

**Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Text: Esther 7:1-6; 9:10; 9:20-22**

The Book of Esther is much better known to Jews than to Christians. One reason for that is that until recently Esther didn't even get read in Episcopal Churches, because it was neglected by the lectionary.\* (Although as you know if you pray the Daily Office, we've been reading from Esther this past week.) Jews, in contrast, use it as the text for a play—a pageant if you will—to celebrate Purim, which always falls one month before Passover.

This play—which is really a melodrama—is set in the fifth century before Christ in Persia, or what we would call Iran today. Think “The King and I” and you get some sense of how the set and costumes might be designed. The story is about Jews living in the diaspora—about trying to keep their faith and stay alive in a foreign culture. (The Book of Daniel wrestles with these same questions from a slightly different angle.) How is it possible to live as a Jew in a hostile environment?

The story begins with Queen Vashti giving a banquet for her husband, King Ahasuerus (Xerxes.) One clue that this is not history but a tale is that there was never anyone named “Vashti” who was queen of Persia. (Her name, though, means “the best”—so we might call her in melodramatic fashion, BQE: *Best Queen Ever*.) The suggestion is that she thinks rather highly of herself.

So in the very next scene after her banquet, the king summons her to come to him. She ignores him. The king's advisors are furious. They insist that if he lets this go then word will get out and no woman throughout all the kingdom will ever again listen to her husband. So there is only one thing to do—banish the queen. That is how there comes to be a vacancy on the throne, and the king is looking for a new bride.

And you thought that the great contribution of our civilization was the invention of reality shows! Not so. In the next scene of this Purim play we are watching “Who wants to Marry a Millionaire King?” And all the beautiful virgin women are invited to compete and paraded into the palace.

Now there is an important aside to the audience—as the scene shifts away from the royal courts. The narrator whispers to us about how there was a man named Mordecai—a Jew—who was one of the captives going back to the Babylonian exile. But instead of heading home after the exile he settled down in Iran. Mordecai has a cousin who was an orphan and so he raised her and took care of her. Guess what? The girl is drop-dead gorgeous. Guess what else? Her name is Esther. Guess what else? She's the next contestant on “Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire King,” and she is about to become the new queen.

Now the key to this narrative is that the narrator whispered that to us. The King has no clue that Esther is Jewish. Since she is fully immersed in Persian society and doesn't apparently keep kosher laws how could he know, if she isn't telling him? (And she's not telling him.) How could he know as she enjoys the lobster bisque?

In scene three we are introduced to the villain of the story: the sinister Haman. As he walks on stage we are expected to hiss as he slithers on stage. He's one of the king's advisors, and he is annoyed that Mordecai refuses to bow down whenever he walks by. (Of course the reason for

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that is that Mordecai, as a Jew, has learned to love only the Lord God and not to bow down to any human being.)

So Haman plans a genocide. No doubt that is quite an overreaction to being slighted. No doubt it's more than a little egocentric. But remember this is a melodrama and it's allowed in a play; Haman is so mad at Mordecai that he wants *all* Jews to be killed—just to make it clear who has power. Mordecai springs into action and speaks with his cousin—now *Queen* Esther: “Perhaps you are in this position,” he tells her, “for just such a time as this.”

At first Esther wants nothing to do with this much responsibility. It's good to be queen and she isn't looking to rock the boat or put herself in danger. But in the end, she is convinced to “do the right thing.” Perhaps, indeed, God has put her in this position “for just such a time as this.”

And so today, we heard the end of the story—bits and pieces of it, to be sure, but still enough for us to get clear about how the story ends. It ends, of course, like all melodramas do. Good triumphs over evil. The king and Haman go into the feast with Queen Esther. She is granted a request by her husband and she asks that she and “her people” are spared. She “outs herself” as a Jew. She has come to identify not primarily with the royal Persian household and her position of privilege, but with God's “little ones,” with the poor and the vulnerable, with her own people. (In this way she's a little bit like Moses, whom you will recall centuries before was raised in Pharaoh's household but who eventually becomes aware of who he really was and then led his people out of bondage and toward the Promised Land.)

