

# McCabe United Methodist Church

“So Much Feasting!”

Esther Series: Once Upon a Time Like This...

Sermon on sel. verses of Esther 8-10 and Romans 8:27-28 (1/31 & 2/1/15)

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Once upon a time in the Persian Empire, there was a king named Xerxes who banished his queen – Queen Vashti – because she publicly disobeyed him. After this, King Xerxes held something of a beauty contest to find himself a new queen. Young women from throughout his kingdom were gathered to the palace to take part in this contest.

One of the young women gathered up was a Jewish orphan named Esther. Esther's parents had died when she was young and she was left in the care of a male relative named Mordecai. When Esther was gathered up to participate in the King's Queen competition, Mordecai warned her not to tell anyone she was Jewish.

Of all the young women gathered up, Esther was King Xerxes' favorite and he chose her to become his new Queen. And, as it happened, while Esther was competing to become Queen, Mordecai was appointed to become part of the royal palace guard.

Not long after this, King Xerxes appointed a man named Haman to become his top advisor. Haman was descended from an ancient king, so Xerxes ordered the palace guard to bow down to Haman whenever he approached. The palace guard complied – all, except for Mordecai.

Because he was a Jew, Mordecai was not to bow down to anyone other than God almighty...so he refused to bow down to Haman. This so infuriated Haman that he decided *all* the Jews in Persia needed to be killed. Haman told King Xerxes the Jews refused to assimilate into Persian culture and should be eliminated. The king agreed.

Haman cast lots to see when the best time would be to kill all of the Jews in Persia. Based on the lots he cast, it was decided the best time would be the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month of Adar.

A royal letter was sent to all the provinces of Persia and everyone throughout the empire was informed. Mordecai and all of the Jews mourned this pending

annihilation with fasting and with the wearing of sackcloth and ashes.

Despite her royal position, Queen Esther did not know about Haman's evil plan to kill all of her people. And, of course, neither Haman nor the king knew that Queen Esther herself was Jewish and would be eliminated in this mass killing.

Mordecai sent word to Esther about Haman's plot and he asked her to speak with the king about it. "If you don't speak up now," Mordecai said to Esther, "we will somehow get help, but you and your family will be killed. It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!"

Queen Esther was compelled by these words as though they were a holy calling and she made a plan to speak with King Xerxes, asking him to stop Haman's plot. To make a long, fairy tale-like story a tiny bit shorter, when Esther spoke to King Xerxes, she revealed her Jewish identity, and begged him to stop Haman's planned genocide of the Jews. The king was furious at Haman for his plot that would have killed his beloved queen. Xerxes then ordered that Haman be hanged...and it was done.

The problem remained, however, that there was a legally binding plan in place that all of the Jews were to be killed on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month of Adar. Even the king himself could not change this law.

So...at Queen Esther's request, a companion law was made that, on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Adar, the Jews could *defend themselves* against those who would attempt to kill them.

Over the centuries, biblical scholars and people of faith – Jewish and Christian alike – have had a bit of a love-hate relationship with the book of Esther. One of the reasons for this love-hate relationship is that, in all of its 10 chapters, there is not one mention of God anywhere. Today's section of the story – the final section – presents another big reason Esther creates significant challenge for many Jews and Christians.

The reason for this challenge is the level of violence contained within it. And, not only the level of *violence*, but the level of celebration that went along with the violence.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Adar, when the enemies of the Jews came to kill them, the *Jews* killed 75,000 men, women, and children. And, on top of the extremely

high number of people they killed, the *following* day – the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Adar – the Jews gleefully celebrated against those they had killed.

They feasted and sent gifts to one another and, as the story goes, with Mordecai's help, Queen Esther established that such feasting would happen, year after year, on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month Adar. This annual feast was to be called “Purim” – P-U-R-I-M. “Purim” is the Hebrew word for “lots”...and this annual feast was named “Purim” in recognition of the *lots* that were cast by Haman to select that particular day as the day when the Jews would be killed.

To this day, Purim remains a special holiday for the Jewish people. As I've mentioned in a couple of the other messages in this series, on Purim, Jews are encouraged to dress in costume, to feast with certain kinds of food, and they even make a point of giving to charity. Perhaps the most distinctive tradition connected to Purim, however, is the corporate reading of the entire book of Esther.

Though it might seem like it would take an inordinate amount of time, this corporate reading of Esther apparently takes only about 45 minutes. And Jewish people make this reading through of the book of Esther quite fun. More on that in a bit.

Before the advent of the movable type printing press back in the 1400's, the printed word was typically written on paper-like materials made from plants or animal skins. For centuries, Jewish Scripture was written on these materials in *scroll* form. To this day, Scripture is read in Jewish synagogues *from scrolls* during their public worship services – and the reading of the book of Esther on Purim is no exception.

The particular scroll of the book of Esther has a special Hebrew name: “the megillah.” And, in fact, if you happen to have ever heard the slang phrase “the whole megillah,” it refers to the reading of Esther on the Jewish holiday of Purim. As a slang phrase, it implies that you listened to a long, complex, drawn-out story.

