

“Esther” by Cindy Wallace

Osler Mennonite Church

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This morning we are having a taste of Purim, the Jewish festival of Lots, which is first instituted in the book of Esther and has been celebrated for thousands of years since. I was introduced to this festival as a little girl reading the All-of-a-Kind Family series by Sydney Taylor. These books charmingly narrate the life of a Jewish immigrant family in New York City's Lower East Side during the years leading up to World War I. (Have any of you read these books?) These books were some of the first American Jewish children's books, and they gave me and many others a glimpse of the texture and richness of Jewish life. I loved to read about the children's celebration of Purim, when they dressed up in funny costumes, tramped through the streets telling jokes, delivered baskets full of delicious homemade goodies to their neighbors and the poor, put on plays, and ate the traditional Hamentaschen, which are three-cornered cookies shaped like the hat Hamen purportedly wore.

And I loved their tradition of reading all of Esther aloud in the synagogue, as we're going to reenact in Sunday School, cheering and stomping and noisemaking and laughing. What a fun way to read the Bible, not just for children but also for adults! What a sensory way to commemorate a story in Jewish history! Purim involved touch and taste and sound and smell and movement and ridiculous sights!

The book of Ester is fairly easy to summarize; most of us probably remember the story. King Ahasuerus (or Xerxes) throws a very long, very wild party and calls his queen Vashti to come, but she refuses. This leads him to nurse his pride by searching for a new queen, and the young orphan Hadasseh, or Esther,

is among the many beautiful young virgins compelled to join the palace harem. After a year of preparations, Esther has her night with the king, and he's so taken with her that she becomes queen.

Meanwhile, the politician Haman is snubbed by Mordecai (who happens to be Esther's cousin and guardian), and Haman hatches a plot to kill all of Mordecai's people, the Jews, who are a minority group within Persia. Mordecai encourages Esther to risk her life to appear before the king even though he hasn't called her—this is the portion of the text we heard read this morning—and she ultimately agrees to it. In a series of banquets and coincidences, Haman's desire to kill Mordecai ends with Mordecai being honored and Haman executed, and Esther's request for the king to save her people results in a decree that allows the Jews to defend themselves against the attacks called for in Haman's original legal document. The book of Esther ends by describing the festival of Purim that the Jews should celebrate each year from then on out to remember their deliverance. This celebration is what I read about as a child and what we'll experience a bit of in Sunday school later today.

But this summary leaves out a lot. And when you move past summary—or romantic historical fiction versions—Esther is a tricky book with a complicated history. It exists in multiple forms: there are different versions of this book in Protestant Bibles than there are in Catholic or Orthodox Bibles. It has been debated whether the book belongs in the Bible at all. It's the only book in our Bibles that does not explicitly mention God. Parts of it conflict with other historical accounts. And parts of it are just ridiculous: a party that lasts half a year? A gallows more than twice the height of the tallest building in the kingdom?

And then there is the gender issue. Do we celebrate the first queen Vasthi or critique her? Scholars and preachers have done both. Do we celebrate Esther or

critique her? Again, scholars and preachers have done both. Esther saves her people, yes, but by winning a beauty contest and hiding the fact that she is a Jew. Which means that she also chose not to keep God's laws for the people of Israel, which would have outed her in the palace. She also becomes a concubine, which is to say, a very well-kept sex worker, and then the queen of a pagan king. She butters him up by getting him drunk. When the king gets the wrong impression about Haman's behavior towards her, she doesn't straighten it out and lets Haman be executed on false pretenses. And finally, in order to save their people, Esther and Mordecai write a decree that calls for the Jews to kill their attackers, leading to thousands of deaths. Are we supposed to consider all these acts examples for us to follow?

These questions have led some commentators to push Esther to the side and applaud Mordecai instead, or to fill in gaps—even revise the story—to make it more palatable for our moral tastes (have any of you read or watched a tidier version of Esther?). Because it fails to explain so many things, and because it is so distant from our own present-day culture, the book of Esther challenges us and maybe makes us squirm a little in our seats, especially if we're looking for heroes.

In fact, the book serves as a good reminder that our Bible is not just “God's instruction book on how to live our lives.” The Bible is a compilation of many genres: we have poetry, prophecy, folk tales and parables, history, letters, sermons, songs, prayers, and genealogies. These different genres ask for different forms of reading, different approaches. The book of Esther reminds us that it is often just as important to consider how something is written and used in worship as it is to consider what is written. In other words, our understanding of a passage from scripture often relies on our attention not just to the content, or story, but also to the context and form.

