

## Haydenville Congregational Church

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Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

### “The Courage of Esther”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

I have a reference book I love called Women of the Bible by Meera Lester. Not only do I enjoy reading the book and learning more about everyone from Eve to Mary Magdalene, but I get a huge kick out of the Table of Contents and sometimes—and this is totally true—I just read the Table of Contents for a good laugh.

Here are some of the chapter headings in Women of the Bible...

“Tempresses and Sinful Women”

“Adulteresses, Harlots and Deceivers”

“Women Who Caused Murder”

“Women Who Opposed Certain Men”

“Women Who Were Concubines”

“Women Who Advised, Taunted, or Lied”

...those are just a sampling of the chapters in this truly informative and entertaining reference book!

This week I was delighted when the Lectionary reading from the Hebrew Scriptures was from the Book of Esther. Quickly I turned to Women of the Bible to see where Esther would appear! Esther is found in the chapter titled “Women Who Were Queens.” That is a good chapter for Esther because she WAS a Queen—a powerful, brave and strategic queen who stood up for and saved her people, the Jewish people.

Let’s review the overall story because I think the tiny slice of the Book of Esther that we get in the Lectionary reading for today is baffling unless you understand what happened before that little snippet that Paula read.

A word of background...Esther is one of the most recognized Jewish heroines of the Old Testament, also called the Hebrew Scriptures.

She is one of only two women in the Hebrew Scriptures to have a book bearing her name (the other is Ruth). And it is Esther's story that is the basis for the Jewish holiday Purim. Many young Jewish girls have dressed up as Esther during the Purim holiday. You'll see why.

Esther, apparently a stunning beauty, was an Israelite, a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin. Following the death of her father and mother, Esther was adopted by her cousin Mordecai and raised as his daughter. Their story takes place in Persia (currently Iran) around 500 BCE. As Esther grows up, Mordecai warns her to hide her Jewish identity because there were many people in the Persian Empire who disliked Jews, including advisors to the king.

The king of Persia, King Ahasuerus, was married to Queen Vashti. As the story is told in the Book of Esther, King Ahasuerus became angry at Queen Vashti because one day while the king was feasting and drinking at a banquet with his friends, he summoned Queen Vashti to come parade in front of the men—apparently he wanted to show off her beauty. But the queen refused. The King then banished Vashti, and ordered his attendants to gather the most beautiful young women in the kingdom for his harem. At that point Esther is brought to the king's palace. The king is struck by Esther's beauty, falls in love with her and, not knowing she is Jewish, he makes her his queen.

Now the plot thickens. The king's prime minister, a man named Haman who is portrayed as evil and self-aggrandizing, hates Esther's cousin Mordecai because Mordecai refuses repeatedly to bow down before him. Haman knows Mordecai is a Jew and in his fury Haman devises a plan to eliminate Mordecai and all Jews in the kingdom—Haman plans a massacre of the Jewish people. When Haman describes his plan to King Ahasuerus, the king approves of the plan and a decree goes out throughout the palace and into every province announcing the impending elimination of the Jews from the kingdom.

Esther hears of this decree and falls in to despair. Mordecai hears of the plan and goes to see Esther. Mordecai tells Esther to seek an audience with the king—he says she must stop Haman's plan to massacre the Jews. But Mordecai also knows that what he is asking Esther to do involves great risk for the queen. The king could simply banish Esther or have her beheaded when he learns that she is Jewish and he hears that she is pleading for the lives of the Jews in his kingdom.

Esther devises a clever plot: she holds a banquet of her own and invites the king and Haman—in fact she has two banquets in a row and the king comes to both.

At the second banquet, thrilled with his beautiful wife and the feast she has laid before him, the king says: “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.”

Queen Esther answers, “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.”

Esther reveals that she is Jewish and that Haman’s plan to exterminate the Jews includes her and her cousin Mordecai (and Mordecai had previously saved the king’s life when two guards had tried to assassinate him). King Ahasuerus then regrets and reverses his decision to eliminate the Jews, orders Haman to be hung from the gallows, and makes Mordecai prime minister over the kingdom.

It is very clear why Esther would be a beloved heroine to the Jewish people and a revered figure in the Hebrew Scriptures. She risks her life when she “comes out” as a Jew and asks the king that her people be spared. The Jewish holiday of Purim is celebrated each year in February or March in memory of the averted pogrom of the Jews thanks to Esther and Mordecai. The holiday is a holy festival with feasts and expressions of joy.

Let’s reflect on Esther’s story and uncover the lessons embedded in this tale of intrigue.

Queen Esther is powerful, independent and brave. She is courageous in ways that are unexpected for women, even queens, in ancient times. So we find ourselves wondering about Esther’s decision to speak out as a Jew and petition the king to spare her life and the life of all the Jews in the kingdom. What made her do that? What gave her the courage when she knew she was risking her life?

Before Esther petitions the king to spare the Jews, she fasts for three days to prepare herself and asks her maids and the Jews in the kingdom to do the same in solidarity with her. Listen to her request and to her courage:

*Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.*

Esther 4:16

Esther's bravery is legendary...but what made her so brave?

I believe THE source of her courage came from her strong *identity* as an Israelite, a Jew.

Consider Esther's identity as a Jew. The Book of Esther does not have one reference in it to God. God is never named. It may be the only book in the Bible that does not mention God. As queen, Esther had to hide the fact that she was a Jew. And yet even though Esther does not seem to pray to God, follow Jewish dietary practices, perform many sacred rituals when she lives in the palace, she strongly identifies as a Jew—enough so that she risks her life to save her people. When in the palace as the queen, Esther is not what we would call a practicing Jew. And yet, her identity as an Israelite, a Jew, never leaves her.

