

March 12, 2023 Third Sunday in Lent
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
Esther 7:1-6,9-10, 9:20-22
"Once Upon a Time when God was Hidden"
Douglas T. King

Telling of the Story

The story of Esther only appears once in our three year cycle of lectionary scripture readings. Why does it only appear once? Well Martin Luther once confessed that "he wished the book did not exist at all." He stated that it was full of "pagan naughtiness." Now if I am browsing at the Left Bank bookstore and read "full of pagan naughtiness" on the dust jacket of a book I am immediately intrigued. But it is an interesting choice to be included in the canon of scripture, a book that never once mentions God or any religious practice. And not only is it in the canon it is the central text around the Jewish celebration, Purim, which our Jewish sisters and brothers celebrated this week.

Let's listen to the story once again this time from the beginning, and then we can talk about why it is in the Bible. But I am going to need your help in telling the story. At Purim celebrations there is a tradition of much merrymaking, cocktail drinking, and congregational participation. I was unable to bring enough hors d'oeuvres and martinis for all of you so we will need to make due with the congregational participation element.

As I share the story with you, every time I say the king, whose real name is Ahasuerus, which is too hard to pronounce anyway, every time I say the king, you call out "not too bright." We will see in the story that he really is not too smart a fellow. And every time I speak the name Haman, who is the bad guy in the story, I need you all to "boo." And every time I call out the name Mordecai, he is the good guy, I need you all to cheer, "Yay!" And every time I call out the name Esther, she is the one for whom we are rooting, I need you to call out "Woo Hoo."

Once upon a time there was a king (not too bright) who gave a royal banquet that put all other royal banquets to shame. The banquet went on for days and days. Flagons of wine were drunk from golden goblets and the finest delicacies were served. After the king (not too bright) had imbibed more than his share of wine, he called for his queen, Queen Vashti and commanded her to dance for his guests. But the queen would have none of it. She refused to be his puppet on a string. So the king (not too bright) became very angry. One of his advisors, Haman (boo), told the King (not too bright) he had to punish Vashti severely or soon all of the women in the kingdom would start to refuse their husbands commands. Heaven forbid! Haman (boo) convinced the King (not too bright) to banish Queen Vashti from the realm, so the king (not too bright) sent her away never to be seen again.

Now the king (not too bright) needs a new queen so a contest is held across the land. Mordecai(yay) convinces his cousin Esther (woo hoo), who is a beautiful young Jewish woman, to enter. Esther (woo hoo) gets all dressed

up, wins the contest, and becomes the new queen without anyone knowing she was a Jew.

Mordecai (yay) is pretty excited that he has helped make Esther (woo hoo) queen. He is hanging around the city gate and chatting away when he overhears a plot by some of the court servants to assassinate the king. Mordecai (yay) sends word to Queen Esther (woo hoo) who saves the king (not too bright) from death.

But somehow, sneaky and conniving Haman (boo) gets all of the credit, glory and power. Haman (boo) loved to walk around and have everyone bow down before him. One day he passed the city gate and he noticed that everyone bowed down except Mordecai (yay). It does not tell us in the text but we know that Jews are not supposed to bow down before anyone but God. Haman (boo) is very angry and has his servants find out about Mordecai (yay). He learns that Mordecai (yay) is a Jew and begins to plot how he can destroy all the Jews in the kingdom. They cast Pur, which means lots, to decide when to destroy the Jews. And the lots said that the Jews should be killed in one year's time.

Haman (boo) went to the King (not too bright) and told him about this group of people living in his kingdom who were different from everyone else. He convinced the king (not too bright) to kill all of the Jews and a decree was issued. When Mordecai (yay) learned of the decree he tore his clothes and dressed himself in sackcloth and ashes and he and all of the Jews began to weep. Queen Esther (woo hoo) hears the news but is afraid to do anything. Mordecai (yay) challenges her to save her people. Basically her

tells her she was born for such a time as this. Esther (woo hoo) calls for the Jews to fast for three days as she prepares to visit the king (not too bright) in his inner chamber. Now visiting the inner chamber without an invitation is punishable by death. She works up her courage, dresses herself up in her finest dress and goes to see the king (not too bright), knowing that she is risking her own life. Esther's (woo hoo) presence wows the king (not too bright), and she is granted whatever request her heart desires.

Queen Esther (woo hoo) requests that the King (not too bright) and Haman (boo) join her for a banquet she will prepare. The banquet is wonderful and the wine flows freely and once again the King (not too bright) offers Esther (woo hoo) whatever her heart desires. She asks that she may host another banquet for the King (not too bright) and Haman (boo) tomorrow and the king (not too bright) gladly obliges.

Haman (boo) headed home all full of himself and wine. He was so pleased with how well his life was going except he once more walked by the city gate and there was Mordecai (yay) who once again did not bow before him. Haman (boo) was infuriated and he rushed home and called his friends together. He recounted all of his riches and privileges and power and also told them it was all worthless as long as Mordecai (yay) did not bow down before him. His friends told him to build a gallows seventy five feet high and to ask the king (not too bright) in the morning for the right to hang this disrespectful Jew.

