



“Prayer Power”

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Eden United Church of Christ, Hayward, California
Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 1, 2006

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 (NRSV)

Today’s scripture reading is from the Old Testament book of Esther. This book is named for its heroine, Queen Esther (in Hebrew, “Hadassah”), whose ingenuity, combined with the people’s piety resulted in the deliverance of the eastern Diaspora from persecution. Since the days of Easter, this victory has been commemorated through the Feast of Purim.

Biblical scholars believe that the book of Esther dates from the 4th Century BC,¹ and has been significantly influenced by the Persian culture in which the story is set.

To appreciate the significance of today’s scripture reading, it’s helpful to recall the larger story of Esther. What follows is a *Cliff’s Notes* version of the book of Esther.

II

¹ W. Lee Humphreys, “Esther” in *The Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 280.

Once upon a time, in the land of Persia, there lived a king named Ahasuerus. Like modern royals, he was big on parties and he threw a lot of them. The book of Esther opens with a description of one such party that lasted several days.

The banquet tables were filled. The libations flowed, and the music droned on. After much revelry there came a lull in the party. The king was eager to amuse his guests; so he called for his wife, Queen Vashti, to dance for the gathering. The order was given, the word went out, the queen received the message, but she refused to respond as the king commanded.

King Ahasuerus was flummoxed by the Queen's behavior, so he called for the royal advisors, asked them to consult the federal law, and inform him of the law's guidance as to how he was to proceed.

The courtiers did as the king commanded and advised that the queen's behavior was not only illegal, but that it threatened national security, since the others might follow her example. So Ahasuerus deposed Vashti and set out to find a new queen.

A national search ensued for Vashti's successor. Given the fate of Vashti, the king's courtiers were hesitant about submitting nominations. Most feared for their

futures if their respective nominee proved to be a poor candidate. Recommendations were slow in the making, and the king grew increasingly discontent.

At last, Mordecai, one of the Israelite slaves, whom the Persians had captured in an earlier massacre, approached the royal gate, and told the king's guards that he had found the perfect mate for Ahasuerus. It was his cousin, Esther. She was young and beautiful, and a gracious hostess.

In the mind of Mordecai, Esther had the perfect credentials for being queen—except for the fact that she was a Jew—so as they approached the palace for her presentation—Mordecai cautioned Esther not to reveal her identity to anyone in the royal court.

Esther was accepted into the royal harem, and for the next twelve months was groomed for her queen candidacy. At the end of her preparation period, Esther was presented to the king for consideration and was quickly accepted and crowned Queen of the Persians.

Shortly after Esther's ascension, a plot against the king's life was exposed by Mordecai, and the advisors who had developed it were hanged. Mordecai was rewarded for his fidelity to the king and elevated to a royal advisory post, and a mid-level advisor, Haman, was promoted to be Ahasuerus' top advisor.

Haman enjoyed his new position and the pomp and circumstance that went with it, including the expectation that everyone but the king would bow before him. The courtiers were quick to comply—all except Mordecai—who quietly refused on account of being a Jew.

Haman grew increasingly unhappy about Mordecai's unwillingness to bow, and set out to destroy Mordecai and his people.

Suspense builds as Haman extracted a favor from Ahasuerus during another of the king's famous parties.

Haman's request of the king, which Ahasuerus granted, was that everyone in the kingdom be ordered to bow before him, and that anyone who refused to bow would be executed. In essence, Haman had declared a pogrom against the Jews.

Not knowing that Queen Esther would be affected by this order, the king granted Haman's wish, and Haman cast lots to determine when the pogrom would commence. The date was determined, and the king signed the royal edict that all of the Jews be eradicated from the land.

Meanwhile, back in the harem quarters, Queen Esther, went on about her routine oblivious to the royal decree. That was, until her cousin Mordecai started parad-

ing around the palace walls in sackcloth and ashes to attract the attention of the royal guards, who at his request, fetched the harem eunuchs, who in turn, brought Esther to the gate to talk with him. Mordecai explained to Esther the impending fate of their people, and begged her to use her influence with the king to protect the Jews.

Esther was deeply troubled by Mordecai's news, but believed she was powerless to effect a change in the King's order. She knew the history. She knew what had happened to Vashti, and others who disobeyed the king.

Still Mordecai would not relent and pressed her further saying, "[Esther,] perhaps you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (4:14). Perhaps you have been granted this position so that you can use your power and influence to save our people.

At these words, Esther accepted Mordecai's charge—under one condition—that all the Jews pray and fast while she tried to reverse their fate.

Mordecai conveyed Esther's request to their people, and they complied. While Esther dreamed and schemed ways to reverse Haman's plot, the Jews prayed and fasted.

Esther knew that she had neither the physical strength to battle Haman, nor the royal authority to demand a change in the king's orders, so she used what powers and circumstances were within her grasp and "turned the tables" for the Jews.

Her plan unfolded as follows: Esther sent a message to the king inviting him to a fabulous banquet. She promised the finest foods and the best entertainment, and for dessert—well, perhaps the adults in the room can guess what was on the dessert menu.

The king accepted Esther's invitation and "played into her hand." In the king's moment of weakness, Esther elicited a favor from Ahasuerus, and he was obliged to honor it. Esther's wish was that king would reverse his decree against the Jews, and hang Haman on the gallows that had been prepared for Mordecai. The story concludes with Ahasuerus granting Esther's wish, and the Jews holding a victory party, known ever since that occasion as the Feast of Purim.

III

The word "purim" means "lots" and refers to the fact that Haman held a lottery to determine the day that the Jews were to have been massacred.