*Esther takes a stand.* She exposes Haman for the shady character he really is. He had planned to have Mordecai executed and hanged—instead (as we heard) the very same gallows he had prepared for Mordecai is where he is now killed. Justice prevails, and all ends happily ever after. God's people are spared because of Queen Esther's courage. In the beginning of the story she was utterly powerless: female, Jewish, and an orphan. Yet she uses what power she has gained to save her people, and to this day Jews have this happy festival of Purim where songs can be sung and where bravery can be celebrated.

The story is over 2500 years old. What might it have to do with us—Christians trying to be faithful in 2006? First: what does this story tell us about God? The truth is that God doesn't actually appear anywhere in the story. In fact God's name doesn't even appear. The characters are not overtly pious, with the possible exception of Mordecai. And yet in another sense God seems to permeate the story. The whole drama seems to be about God's ability to put people where they need to be. “Perhaps you are in this position for a reason,” Mordecai tells his cousin the queen. Implicit in his statement is that God is at work in people's lives even when they don't know it; even when it isn't always obvious or overt. We are put into situations for a reason, Mordecai suggests—and that is the work of God in the world.

There's also another little episode that the rabbis have loved. The whole story turns on one sleepless night that the king has, which I haven't mentioned in my own telling of the story. He is tossing and turning and restless, until he can't take it anymore. So he gets up to read “the book of memorable deeds”—some old government records. And there he discovers that Mordecai had turned in two eunuchs who were plotting to kill the king. And yet no proclamations were made, no royal medals awarded! This late night reading puts Mordecai into a position where he can't

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just be “disappeared” because he’s now on the king’s radar. The rabbis have suggested that God is the one behind that sleepless night. That is to say—in both instances—that God is subtly at work in the world but it takes eyes of discernment to realize where. God is a hidden character much of the time—in this play and perhaps in our lives. But that doesn’t mean that God isn’t at work.

In any case, *it could have turned out otherwise*. Because human beings still can respond or not respond: our choices matter—in this story and the “playwright” suggests in the real world, too! Mordecai could have caved into peer pressure and just bowed to Haman. Esther could have said, “sorry Mordecai...I’ve got a good thing going here and I don’t want to blow it.” The king could have taken a sleeping pill. God’s people are free to make choices, and sometimes God’s people choose incorrectly. In this story, however, they choose rightly—and a genocide is averted. The fact of Holocaust in the first half of the twentieth century adds new and poignant power to this tale. Talk of annihilating Jews doesn’t sound so far-fetched to our ears. But the fact remains: Hitler didn’t kill six million Jews by himself. As someone once put it, “the only thing necessary for evil to prevail is that good people do nothing.” There were far too many who were co-opted, but there were also those who resisted. And so, this story reminds us of the power of one, a story of what it means to be courageous and brave and to speak up for those without access to power by addressing the powerful. Shindler and many whose names we will never know took risks during the Second World War that saved lives—they are modern-day “Esthers” who recognized that maybe they were put where they were for a reason—to choose to do good in the face of evil.

It is along this path, I think, that we discover how a text like this might convey for us a “Word of the Lord.” Some have argued that increasingly we as Christians find ourselves as aliens in a foreign land. That like Jews of the diaspora we are living in an increasingly hostile environment, where it is easy to be co-opted by the powers-that-be. Think about the enormous pressures within the health-care system that work against health, or the justice system that work against justice, or in business or the church or banking or education where institutions stop serving people and serve only themselves. It takes great courage some days to “do the right thing” in the midst of all that. Yet when we do, it brings “light and gladness, joy and honor” into the world. (Esther 8:16)

Most of us have far more influence than we sometimes wish to acknowledge. As individuals we find ourselves in the midst of the powerful again and again; yet most of the time we may feel pretty powerless. It takes courage to speak up—especially for the vulnerable—when it comes at great risk to our own positions, our own prestige, our own comfort. It seems to me that Esther reminds us that the important thing is not what we confess with our lips here but how we live our lives in the world. Being a *real* Jew, Esther discovered, wasn’t about avoiding certain foods—it was and is about being a bearer of light and gladness and joy and honor in the world. So, too, for us. Being a Christian in these times requires courage and discernment—and a recognition that God puts us into certain places where we can, if we choose, make a difference.

\* The most recent General Convention has made the Revised Common Lectionary the official lectionary of the The Episcopal Church beginning in Advent 2007. We have been using the RCL here at St. Francis since 2002, after it was approved for trial use. The BCP lectionary doesn’t include Esther, but the RCL does.