

The king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, “What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” 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. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.” Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?” Esther said, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high.” And the king said, “Hang him on that.” So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.”

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Every so often, a reading chosen for our lectionary 25 years ago lines up with world events in a way that it just *insists* on being explored. And this morning, it's a passage from a very unusual book about a remarkable woman speaking truth to power at great risk to herself.

Once every three years, we get this heavily edited snippet from the Book of Esther, unless the Feast of Michael and All Angels falls on a Sunday. And unless you've been living in a cave for the past year, you can't have missed the increasing number of stories from women speaking out against injustice.

Now, unlike many of the women making headlines in the past several months, Esther's is intended to be a light-hearted story. Even so, we can't take it lightly without some context, because hers is a story about a woman bravely making a stand for what she believes in. And it seems a ripe moment for us to hear from her.

The Book of Esther is unusual, especially for Christians. For Jews, the scroll of Esther is forever connected to the holiday of Purim –

a holiday not mentioned anywhere else in scripture. Also, the Hebrew version makes no mention of God or of prayer or of worship.

And before we can see the lightness of her story, we need to get into the context, which is quite dark.

So...

Esther begins life as a Jewish orphan named Hadassah who was taken in and raised by her older cousin Mordechai. They have both been taken captive by the Persians. Eventually, Esther is brought into a harem that was formed when the king began to regret banishing his wife, Vashti, for refusing to appear at a drunken party wearing nothing but her crown.

As the property of the king, the 12- or 13-year old Esther and the other women in the harem each took a turn in the king's bed to see who would please him best. Esther's beauty pleases the king, who makes her his queen. A superficial man, the king knows nothing else about Esther, including her Jewish heritage. Sometime later, Haman becomes the king's new vizier and he demands that all the people bow down to him.

Esther's cousin Mordechai refuses, enraging Haman, who plots to slaughter all the Jews in Persia. When Mordechai learns of the plan, he alerts Esther who skillfully uncovers Haman's plot. Because she has already foiled an assassination attempt on the king's life, he grants her the request that we heard in our reading this morning.

Now, despite all that – as well as some gruesome killing and violence at end – the book was written as entertainment. And there are parts of the Christian church that have reduced Esther to an entertaining ancient version of a Disney princess. Other parts of Christianity have derided her as a sexually immoral participant in her forced relationship with the king, while still others present her story, not simply as a love story, but as a perfect model of wifely submission to her kingly husband in a marriage sure to be filled with godly Christian bliss.

Esther's story deserves to be heard as a complex, nuanced story, about an ingenious woman in a terrible situation. She is a strong protagonist, not a fairy tale princess. She is a brave and resourceful young woman, not a devious 13-year-old Lolita. She is victimized by the powers of Empire, and while she is dangerously vulnerable, she is never a victim *by identity*.

All that said, we also have to add that she is an imperfect and faithful Jew, not a fantasy feminist from 500 B.C.E.

Because her story is not about sex and sexuality, though those are prominent themes. Her story is not about gender roles, although those play a part. Her story is not about marriage, even though that's an essential context.

Esther's story, first and foremost, is about Jewish identity; more specifically, about what it means to be a Jew in exile. Without mentioning God at all, her's is a Jewish story about God's caring relationship with the scattered children of Israel.

A story about the silent presence of God hidden in plain sight.

What Jewish history and Jewish humor both reveal is that there is always another way of seeing things, always a perspective that advocates for a future worth looking toward. For centuries, a defining characteristic of Jewish humor is the subversive ability of laughter to undermine the pretensions of the privileged and to sustain hope in what seem like endlessly unbearable circumstances.

As so, as hard as it may be to imagine, countless scholars and even the acclaimed Jewish Study Bible advise that we read Esther as comedy. Not as sarcasm, not dismissing painful reality, but as a way to walk toward the teeth of the tragic with a pair of extraction pliers.

Now, to pull teeth out of *Jewish* tragedy, we need Jewish pliers. We have to understand the holiday of Purim, the holiday established in the last paragraph of our reading this morning.

Because on the joyous holiday of Purim, Jews gather in costumes and masks, like a curious combination of Halloween and Mardi Gras. They go to synagogues where rabbis read the story of Esther to choruses of raucous cheers and lusty boos with buckets of wine flowing. They gather gifts of food for one another and gifts for the poor, and they eat a festive meal complete with "hamantaschen" – triangular cookies named after the villainous Haman.

During the reading, the people shout and scream to drown out the name of Haman. When they hear the names of Esther or Mordecai, they cheer. All this is done in honor of a story about the near-destruction of their ancestors – the genocide that Haman had planned for the children of Israel.

This is part of a pattern that has played out over and over throughout 5,000 years of Jewish history. Esther's story was meant to help the Jewish people come to terms with their identity and their faith. Her story reminds all of us to consider how the powerless might creatively respond to power and to examine how we exert whatever

powers we do have as well as our contributions to the larger powers of empire.

Precisely because Esther's story resists easy moralizing, it forces us to enter into the questions and the circumstances where God seems to be waiting in the shadows for us to act.

Like so many heroines from Hebrew Scripture – Tamar, Sarah, Rachel, Abigail and Ruth – Esther figured out how to navigate and use the system to bring justice where it was not forthcoming. She worked with the king's weaknesses, with Persian courtly protocols, with social pressures and human hubris, and when the time came, she acted with conviction and clarity.

In the end, God saves the people and defeats their enemies. And Esther and her cousin usher in a celebration that will commemorate this approach to life for ages to come.

The humor that arises in this otherwise dark story comes at the expense of earthly power that never seems to realize its own ultimate futility. Beneath the gaudy golden chairs, packed harems, drunken parties and ridiculous edicts are a bunch of insecure, weak people whose attempts to puff themselves up only make them look silly.

The people in Esther's story who appear to have the most power are the ones who behave with the most weakness. The king makes his decisions on whims, in response to petty personal slights and never on any noticeable principle. He is manipulated and coddled by his advisors, his eunuchs, by Hamen and finally by Esther.

And that would be upsetting except that behind the entire story, never once mentioned by name, God is at work. This is *also* part of the pattern that has played out over and over throughout 5,000 years of Jewish history.

That's why Jews dress up, celebrate and laugh in remembrance of this story. They know and find the deeper truth delightful: that they serve a God who uses people who have no obvious influence to change the course of history, a God who puts orphan girls in position to reverse the decisions of kings, a God who uses the weak to humble the powerful.

The ironic humor in this dark story comes from the experience of people who find themselves being ill-treated by small minds with selfish ambitions, and yet – *and yet* – they also find God's hidden hand at work.

Esther's story reminds all of us that sometimes laughter is among our options for responding to injustice – that sometimes we can meet

tyranny with ridicule. And *always* that we can trust that the grace-bestowing powers of God will ultimately overcome the death-dealing powers of this world.

Esther's story is about the resilience and strength of will that God gave a remarkable woman to work through staggering injustice. In her story, you can hear 5,000 years of dark history and 5,000 years of light laughter in a Jewish summary of the holiday of Purim and the story that inspired it: "They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat!"

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