Paying attention to the context of the book of Esther reminds us that norms

of culture, gender, government, and violence were different then from now. If we ignore these differences, we can jump to sketchy conclusions. Like much of the Hebrew Bible, Esther is a descriptive book rather than a prescriptive one: it tells us how things happened, in all their messy humanness. We don't go to the Old Testament for stories of perfect societies or perfect people. In fact, most of our “heroes of the faith” show serious flaws: fears, pride, infidelity, dishonesty. We don't find cozy pictures of our contemporary moral ideals in the Bible. What we find an ongoing message that God delivers, and God uses people as complicated and imperfect as we are to do it.

This is how the Jewish community has understood Esther, even as its scholars have grappled with the questions it raises. In Purim celebrations, the people of Israel recognize that before all else, Esther is a story of God's deliverance. The purpose of the book of Esther is to commemorate a courageous woman's participation in God's work of deliverance. This is why Jewish communities read the whole thing aloud every year, in some synagogues twice—both the night before and the day of Purim. Esther is a story of God's saving work among God's people, a story of how God frees, liberates, rescues, releases, and saves.

The crux of this deliverance is summarized in chapter 9, verse 1, with the phrase, “the reverse occurred,” or in the words of the New International Version, “the tables were turned.” The whole book of Esther is structured around this idea of reversal, or opposites, and so some Jewish communities call Purim the “Festival of Reversals.” Characters in the book are paired: Vashti gets in trouble for not appearing before the king, whereas Esther fears that she'll get in trouble for appearing before the king. Haman seeks honor for himself and to destroy Mordecai but in the end Mordecai is honored and Haman destroyed. Haman's anti-Jewish law can't be repealed, but it is answered by a pro-Jewish law that mirrors it in almost every way. The book both begins and ends with feasts: first the people of

Persia celebrating their wealth, and then the people of Israel celebrating their deliverance from annihilation. And as many scholars have noted, the book turns on the carnivalesque parade in chapter six, where Haman leads Mordecai through the streets on the king's horse, wearing the king's clothes, crying, “This is what the king does for the one he wishes to honor.” Mordecai is removed from sackcloth and ashes to royal robes in the space of a day.

The book also traces a very real change in Esther, a reversal in her role, not just from unknown Hadasseh to queen, but from passive to active. A closer reading gives us a different view of Esther. As the story progresses, she gains confidence and authority. Near the beginning of the account, in chapter 2, the narrator describes things happening to Esther in the passive voice: just like the Jews were carried away into exile, Esther is carried away into the harem, she is summoned, she is prepared for the king's bed. She doesn't speak or act, she's just acted upon. But as the book continues, things don't just happen to Esther: Esther does things. She makes decisions and plans, even tells her guardian Mordecai what to do, and the narrator tells us that now he obeys her. She knowingly risks her life to approach the king. She writes decrees. And in the end, she saves the Jews of Persia from utter destruction. In a very real sense, the liberation of an entire people is linked to Esther's liberation from her role as a passive beautiful object in the king's palace.

How the story of Esther is written—its very purposeful structure and language—underlines the theme of reversal and deliverance. And the festival of Purim, with its celebration of opposites, beautifully enacts the theme. On this one day in traditional Jewish communities, women may dress like men and men like women, children like adults and adults like children. On this one day the synagogue, usually a solemn and reverent space, is turned into a carnival. People play practical jokes and even—as the saying goes—are encouraged to drink until

they can't tell the difference between the phrases “cursed be Haman” and “blessed be Mordecai.” In the words of Esther chapter 9 verse 22, this is a time turned from “mourning into gladness and from sorrow into a holiday.”

This reversal reminds us of the prophecy in Isaiah 40 that we often read during Advent, and which John the Baptist quotes in Luke chapter 3:

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall become straight,
and the rough places shall become level ways,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

This reversal reminds us of Jesus' own teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and the logic of the Beatitudes, the command to love our enemies, the warning in Matthew 19 that “many who are first will be last, and the last first.” It reminds us of the paradoxes spoken of by the Apostle Paul: that God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise and the weak things to shame the strong. That when we are weak, we are strong, that though we die, yet we live.

