

Esther and Purim



The Book of Esther 7:4 "On the second day (of the feast), as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, 'What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. . . even to the half of my kingdom . . .'" Then Queen Esther answered, 'If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me -- that is my petition-- and the lives of my people --- that is my request.'"

How many of you really know the Old Testament story of Queen Esther? Well, you might be excused for not knowing much because no part of the book of Esther was ever read on Sunday mornings in the Episcopal Church with the old Prayerbook Lectionaries, and today's scriptural reading is the only time any part of the story of Esther is read aloud on Sunday mornings

in the new three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary. And yet this is an important biblical story, which some of you may remember pieces of from Sunday school as a child. The story of Queen Esther is, however, well known to observant Jews, because at the Jewish Festival of Purim each year, the whole book of Esther is publicly read from start to finish, twice, in accordance with the ancient instructions of Mordecai found in today's reading.

The story of Esther occurs during the time of the Persian Empire. You may remember that in the year 740 B.C.E the Assyrians destroyed the ten northern tribes of Israel, and they are lost to history forever. About 150 years later, the Babylonians came and destroyed the southern kingdom, sacked Jerusalem, burned it to the ground, leveling David's Royal Palace and King Solomon's great Temple, and then carted away most of the people back to Babylon as slaves, those had survived the terrible siege, where they lived for a generation in exile. Then good King Cyrus of the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and thereafter he freed the Israelites, and even allowed them to return to their Promised Land and rebuild their beloved Temple. Some of the Israelites, however, stayed behind and continued their lives in those ancient Mesopotamian kingdoms.

The story of Esther occurs during the reign of King Ahasuerus, the immediate successor to good King Cyrus in Persia, whose kingdom stretched from India to Ethiopia. The book begins with the king holding a months-long celebration of his great wealth, followed by a week-long banquet, at the end of which the king wanted his wife, Queen Vashti, to put on her royal crown and come and parade in front of the other men so he could show off her beauty, but alas she refused. Furious at her refusal to obey a royal command, the king asked his sages what he should do. One of them warned him that all the women in the empire would hear that "The King commanded the Queen to be brought in before him, but she came not." Then other women of the empire would begin to disobey their husbands. And this would cause a great turmoil in the kingdom. Thus, it would be best to get rid of her. So, the Queen was banished for her disobedience and the King then conducted a search for new wife. Beautiful virgins from all the vast provinces of ancient Persian Empire were brought to the royal palace and spent a year in the harem getting beautified before being presented to the king, one by one. Esther, a Jewish orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai, captivated the King with her beauty and her intelligence, and she was chosen as the new Queen. Soon thereafter, Mordecai heard rumor of a plot to assassinate the king, and he informed Esther

of the plot who then told her husband, the king, so that the conspirators were captured and killed, and Mordecai became a something of a hero in the palace.

Not long after this, the king granted special honors to Haman the Agagite, one of the most prominent princes of the realm. All the people were commanded to bow down to Haman whenever he rode his horse through the streets. And all complied with this royal decree, except for Mordecai, a Jew who would bow to no one but God. This enraged Haman, who, with his wife and advisers, plotted not only against Mordecai but against all the Jews in the kingdom, making a plan to kill and exterminate on the same day all of Jews throughout the Persian Empire. Haman said to the King, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdoms; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not for the king's profit to tolerate them. If it pleased the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed." After laying these charges of sedition against the Jews, Haman gained the king's approval to write a decree for their destruction throughout the kingdom all at once on a certain day.

After the decree became known, however, Mordecai pleaded with Esther to appeal to the King on the behalf of her people,

for no one knew that Esther was a Jew, for she had kept this secret all along, and she was reluctant and somewhat uncertain what to do now. But eventually Esther revealed herself and pleaded for her people, as we heard in this morning's reading, and the day that had been appointed for the mass extermination of the Jews became instead a day of celebration, the Feast of Purim, recalling each year how good Queen Esther saved the Jewish people.

While brave and beautiful Esther saved her people from annihilation, the acceptance into the Jewish Bible of her story with the book of Esther was controversial for many centuries thereafter. The book of Esther, for example, is the only Hebrew Scripture not found among the famed Dead Sea Scrolls. The book is disputed because, among other things, God is never mentioned anywhere in the text. And the characters are not overtly pious, with the possible exception of Mordecai and his refusal to bow before Haman. And while the word "God" is never mentioned in the book, the word "Jew" is found for the first time in the book of Esther, Jew meaning someone from the tribe of Judah, one of the two surviving southern tribes, which had been carted off by the Babylonians into exile. Before this, Jews were always referred to as 'Hebrews' or 'Israelites'. Despite all this, as we read this morning, Mordecai did record the story of Esther and did

send out letters encouraging Jews everywhere around the world to celebrate this event, which they have been doing ever since, such that the beloved story of Queen Esther was eventually accepted into the Jewish Canon of Scriptures.

Though God doesn't actually appear anywhere in the story, God does seem to permeate the story. The whole drama seems to be about God's ability to put people where they need to be.

"Perhaps you are in this position for a reason," Mordecai tells his cousin Queen Esther as he pleads for her help in saving the Jews. "Perhaps you are in this position for a reason." Implicit in his statement is that God is at work in people's lives even when they don't know it; even when it isn't always obvious or overt; even when they keep secret their faith or religion. We are all put into situations for a reason, Mordecai suggests, and that is the work of God in the world.

And in any case, *the story could have turned out very differently*. Mordecai could have caved into peer pressure and just bowed to Haman. Esther could have said, "Sorry Mordecai, I've got a good thing going here with the King and I don't want to blow it." Or the King could have refused Esther's request.

---- God's people are free to make choices, and sometimes God's people choose incorrectly. In this story, however, they choose rightly, and genocide was averted.

The fact of Holocaust in our day adds new and poignant power to this story. Sadly, talk of annihilating the Jews doesn't sound so far-fetched to our ears. But the fact remains: Hitler didn't kill six million Jews by himself. As someone once put it, "the only thing necessary for evil to prevail is that good people do nothing." There were far too many good people who were co-opted during Hitler's reign of terror, but there were also those who resisted. And so, the story of Esther reminds us all of the power of one person to change history, to speak up for those without access to power, a story of what it means to be courageous and brave. I think in our day, for example, of Oskar Schindler and his list, or the many others in the resistance movement during the Second World War whose names we will never know but who took risks that saved lives; they are modern-day "Esthers" who recognized that maybe they were put where they were for a reason, to choose to do good in the face of evil.

Some have argued that increasingly we as Christians find ourselves as aliens in a foreign land. That like the Jews of the Diaspora, we are living in an increasingly hostile environment, where it is easy to be co-opted by the powers and values that be. It is easier 'to go along to get along', to turn away from the needs of the poor, to let injustices stand, and prejudices

prevail, to allow a government and laws that work against what is fair and right. It takes great courage these days to "do the right thing" and in the midst of all that, to speak truth to power. Yet when we do, it brings "light and gladness, joy and honor" into the world as recorded in the Book of Esther (8:16). It only takes courage to speak up --- especially for the vulnerable, though it may come at great risk to our own positions, our own prestige, our own comfort.

It seems to me that Esther reminds us that the important thing is not what we confess with our lips here, but how we live our lives in the world. Being a *real* Jew, Esther discovered, wasn't about believing certain things, it wasn't about avoiding certain foods; it was and is about being a bearer of light and gladness and joy and honor in the world. So, too, for us. Being a Christian in these times requires courage and discernment — and a recognition that God puts us into certain places where we can, if we choose, make a difference in the world. AMEN.