The Feast of Purim is sometimes referred to as the “Jewish Mardi Gras,” because it has parallels to Christian festivals associated with “Fat Tuesday.” To this day, Jews celebrate Purim by holding raucous parties, performing plays that dramatize the story of Esther, donning costumes, presenting beauty contests, and sharing food and drink with friends and neighbors.

According to my friends Carol and Naphtali, who are devout Jews, it’s customary for adults to consume alcohol until on this occasion until, “They can’t tell the difference between the phrases ‘cursed be Haman’ and ‘blessed be Mordecai.’”

More wholesome activities associated with the Feast of Purim include: preparing and eating triangular fruit-filled cookies, called “hamentaschen,” which are thought to resemble Haman’s three-cornered hat.

In the synagogues, the book of Esther is read aloud, and whenever Haman’s name is mentioned, people stomp their feet, hiss, boo, and shake noisemakers in order to obliterate his name—somewhat like audiences used to respond to villains in the old Vaudeville shows.

Besides being a great story, the book of Esther raises the question: **“What do we do with our power and position?”** Not many of us are royalty; not many of us are powerful by worldly standards, but all of us, within our own spheres, do have some degree of power and influence. So what do we do with it? Do we ac-

knowledge it? Claim it? Use it for the glory of God? Or do we passively resist it, and allow evil to triumph in our own modest spheres?

IV

My hunch is that there are many circumstances in our life that would leave us feeling disempowered, or even powerless—circumstances that would make us vulnerable to passivity, because we don't see ourselves as powerful or because our previous efforts to do what is right or good have not yielded the results for which we had hoped.

What experiences leave us feeling powerless or less powerful?

- ◆ Maybe a decision made by our employer, especially one that doesn't include our input or that doesn't make any sense to us.

- ◆ Maybe a landlord's failure to address a code violation in our apartment, or the county's decision to invoke eminent domain laws that affect our family's home.

- ◆ Maybe a judge's decision about the custody of our children.

- ◆ Maybe a county, state, or federal budget decision that depletes the social programs and public safety that we value in our community, or even rely on for our family's survival.

- ◆ Maybe our own toddler's emerging stubborn personality or our spouse's or parent's rapid aging processes have left us feeling powerless.

- ◆ When the crime rate rises in our neighborhood, we may feel powerless to reverse the trend, maybe even unable to protect our property and families from intruders.

- ◆ When we are emotionally or physically intimidated or abused by someone in our family, we may feel powerless to protect ourselves or to get help from the police, social services, or even our pastor.

- ◆ When someone in our family becomes addicted to alcohol or drugs, we may feel powerless to stop our loved one from drinking or drugging, much less to affect their recovery.

- ◆ When someone near and dear to us cannot acknowledge or seek treatment for a chronic or life threatening form of mental illness, we may feel powerless to help them or to fend off the havoc that they wreak in the lives with whom they intersect.

To doubt that we are powerful may be part of human nature. Esther certainly didn't see herself as powerful. Even though she was the "first lady" of ancient Israel, she didn't have much ground on which to develop a sense of herself as powerful or influential in Persia. She was no Eleanor Roosevelt; she was no Hillary Rodham Clinton; she wasn't even a Laura Bush. She didn't have a college education. She didn't have any experience leading national reform movements, and she didn't have access to the King's court, unless he summoned her.

Esther was a foreigner in a foreign land, a woman in a man's world, a Jew in a pagan land, a slave woman in the hands of ruler, and a member of a people about to be annihilated.

It's *no surprise*, then, that Esther doubted her ability to reverse the king's edict. It's no surprise that she doubted her ability to avert disaster, or her ability to avoid her own demise.

What *is* surprising is that Esther accepted Mordecai's challenge. She claimed what power that she had, and the influence in position that was hers, and in so doing, she saved the Jews from their fate.

It should be noted too that Esther didn't go it alone. Before she accepted Mordecai's plea, she extracted a pledge from him. She made Mordecai promise to enlist the Jews to pray and fast while she strove to reverse their fate.

Mordecai did as Esther requested. He called on the Israelites to pray and fast, and they did. And, it was that sense of solidarity with her people, and with God, that enabled Esther to do what needed to be done.

V

The story of Esther reminds us that feelings of powerlessness are common; *and* that overcoming these feelings is possible, especially when we invite and are remembered in communal prayer and other acts of spiritual solidarity.

Through prayer, solidarity with others, and our own agency, the circumstances that once may have been disempowering can become, for us, the basis for revitalizing our faith and relationships with God and each other. Consider some examples:

- Participation in a **vocational discernment group** and/or **spiritual direction** as we strive to understand God's call in our lives, and ways that we may be moved to use our gifts and power in fulfillment of Christ's mission.

- Participation in a **weekly prayer group**—including Congregational prayer each Sunday—including being intentional about inviting prayer requests from others and encouraging others to pray for us.
- Participation in **12-step programs** like AA, NA, and Al Anon, which help those who are addicts or who have addicts in their families understand and minimize the affects of addiction on them and their loved ones.
- Participation in **health support groups** designed to educate and support persons and loved ones with physical and mental illnesses about their diseases, treatment plans, and coping skills, or participation in **hospice support groups** for persons and families who living with terminal illnesses, as they/we strive to find healing and hope even when a cure may not be possible.
- Participation in “Neighborhood Watch,” “Sidewalks for Cherryland,” and “Walk-Able Neighborhoods for Seniors” which help us reclaim our neighborhoods from thieves, prostitution, drug dealers, and vandals.

These and many other examples could be named. What they all have in common is that they remind us that we all have some power to affect positive change in our lives and world; we are all called to use what power we have for the glory of God; and we are all called to hold each other in prayer and to participate in spiri-

tual practices that help us discern God's call and strive to fulfill it—just like Esther.

May God help us learn from Esther's witness and fulfill our individual and corporate callings as faithfully as she did. Amen.