(I happen to be famous among my friends and family for telling stories that are very long and that involve far more details than are absolutely necessary. Any time I tell such a story, it would be very appropriate for someone to sarcastically describe said story with this very phrase: “Oh, yeah...Jenny told us all about such-and-such the other day. We heard *the whole megillah!*”)

Well, a few weeks ago, I decided we needed to have *the whole megillah* here at McCabe at some point during this sermon series. So I ordered a fun Esther scroll from an online Jewish supply store...and I'm going to need two assistants to come up here to help in showing you "the whole megillah." And when they come up here, I'm going to ask them to unroll the scroll from right to left...

Just so you know, I wanted them to unroll it from right to left because, unlike how we read in English – from left to right – Hebrew is read from right to left. The Old Testament of the Bible was originally written in Hebrew, so, when Jews read the Bible – even in scroll form – they read it in Hebrew, from right to left. This particular version of the Esther scroll has both Hebrew and English.

This particular Esther scroll was also designed with children in mind because, throughout its 10 chapters, there are fun pictures of clay figurines depicting the various characters and scenes within the story.

At the end of this scroll, there is even a picture of more modern-day people celebrating the feast of Purim with their food and costumes. So...I said that, when Jews gather to read *the whole megillah* on Purim, they make it fun. And they do that by making noise every time Haman's name is read. They yell "Boo!," they stomp their feet, and, if they have them, they even shake special noisemakers called "graggers." (If you were here last week, I introduced you to the Haman gragger I bought recently. It makes an annoying noise, but it sure is fun!)

Haman's name is said 54 times in the book of Esther. On Purim, as Haman's name is said, the gathered Jewish community makes all kinds of noise, as if to literally cover up his name – to blot it out, to make it impossible to even hear the name "Haman" being said. And we're going to give this a try. Just for fun.

So, before I invite my assistants to sit down, I'm going to reread the beginning of today's Scripture...and, each time I read Haman's name, I want you to quickly make gleeful, protest noise. Stomp your feet, yell "Booo!," drum your hands on the pew / chair in front of you. Have fun with it! I will hold up my Haman gragger each time to help cue you and your noise.

You're going to have five chances to get it right. Are you ready? Okay. Here we go: "Before the end of the day, King Xerxes gave Esther everything that had belonged to **HAMAN**, the enemy of the Jews.

“Esther told the king that Mordecai was her cousin. So the king made Mordecai one of his highest officials and gave him the royal ring that HAMAN had worn. Then Esther put Mordecai in charge of HAMAN'S property. Once again Esther went to speak to the king. This time she fell down at his feet, crying and begging, 'Please stop HAMAN'S evil plan to have the Jews killed!'”

“King Xerxes held out the golden scepter to Esther, and she got up and said, 'Your Majesty, I know that you will do the right thing and that you really love me. Please stop what HAMAN has planned.’”

Many thanks to my assistants here. If you would please roll up the scroll, this time from left to right, I would be much obliged.

It's kind of fun to gleefully protest against an enemy, right? That's what the Jewish festival of Purim is all about. And, if you are a student of history, you know that the Jews have had their share of very real, very dangerous enemies.

Even though Purim is a fun, joyful holiday, it connects deeply to the soul of Jews who have experienced discrimination and death at the hands of people who hate them simply because of their religious identity.

This book of Scripture that gives Jewish people permission to celebrate against their enemies is extremely important.

Now. There are ten feasts in the book of Esther. Ten chapters in the book of Esther, ten feasts. So. Much. Feasting! When you read *the whole megillah*, it is clear just how important feasting is. It's about joy – sometimes even joy in the midst of fear and sorrow...joy in the midst of worry about the future and what it holds for you and your dear ones.

It is understandable that people have struggled over the centuries with this book of Scripture...especially because of the amount and type of violence contained within it.

Some Christians believe that *some* violence is justifiable, while other Christians are strict pacifists – taking to their literal extreme Jesus' words that we forgive our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

Whichever side you fall on, Christians everywhere recognize that violence should not be the first, nor is it an ideal way to respond to any kind of enemy. But, our world is so often far less than ideal...

Well. As Christians, we have our own feast that celebrates the way in which God brings salvation and redemption in the midst of violence.

When the Roman authorities crucified our Lord and Savior, God responded with the ultimate victory: Jesus' resurrection from the dead. A sign of hope in the face of any enemy.

Every time we celebrate Holy Communion, we celebrate the victory God gives us through Christ's death and resurrection – a victory over the enemies *sin* and *death*...the enemies *addiction* and *pain*...the enemies *sickness* and *chaos*...the enemies *fear* and *loneliness*.

Holy Communion is a Christian feast of joy – not wholly unlike the joy of the Jewish feast of Purim. Yet so many Christians come forward for Communion in such a somber way.

Are we joyful that, through Christ's death and resurrection, God defeated the power of sin and death? Of course we are! Are we joyful that, through Christ's death and resurrection, God defeats the power of addiction and pain, the power of sickness and chaos, of fear and loneliness? You better believe we're joyful about that!

Friends: *this* feast we are about to celebrate – the feast of Holy Communion – is a feast of joyous victory over such enemies. Never, ever forget that. A bit ago, we practiced celebrating the joy of Purim – a feast belonging to our Jewish brothers and sisters. But now we get to celebrate the joy of our *own* victory feast...and thanks be to God for that celebration.