

Esther, Savior of Her People

Sermon Reprint by: Rev. Dr. Tess Baumberger
Unity Church of North Easton
Sermon delivered Sunday March 8th, 2009

In the 4th century three of the world's great religions closed their canons. That doesn't mean that they plugged up their big guns, because big guns didn't exist 1700 years ago. This word "canon" is spelled c-a-n-o-n and it means "a list." Closing their canons means that these three religions decided which scriptures should be "on" their lists of approved and authoritative texts, and which scriptures were not.

Some religions have what we call "open canons." This means that they believe that revelation is an ongoing process - that there will always be new prophets, new scriptures, and so they keep the list open for additions. The scriptures of Buddhism's open canon would fill a large room. The Ba'hai have an open canon, and so do we. Ours includes scriptures from the world religions, as well as poetry, the findings of science, and the text of nature.

We have chosen and continue to choose an open canon, but other religions chose differently. Their leaders came together and made a final list of their official scriptures. They did this because they believed the age of revelation and prophecy had ended. At the same time, they consolidated their religions in some important ways that determined their shape for centuries to come.

The world religions that closed their canons around the 4th century were Zoroastrianism, an ancient Persian religion, Judaism and Christianity. The closing of the Christian and Jewish canons is relevant to today's sermon because the book of Esther almost didn't make it into either one.

The book of Esther was nearly excluded because it is so secular. It does not once mention God, or the law, or the covenant. If you were raised Christian and remember prayers and references to God in the book of Esther, that's because they were added later. They simply do not exist in the original story.

What's more, Esther marries a Gentile and lives in a Gentile world. The story of Esther is set in the Persian court in Babylon, where the Jewish elite lived after the Syrians destroyed the first temple and exiled them from Jerusalem. The book presents

Jewishness as more of an ethnic distinction rather than a religious faith. It does mention the Jewish religious practice of fasting, but that's about it.

Today, we would say that many of the Jews in Babylon were “highly assimilated.” That is, they adopted many of the Persian culture’s customs. It’s clear from the text itself that both Esther and Mordecai know a great deal about Babylon’s laws and its power structure. Esther does not appear to keep Kosher when living among the Gentiles, though some traditions say she ate only salted beans there. But for a story about the origins of a Jewish holiday, the book of Esther is not very Jewish.

In fact, some biblical scholars think Purim was not originally a Jewish festival. It may be rooted in a Persian new year festival that centers on a story about the goddess Ishtar, who worked with the god Marduk to put down another god who was named Haman. The names “Esther” and “Mordecai” may be Hebrew versions of the names Ishtar and Marduk. When the Persians celebrated this new year festival they cast lots (*pur*) to predict what would happen the coming year.

So it could very well be that the assimilated Jewish elite in Babylon began celebrating this festival while there, then borrowed and adapted it into their faith culture. Borrowing between religions is common. In fact, it is so common that religious scholars even have a word for it - “syncretism.” Just as languages borrow words from one another when cultures connect, religions borrow customs, holidays, and rituals. It happens.

Some scholars think that sometime after Jews began to celebrate the Persian feast 2,500 years ago, they fashioned the story of Esther to explain why they did so. It could be that there actually was someone like Esther, whose story became part of this legend.

The book of Esther is a story about a people who are a religious and ethnic minority, who become the object of a sinister plot to destroy them. The bad guy, Haman, issues a decree that on a certain day, which he determined by casting lots, all the Jews in the kingdom were to be killed.

To understand the enormity of this plot, you have to know that at the time, the Persian Empire stretched from northern Africa in the west to the Indian subcontinent in the east. It was huge. Jewish people lived throughout that empire. In other words, Haman’s edict was a decree of genocide.

Why did Haman want to wipe out all of the Jewish people? Because Mordecai refused to bow down to him! How crazy is that? But Jews have often been persecuted for their religion, and even though it is not directly mentioned in the book of Esther, religion was at the root of Mordecai's refusal. He was not so assimilated that he would agree to honor a human being in the way his faith said only God could be honored.

You could say that Haman's sinister plot stems from a clash between a religion and a culture that involve our heroine in complicated ways. Now Esther is an unlikely hero - a female member of an oppressed patriarchal minority. At the beginning, Esther isn't really much of a character in her own right at all. Instead she is defined by her relationship to Mordecai, her cousin and guardian.

When the king issues his decree about looking for a new queen, Mordecai tells Esther to put herself forward. She does, obediently presenting herself as a possible bride to the Gentile king. She passively obeys Mordecai. This is the expected behavior for a woman in a highly patriarchal culture.

However, there is a turning point in Esther's life and in the story, and I would like to read that passage to you now.

Esther 4:10-17 (New International Version)

¹⁰ Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, ¹¹ "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

¹² When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³ he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴ For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

¹⁵ Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶ "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

¹⁷ So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

The passage starts out with Esther caught between a rock and a hard place. She explains very clearly to Mordecai that if she enters the court without being summoned, she could lose her life. Mordecai replies that she will lose her life anyway under Haman's decree. He says maybe she came to be queen just so she could help her people at this moment.

This is where I think the turning point in the story occurs. As it dawns on Esther that she actually does have power in the Persian court, the power in her relationship with Mordecai shifts before our eyes. She begins to give him and the Jewish people orders, and to work methodically to achieve her goals. In doing so, she uses her knowledge of the court and her husband.

Esther is clearly no fool - she's smart and resourceful. She doesn't just barge into the king's court demanding to see him. She knows that would not work. First she robes herself in finery that enhances her beauty and marks her as a queen. Not only does he not have her put to death, he welcomes her. Not only does he welcome her, he says he'll give her anything, up to half his kingdom. She must have looked pretty darn hot.