Let's place the story of Esther in the context of the Old Testament overall. The Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures is one long story of the Israelites and their sense of God in their lives, moving through history, leading them forward. The Old Testament is the story of the Israelites—a small band of nomadic people who believed without question that God spoke to them, loved them, guided them and most importantly CHOSE them. The Hebrew Scriptures are the story of a Chosen People.

That is critically important for us to grasp. Part of the reason that Esther can stand up for her people, be willing to die for her people, even when not actively practicing her faith is because she identifies so strongly internally as an Israelite, a Jew, one of the chosen.

If you read the Hebrew Scriptures, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers Deuteronomy, and on through Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles and on for so many more Books, you hear the same refrain over and over again—this is the story of the Chosen People. The people God chose and blessed, and made a covenant with on Mt. Sinai. The people God especially loved, cared for, guided, and formed a special relationship with. These are God's people.

The Hebrew Scriptures are the stories of the Israelites and their bond with God, their covenant with God and their understanding of God. But remember the Israelites were not living in isolation, they are not the only people in ancient times. The Israelites were surrounded by and interacted with other tribes who had their own identities, their own Gods, their own customs, rituals and beliefs—these include the Amorites, Jebusites, Hittites, Hivites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Midianites, Amalekites, Moabites. And that is only a partial list.

The Israelites were a small tribe of nomads with many other tribes, cultures and peoples around them, interacting with them, threatening them, attacking them. And yet over time the Israelites emerge—over centuries, over millennia—with a strong identity as a people chosen by God and blessed by God. Of all the tribes in ancient history, that whole list of tribes/peoples (Amorites, Jebusites, Hittites, etc.) the one that surfaces, emerges, remains and still exists today is the Israelites, now called the Jewish people. The other tribes have intermarried, or passed from history as a discernable tribe, body, people. **ONLY** the Israelites, the Jewish people, only they remain a distinct body, identifiable group of people in modern times.

The Israelites special relationship with God, their covenant with God, made it possible for them to endure, survive and thrive when other tribes faded from history. The Israelites understood themselves as a Chosen People....that Yahweh was their God and they were his people.

Esther is courageous and stands up for her people because she had that spark in her. As queen, she could not practice her faith or speak of her God, but she knew she was an Israelite, a Jew and that identity was so strong within her, so compelling in her life, that she was willing to “perish,” as she says, to try save her people.

For millennia, the Jewish people have been isolated, enslaved, crushed, attacked, threatened, exiled, transported, divided and killed—all of it...and yet the Jewish people have, over thousands of years, held on to their identity as Jews. They know who they are, they understand their history, they believe God chose them among the nations, and they remain faithful. The Moabites are gone as a distinct ethnic or religious group, the Amalekites also, the Perizzites as well, the Hittites and the list goes on. But the Israelites remain because people (like Esther) knew who they were, believed they were close to God, and remained faithful, brave and loyal.

The covenant the Jews made with their **MONOTHEISTIC** (and that is important) **ONE GOD** Yahweh has sustained them through centuries and centuries of terrible trials and it sustains them today.

Esther is one example of the amazing spirit of the Jewish people and the power of the Jewish identity. Esther knew she was a Jew and she was willing to die for her people when they were threatened.

And as Christians, we come from this line of believers. Esther and Mordecai and all the Israelites are OUR ancestors. Jesus was a Jew. He comes from the line of the House of David.

I know, Christians have the New Testament and Jesus—new stories, a new teacher, savior, leader who we know, trust, love and follow. But the Chosen People, the Jewish people, are part of our heritage and we must never forget that. The Torah is part of our Bible. Their stories are our stories. Jesus does not come to replace the old story with a new story, he does not come to negate the stories of the past or deny his lineage or ancestry. Jesus said he came to fulfill the scriptures, to fulfill the prophesies and the law. He is the fulfillment of all that has gone before.

And so I take the story of Esther and all the stories in the Old Testament as stories about my people, my ancestors, my sisters and brothers in the faith. These are the stories and traditions that shaped Jesus who I love and follow. Jesus may be for me a path, a channel, a way that I find and know God. And Jesus was a Jew and I must never forget that. And Esther is my sister because her courage helped the line of the Jewish people to survive, the legacy to continue. Esther's strong sense of identity as a Jew helped the Israelites carry on, go forward and emerge from years of struggle to be the people of faith we know, love and admire today.

Esther's story shaped Jesus' life—he grew up hearing the stories in Scripture and the warnings of the prophets. Jesus' own witness, his courage, his compassion, his understand of his role on this earth, his teaching and his preaching were rooted in his study of the Hebrew Scriptures. The stories he heard are the stories we study today.

And so I embrace Queen Esther, I admire her courage, I am inspired by her story, and I recognize her as a sister.

The Old Testament is not the old story of the Jews AND then the New Testament the new story, the Christian story, where our story begins.

No. Our story begins in Genesis and moves through the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures—as a small, strong, remarkable band of nomads called out to their God, made a covenant with their God, and held onto their identity for thousands of years against unbearable odds.

Esther's life informed Jesus' ministry.

Just as he is ours, she is ours too. And her story, her courage and her strong sense of identity, loyalty and faithfulness can inspire us all. Amen.