that the annihilation of an entire people can be perpetrated by one man who feels he has been disrespected? This story seems to say so. What evidence do you have from your experience that would substantiate that claim?
13. What folks do you know who might feel that strangers should not be tolerated? Have you ever felt that way?

**OPTIONAL ACTIVITY (IF TIME ALLOWS):  
LONGING FOR A HOMELAND**

📖 **Read:** Esther 3:12–15

This chapter demonstrates how the kingdom worked. The procedures are exhaustive and the city of Susa is thrown into chaos. The last verses of chapter 3 tell of the king and Haman sitting down to drink—the deed is done!

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

14. Make a list of the steps involved to ensure that everyone in the kingdom will be notified about what is to happen.
15. What can we tell about the king in the last verse? How do you think the people viewed his actions?

Some of the voices that we have heard in the first three chapters of Esther are loud, demanding voices from the royal court of the king. But there is also the quiet voice of God speaking to the hearts of Esther and Mordecai. Though they live in a kingdom that totally disregards their faith, they can still hear God's voice. The decision of Mordecai to not bow down to Haman seems to indicate that his king is God, not any human being (though the text does not say that). Opinions may differ on his motivation but the overriding theme of the book of Esther is that the Jews are living in a place that does not tolerate their religious beliefs or practices. This intolerance breaks their hearts and puts them in jeopardy.

Poetry is a powerful way to eloquently express this longing for the homeland, a place where they can live their faith openly, with joy.

*By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'*

*How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!*

*Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy (Psalm 137:1-6).*

In such an alien place, there are certainly times when Mordecai has to decide what he can compromise in terms of his faith. Can he bow to the king to save his life and still be faithful? Can he bow to another person? Perhaps Esther has to ask herself whether she can eat food that breaks the dietary laws of the Jews? Both Esther and Mordecai must listen carefully for the voice of God.

Though hidden in the book of Esther, the voice of God is present throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Creation began with God speaking in a loud crashing voice to create something out of nothing and announcing that “it was good.”

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

16. That loud voice guides the Jews as they are forced to live in exile. That loud crashing voice of God continues to guide us in our journeys. Read Genesis 1:1-31 to hear the voice of God, speaking words in creation.

**CONCLUSION**

(10 minutes)

A profession of faith doesn't always need voices. Sometimes our actions speak louder than words. But there are times when we are called to use our voices, to speak up for our families, to speak out in small groups or to our congregations. There are times when we are called to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:11-16). We find aspects of both Vashti and Esther in all of us.

Sometimes it's harder when we are put on the spot and required to make a very public profession of what we believe. There are times in our lives when we are called to speak with a loud

crashing voice as we take a stand and speak truth to power.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

17. We may not all be eloquent, bold speakers, but we can be faithful voices. How can you use your voice to express your faith in family, congregational or community settings? How might you use your voice in the world?
18. There are many spiritual practices, biblical texts and liturgies that support our faith. What do you depend on to help you to continue to grow into a strong woman of faith?

**PRAYER**

Holy God, sometimes we feel very small. We wonder if our voices can be heard amid the roar of dissonant messages across the globe. Help us to search out places where we can be a strong voice for you. Grant us wisdom and courage for the living of our days. Amen.

**HYMN**

*ELW 759* 🌿

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## Session one

Esther the Queen: Voices in the king's court

BY KAY WARD

### MANAGING YOUR GROUP'S TIME

Your role as a leader is to gently guide your time so that you accomplish what you set out to do together. Your group may enjoy generous discussion and not be as interested in moving through all the material. That's perfectly fine.

In fact, this Bible study is experimenting with some new notes to help you manage your time effectively. You'll see in each section we've included an approximate time the Scripture, reading and discussion questions in that section should take. We've marked other sections as "optional, as time allows," should your group find yourself needing to speed things along. Your group may also choose to read the book of Esther before you meet (this is also a good idea if you meet for a shorter time).

### DIGGING INTO THE TEXTS

As is the custom in *Gather*, the Scripture passages in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. If time allows, your group may wish to compare these readings with other translations of Esther, such as the New International Version or King James Version. Comparing the text of these different translations may give your group insight into the nuances involved in the telling of this story over the years.

You may also note that the Bible study often uses the word "story" when referring to the book of Esther. I understand story to mean a narrative which can be factual or fictional. It's a perfectly good

way to speak of Esther, but it does not mean that the events did not happen.

As you read, you'll also note that there are a number of complicated questions and issues throughout this book. First, there is some discussion about the relationship of Esther and Mordecai. Some translations call them cousins; some call them niece and uncle. The point is: Esther was orphaned, and Mordecai raised her as his daughter.

The story also contains a number of details regarding sexual relationships in the king's empire—i.e., harems, virgins and eunuchs (castrated males who managed the women in the harems of kings; also see Acts 8:27-39). You know your group best and can determine how deeply you want to go into the many sexual issues in Esther. Wherever your discussion takes you, stress that women in this empire during this period of time had no rights, and the king had access to any woman in his court whenever he desired her. With rare exceptions, women were judged only on their beauty. 🌸