That night the king (not too bright) could not sleep

and since it was in the days before Ambien he had the book of court records read that he might get some shut eye. But before he starts dozing he hears the account of when Mordecai (yay) saved him from an assassination attempt and asks how he was rewarded. The king (not too bright) is told that nothing was ever done to honor him.

The next day the king (not too bright) asks Haman (boo) how he thinks the king (not too bright) should honor someone. Haman (boo) thinking he is the one to be honored tells the king (not too bright) to throw a great parade for the man, dress him royal robes and have him led throughout the city on a fine horse. The king (not too bright), who has somehow forgotten his very own edict to destroy the Jews, orders Haman (boo) to provide just such a parade for Mordecai (yay) the Jew. Haman (boo) does as he is told and returns to his home very depressed.

The king (not too bright), Haman (boo), and Queen Esther (woo hoo) gather for their second banquet. Once again the king (not too bright) tells her she can have whatever her heart desires. Esther (woo hoo) requests that the lives of her people be spared from being killed by the enemy. The king (not too bright) asks who the enemy is and Esther (woo hoo) announces that it is Haman (boo).

The king (not too bright) storms off in a rage leaving Esther (woo hoo) and Haman (boo) alone. Haman (boo) approaches Esther (woo hoo) to plead for mercy but he accidentally falls on top of her as she is reclining on a couch. The king (not too bright) returns to the room and thinks that Haman (boo) is attacking his wife and he decides to hang him from the very gallows Haman (boo) had

built to hang Mordecai (yay). Mordecai (yay) is given all of Haman's (boo) riches and power. Esther (woo hoo) returns to the king (not too bright) and begs that the edict against her people be rescinded. The king (not too bright) gives Mordecai (yay) the power to remove the edict.

On the day when the death of the Jews was supposed to occur the Jews get rid of their enemies and celebrate their victory and survival. The End.

Sermon

So that is the story of Esther. Not a bad little tale, a few plot twists, a villain, a hero or two, but what is its purpose in the canon of scripture? Why have a book in the Bible that never mentions God even once?

Perhaps we should start with the name of our female hero. The name Esther in the Talmud is a form of the verb "to hide" which makes sense because Esther hides her identity as a Jew for much of the story and God is hidden throughout this story. The divine appears to be entirely unavailable. Throughout all of the twists and turns no matter how tragic or dangerous, no one turns to God in prayer; there are no burning bushes; no thundering words from above.

It has been argued that in sections of the Bible where God is the subject of every other sentence we almost lose sight of God in the commonality of it all. Paradoxically, in this book with no mention of God at all in the midst of this extraordinary set of circumstances, we read God into the story. We cannot help but create our own place for God in the narrative. We picture God at work

behind the scenes in the midst of the muddled human motivations working to bring deliverance to the chosen people.

We find ourselves faced with this question, "Do chance and determinism rule the universe or does God?" In this literary farce of a tale we get all of the complex machinations and critical junctures of a soap opera. But in the midst of it all the most important line in the whole story is when Mordecai challenges Esther to risk her life in order to save her people. "For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter..." In a world with no apparent appearance of God, Mordecai deeply believes in God's providence and God's call upon our lives.

In this story of a clueless leader, an evil and Machiavellian power broker, a stubborn yet virtuous old man, and a very young woman placed in a position of dire circumstances, humor is used as a survival mechanism, as Diaspora Jews try to survive in a hostile and alien culture. There is an old joke about a rabbi being asked to explain the meaning of all Jewish festivals. He says all festivals can be summed up in three sentences. "They tried to kill us. They failed. Let's eat." By poking fun at their painful situation they do not deny their current suffering but they envision a place beyond it, a place promised for them and created for them by God.

On this Sunday as we gather around the Lord's table and celebrate communion, we too seek to reach beyond the suffering of our world. We remember the last supper Jesus shared before he is killed and we still believe in God's

ultimate providence. We are called to trust in God's providence, even and perhaps especially when God may appear to be absent. We know that God is inviting all of creation to a banquet feast. We know that there is a place for each and every one of us around a table and a love bigger than our divisions and distrust; bigger than our tragedies and confusion; bigger than all that ails this complex world of ours.

Frankly it is a rather absurd notion to believe in this table when we know the reality of our world. We know about the horror of the holocaust, the current war in Ukraine, school shootings, and countless other tragedies where the children of God have not received the kind of deliverance for which we would hope.

Yet we gather and we retell the story of our Lord Jesus Christon the night before he is hanged on a cross. And we make the leap into the absurd trusting in God's providence. We trust that God is leading us to a place of healing and wholeness and reconciliation beyond the painful realities of this world. And we are called to ask ourselves a question, a question similar to Mordecai's to Esther. Have we been placed in this place for such a time as this?

In this broken world of ours, how are we called to embody our faith and be agents of healing, participants in God's peace and justice, sharers of the gospel? How are we working toward God's victory?

As we are fed at the table this morning may we be given the strength and faith to be Mordecais, trusting in God's providence even when there is only absence to be

seen. And may we be Esthers, believing God has a purpose for each of us in this time and place; believing that God will indeed use our actions to further the divine plan. In this world where God may not always be as visible as we wish, may we find our place in the story of the people of God. Perhaps we were created for such a time as this.

Thanks be to God. Amen.