



“Everyday Heroes & Heroines”

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Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California*

*Second Sunday of Lent
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Selected Verses from Esther 4*

Today’s scripture reading is from the Old Testament book of Esther, which dates from the 4th Century BC. ¹ Its title is derived from the name of the heroine, Queen Esther (which in Hebrew means “Hadassah”), who is featured in the novella.

Esther’s ingenuity, combined with the people’s piety, is remembered by Israel as the reason that the eastern Diaspora was delivered from persecution which they suffered in Persia, which today we know as Iran.

Since the 4th Century BC, Israel’s delivery from the Persians has been commemorated by Jews through the Feast of Purim, which our Jewish friends celebrated Friday evening.

The name “Purim” comes from the Hebrew root word *pur*, which means “lots” in English. In the story of Esther, King Ahasuerus’ advisor, Haman, proposes that the date for the Jewish pogrom be set by casting *pur* (or lots.) Hence the festival is called Purim.²

Our resident anthropologist, Stephanie Spencer, will tell you that Purim is a festival of “inversion.” It is one of those celebrations like Halloween, Mardi Gras or Carnival, in which otherwise normal, law abiding citizens don costumes that make them look like devils, witches, and revelers at a bacchanal.

My charge from the Board of Community Ministries is to give you an overview of the story of Esther, so that you can better understand the context for today’s scripture passage, and why they chose this story to ground today’s worship service. What follows is my *Sparks Notes* version of the book of Old Testament book of Esther.

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

² Fred Craddock, et al., *Preaching through the Christian Year*, Year B, (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1993) 421.

II

Once upon a time in the land of Persia, there lived a king named Ahasuerus (a pseudonym for Xerxes I, who reigned from 485-464 BC.) Ahasuerus loved pomp and circumstance, and was a royal partier. The book of Esther opens with a party that has gone on 180 days. (Imagine that. The Greek organizations on our modern university campuses have nothing over on the ancient world!)

The banquet tables were filled. The libations flowed, and the music droned on and on. After much revelry there came a lull in the festivities. The king, eager to amuse his guests, called for Queen Vashti to dance for the gathering. The order was given, the word went out, the queen received the message, but she refused to come. She would not dance. Not even at the king's command.

King Ahasuerus was utterly flummoxed by the queen's resistance, and called for the royal advisors, who consulted the law books, and discerned that the Queen was a threat to national security, since others might follow her example and undermine the King's rule. So Ahasuerus disposed of Vashti and set out to find a new queen.

A national search ensued for the queen's successor. Given Vashti's fate, the royal courtiers were hesitant to submit nominations, and resumes were slow to arrive. The king grew increasingly discontent.

At last, Mordecai, one of the Israelite slaves, approached the royal gate and told the king's guards that he had found the perfect mate for Ahasuerus—his cousin, Esther. Mordecai said that Esther had all the right qualifications. She was young and beautiful and a gracious hostess. Perhaps her one shortfall, in the eyes of the court, may have been that she was a Jew, so Mordecai cautioned Esther not to reveal her ethnic 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, in what amounted to a royal beauty pageant, and was quickly accepted and crowned Queen of the Persians.

Shortly after her ascension to the throne, 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 in the king's court. At the same time, a mid-level advisor named 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 to him. The courtiers were quick to comply—all except Mordecai—who quietly refused on account of being a Jew. (Remember the first commandment: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me.”) Mordecai would not bow.

Haman grew increasingly unhappy about Mordecai’s insubordinance, and set out to destroy him and the Jewish 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 to him, and that anyone who refused to bow would be executed. In effect, Haman declared a pogrom against the Jews.

Not knowing that Queen Esther would be affected by his order, the king granted Haman’s wish. Haman cast lots (*pur*) to determine when the pogrom would commence. The date was determined, and the king signed the royal edict that in effect would result in death to all the Jews who kept the first commandment.

Meanwhile, back in the royal harem’s quarters, Queen Esther went about her routine oblivious to the king’s decree until her cousin Mordecai drew attention to himself by parading around the palace walls in sackcloth and ashes. Mordecai attracted 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.

When she arrived at the gate, Mordecai explained to Esther about the pending 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 this way: 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, I think you can guess.

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 the 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.³

III

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 conservative Jews, it's customary in their tradition for adults to consume alcohol during the Feast of Purim until revelers 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, and reading aloud the story of Esther in the synagogue. Whenever Haman's name is mentioned, listeners stomp their feet, hiss, boo, and shake noisemakers in order to obliterate his name—sort of like how 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. We all have the capacity to become everyday heroes, and to support each other in fulfilling the heroic challenges to which we are called. Amen.

³ The word "purim" means "lots" and refers to the fact that Haman had held a lottery to determine the day that the Jews were to have been massacred.