

Kerry Mansir
September 30, 2018
Pentecost 21

The Book of Esther in the Hebrew Scriptures is a delightful satire about the whims of the powerful and how that power is abused as well as serving as the foundational story for the Jewish holiday of Purim. Unlike the very serious tones of most Jewish holidays throughout the year, Purim is raucous and carnivalesque with drinking and partying and costumes. This makes sense in light of the story we find in Esther that begins with a blowout party where the wine flows freely and the plot of the story is set in motion when the king has had way too much to drink.

We only get Esther's story in our lectionary once every three years. And, even then, we get this snippet of it that we heard today. But this story deserves hearing all of it, so I'm going to fill you in on the missing parts. Just in case you haven't read Esther lately.

The story tells of a time during the Babylonian captivity when the Jewish people had been exiled from Jerusalem and forced to live under the rule of foreign kings, in this case, King Ahasuerus of Persia.

To celebrate the wealth and splendor of his kingdom, King Ahasuerus threw a big party. I mean a BIG party. This party went on for six months for the important people in the Kingdom and ended with seven days of festivities for all the people of Susa, the fortified city of the King. At the end of it, when the king was quite drunk, he sent for his queen, Vashti, wanting to display her beauty before all the men of his court. He asked for her to be brought to him wearing the royal diadem and some traditions hold that he wanted her to wear ONLY the royal diadem—nothing else, when she came

before the men. Vashti, knowing the impropriety of this request, and not wanting to be put on display for her husband's friends refused to appear before him.

Furious at her defiance, the King consulted his advisors as to what he should do and ended up commanding that Vashti never come into his presence again and stripped her of the royal title. As his advisors explained, any treatment less harsh might have meant that women throughout the kingdom would start disrespecting their husbands, and all hell could break loose.

This put Ahasuerus in the position of needing a new queen. After much pageantry and fanfare, he chose Esther, a Jewish orphan under the care of her uncle Mordecai, though Esther hides her Jewish identity from the king.

At the same time, the evil villain, Haman is promoted to be the king's highest official. Haman and Mordecai, Esther's uncle, soon become bitter enemies. One day when Haman was riding through the city gates on his horse, Mordecai refused to bow down before him, citing his Jewish faith as the reason. Haman was enraged and quickly plotted to kill not only Mordecai but all of the Jews in the kingdom, and he easily convinced the King to issue a decree commanding just that.

Upon learning of this, Mordecai realized that only Esther, whose Jewish identity was still hidden from the king, could save the Jews. When her uncle encouraged her to intervene on behalf of her people, she responded

that to approach the king without his summons would likely mean her death. Mordecai answered with these stirring words.

“Don’t think that just because you live in the king’s house you’re the one Jew who will get out of this alive. If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this.” (Esther 4:13-14)

So Esther mustered up the bravery to approach the king without invitation. And she set in motion the chain of events that led to our piece of the story that Jeff read today. Esther hosted a feast for the King and Haman. At the feast, Ahasuerus offered to grant a wish to her. And, of course, used that opportunity to request that the lives of her people and her own be spared. The king, ever clueless as to what was really going on in his kingdom was furious to discover that his queen’s life had been threatened and demanded to know who was responsible. And the finger is pointed at Haman.

Haman didn’t get out alive. Hanged on the very gallows that he had built to kill the faithful Mordecai. The king goes on to decree that all the Jews should be saved, and a national holiday, a day of merrymaking and feasting, was initiated to remember the saving of the Jewish people in Persia. This is the celebration known as Purim.

But despite his decree and saving the Jews, King Ahasuerus does

not get to be the hero in this story. As king, he is most often oblivious to what is going on around him. He is arbitrary in his decision-making. One minute he's granting Haman permission to kill all the Jews. And the next, he's ordering that the Jews should be saved because his beautiful wife asked him to save them! And he cannot be let off the hook for simple incompetence. His decisions have devastating consequences for his subjects. It's as if he doesn't realize that the edicts he signs, like banning his first wife and a death sentence for all Jews in Persia affect real people who must live or die by his decisions.

The book of Esther is a satire. It's not history. Scholars agree that while it was written to reflect what it was like for the Israelites living in exile, living under kings who didn't share their customs and traditions, it does not describe a particular place and time in their history.

And it's certainly not an instruction manual on how to live a godly life. After Esther and the Jews are saved from extermination, Esther and

Mordecai get permission from the King to exact their revenge by slaughtering more than 75,000 non-Jews in the kingdom. This number is, of course, hyperbole. But still, one must ask.... Why do the people of Susa get punished for the whims of their king and his trusted advisor, Haman?

Because that's what satire does. Satire uses hyperbole to show vices, shortcomings, and abuses and to ridicule and shame those in power.

The childlike and dangerous behavior of King Ahasuerus reminds us that the leaders don't act in a vacuum. Their schemes, particularly those designed without any thought of whom they will injure, have far-reaching consequences. Satire done right pushes society toward improvement—better government and care for those under its leadership.

Satire comments on the ways things are, pointing at the way things should be, and takes aim at the powers of the world. And that's why the Book of Esther continues to be relevant today. Both in its exposure of inept leadership concerned with only personal happiness and career advancement, but also in its reminder to us what a precarious role women played in the world when this story was written. And a call for us to consider the ways in which women continue to live vulnerable lives.

Esther may end up the heroine of this story, the voice that saves the Jewish people, but she is vulnerable throughout. Before Esther was chosen to be the next queen, she was gathered up by royal officials along with other virgins in the kingdom and placed in a harem to await judgment by the king. She wasn't asked. She was taken. And while she was chosen by Ahasuerus to be his queen and placed on the throne, she continued to live, completely at his mercy. Not only because she was Jewish, but because she was a woman, and even entering a room without his permission could mean her death.

Esther's beauty won her a place on the throne, though she was never secure in it. And we cannot forget Vashti, the first queen. Her beauty led to a command that she appear naked before all the men of the court so that

her husband could show her off. A command which she refused and which sealed her fate. In both cases, Esther and Vashti served as objects--not in charge of their own destinies, even their own bodies, but at the mercy and whims of men with power. And yet, even in their vulnerability, they found agency, and their actions changed the fate of many. We cannot forget either of their stories. In this tale of the salvation of the Jews in a foreign land, it took both the bravery of Esther and the defiance of Vashti to change the course of history.

If the Book of Esther is a satire that calls us to see more clearly the social and political evils of our own day, then we must not forget what Mordecai said to Esther. "If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this."

Where are the places in our lives where we need to display the bravery of Esther, to speak up instead of being silent? What moments in our modern times require the defiance of Vashti, risking our places of comfort and privilege to say no to that which is wrong and demeaning?

And as we listen to the voices of Esther and Vashti calling to us from this story, we must listen for the voices of women in our own place and time. Women who have been oppressed and marginalized and whose stories shine a light upon those social and political evils that persist today. We must not turn away from their stories, no matter how disturbing or inconvenient.

As people of faith, we are asked over and over in our biblical stories to hear the voice of the oppressed. Of the weak. Of the powerless. We must make space for those voices. And we must not stay silent about the ways in which those voices are calling out for change.

It has been widely noted that the Book of Esther is the only book in the Bible that not even once mentions the name of God. But God is there in that story. God is there in Vashti's defiance and in Esther's bravery. God is there in the words of Mordecai calling Esther to speak up rather than to remain silent. God is there, crying out for US to hear the voices of the oppressed and to speak up on their behalf. God is there. Let us be there, too. Amen.