And this reversal reminds us of a God who creates and sustains, in all power and glory, and yet suffers with us. This story of the tables turning reminds us of a Christ—a Messiah—who, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on

earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:6-11).

This is the upside-down kingdom, where the vulnerable, for whom God has special concern, are delivered from their oppressors, where mourning is turned to dancing. This is the upside-down kingdom, where a woman whose role in her society was to be one more beautiful possession to the king's treasury, one more pleasure in his bed, shows the grit and courage to speak up on behalf of her people, and thus lets God use the least of these to lead the strong.

Sisters and brothers, we too have stories of deliverance, stories of liberation and release and salvation, stories of reversal. I have stories and you have stories. And today, I want us to learn from our Jewish brothers and sisters a lesson in telling and re-telling these stories.

In many Jewish communities around the world, there is a tradition not only of celebrating Purim as is outlined at the end of Esther, there is also a tradition of celebrating “small” or “second” Purims—feast days that commemorate local communities' stories of deliverance from oppression. So for instance, in 1615, Jews in Frankfurt began to celebrate a small Purim commemorating their deliverance from an anti-Semitic baker who organized attacks on the Jews. And the community in Casablanca instituted a small Purim in honor of their deliverance from anti-Jewish riots and Nazi occupation in 1943.

What are our small Purims? God is still at work freeing us, and we must remember both the ancient history and the more freshly unfolding stories of deliverance. We need these stories: as a woman shaped by a society that still demeans and oppresses women, still often treats them as beautiful objects, I need stories of strong and courageous women partnering in God's work—our daughters and sons need such stories—we all do. As people living in a world still structured

by racism, we need to take part in the long tradition of oppressed peoples recounting tales of deliverance in the past that give us courage for the present and faith for the future, so that “Deep in our heart, [we may] still believe that we shall all be free someday.” As a religious group that escaped persecution in Europe, we ought to remember the sacrifices and extraordinary mutual aid that brought Mennonites to such a bountiful life here in North America. And as settlers on Treaty Six Lands, Nehiyaw Territory, and the Homeland of the Métis, we must be seeking out and listening to the stories—stories of both suffering and strength—of those who inhabited this land long before us, and seeking a way of reconciliation together.

We need these stories, for they remind us of who we are, and who we can be, and that the Mysterious One who we worship, that this is the One who saves. They also remind us, when we get too comfortable, that oppression is still real, and that deliverance—salvation—is something that we trust in, yet also hope for, rest in, yet also work out with fear and trembling. Sometimes we are like the Jews in Esther’s story. And sometimes we are like the Persians. We are often both at once.

I’ll close this morning by outlining three points I hope we’ll carry with us. First of all, may we commit ourselves to studying our scriptures, because these are our faith community’s basic stories, and in their particularity, in their form and context as well as their content, they offer us deep riches—especially when we approach them in communities of interpretation and with prayerful openness to the Spirit’s guidance.

Second, may we share our stories of deliverance, both the biblical and the personal, and listen to others’ stories. We need to create spaces—around our dinner tables, in small groups, in celebrations and times of mourning—where we can tell and re-tell our tales, where we can celebrate our small Purims. We must be people

who remember and who welcome one another into the specificity of our histories, ready to weep with those who weep but also to rejoice with those who rejoice. May we mourn well and also celebrate well, as unafraid of laughter as we are of tears.

Third, and finally, may we remember that our deliverance—our liberation—is all wrapped up together. In the famous words of Martin Luther King, Jr., our freedom is “inextricably bound.” In Esther's story, she cannot act for her people until she overcomes her fear and refuses her role as a passive beauty queen. And even then, after the king grants Esther and Mordecai relief from Haman, she risks yet another approach, because Esther realizes that her own liberation is incomplete: she bears the responsibility for an entire community—she is not free until they are. She may be fine in the palace now, but she asks, “How can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?” I think we have similar question to ask ourselves.

God seeks to deliver a people. God seeks to build a beloved community. God seeks to reconcile all things. It is for freedom that Christ set us free, surprising us, turning everything upside down and making beauty of the mess.

One Jewish community's website concludes its explanation of Purim with these words:

“In the time of the Messiah, every day shall feel like Purim.”

May it be so.

Amen.