But Esther doesn't ask for what she wants right away, because that would leave Haman still in power, and she knows the Haman is dangerous. Instead, she invites the king and her enemy to a private banquet. This will build the king's attachment, which is important because it is clear from earlier in the story that this king acts impulsively based on emotions. As far as Haman is concerned, inviting him lulls him into a false sense of security and further inflates his pride.

At this banquet, the king repeats his offer to honor any request of Esther's, and asks her to name what she wants. Again, she puts him off and invites them to a second banquet, which in the story serves to build suspense. It also allows the subplot pitting Haman and Mordecai against each other to take a comic turn as Haman is forced to honor the man who refused to bow down to him. The king's attendance at the second banquet assures Esther of her good standing with him. She knows now that he will honor his promise.

So, at this second dinner, Esther reveals Haman's plot to kill the Jews, which the king doesn't really know about. He is kind of a buffoon with what you might call a "hands off" leadership style. Esther argues with him that the destruction of the Jews

would be a great financial loss, appealing to his greed. As a final stroke, she reveals herself to be Jewish. Haman has been plotting the death of the king's beloved queen!

The king reacts just as impulsively as Esther would have expected, and with great anger. He has Haman executed and gives Haman's house and all of his belongings to Mordecai. He even makes Mordecai his new second-in-command.

The king is proud, so he won't retract Haman's decree to kill the Jews. So instead he and Mordecai issue a new decree saying that the Jews have the right to defend themselves. In this way, the Jewish people slaughter many of their enemies and declare a holiday to celebrate their victories.

It's easy to see how this story caught on among an exiled people. By the fourth century, Purim was so entrenched that there would have been a revolt if the book of Esther hadn't made it into the canon! It didn't matter to most people that the book didn't contain the word "God." If anyone even knew that the festival was based on a pagan holiday, that didn't matter so much either. What mattered is the powerful way the story spoke, and still speaks to the Jewish experience of being an oppressed minority in an often-hostile world.

The story of Esther is a story of power, hope, and survival against all the odds. Esther is a symbol of heroism. She is both a prophetic figure and a savior. Because of her beauty, she ended up in a palace and acquired some political power. She had the guts, the smarts and the savvy to use that power to save herself and her people from certain annihilation.

Esther showed enormous courage in speaking truth to power, and that is a hallmark of prophecy. She was willing to risk even her own life in order to do what was right. Her courage and her actions place her within the ranks of the prophets of the Jewish tradition. Prophets are those people who stand in the public square and cry out for change, who speak on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised, who cast visions for a better world, who present us with a deity that wants justice and fairness for all creatures.

As fun and silly as the feast Purim is, the story of Esther is really serious at heart. It deals with issues of justice and power, and features a main character who turns things upside down. Esther, the seemingly powerless Jewish woman, outsmarts the bad guy, bosses around her adoptive father and in fact all Jews, and in doing so, saves her people.

Because Esther is victorious, and lives, the traditions around Purim have light tones despite the story's serious themes. I find Purim compelling partly because of the laughter and fun around it. Custom dictates that on Purim, things are turned upside down - people act silly, and play practical jokes.

Everyone makes fun of everyone else, even those they normally take seriously. For instance, someone might play Moses looking desperately for his law under mounds and mounds of biblical commentaries. Rabbis are frequently the objects of satire during Purim. Fake rabbis perform ridiculous ceremonies, utter silly benedictions, and stage mock arguments about scripture.

There is also a centuries-long tradition, developed among European Jews, of having Purim plays, where the story is acted out as it is read. Actors dress up in outrageous costumes and people watching the action make lots of noise whenever Haman is named, and cheer loudly for the heroine, Esther.

It seems to me that the lighter customs of Purim, the fun and hilarity, are as much about power as is the story of Esther. When we laugh at our enemies and oppressors, we take away a measure of their power over us. When we make fun of them, we reduce the fear that oppressors use to control and subdue us. Through our laughter, we share in our salvation.

A sense of humor is a saving grace, and I think humor is part of what has kept the Jewish spirit alive through so many centuries of oppression. Being able to laugh at ourselves, about dearly held religious beliefs, even religious leaders, reminds us that we're all just human after all, that we all make mistakes, that we all do silly and stupid things.

One commentary I read pointed out that the book of Esther tells a very familiar human story. It's about how we act under certain circumstances. In its characters we can still see our selves or others in the world around us.

Who hasn't known someone like the lazy king who lets others rule so he can play? Perhaps we ourselves have sometimes acted as foolishly. Who hasn't known someone who lets hormones rule his or her life, so dazzled by another's beauty that they'd offer half of all they possess? Who hasn't acted impulsively in ways others might well regard as silly or immature?

At times we might even think or talk like Haman whose solution to being "dissed" is to plot to destroy his enemies, and all their kind. Who hasn't had a vindictive moment like that? We don't act on them, I hope, but who hasn't secretly plotted revenge while nursing injured pride? At least, who hasn't thought of the perfect cutting comeback until too late and regretted not being able to think of it in time?

On the other hand, who hasn't witnessed people who have found the courage of Mordecai to refuse to bow before people who set themselves up as little gods? Perhaps we have even found his kind of power ourselves, the power to say, "enough is enough." Perhaps we have found this courage, or the courage to tell people who feel powerless that they have the right to defend themselves. At times, we may be like the wise Mordecai.

Who hasn't known men or women like Esther, who have discovered their power and then used it to protect their people, their children? Even we may have elements of Esther in us, her savvy and intelligence. Perhaps there have been times when we have found the courage to say to someone in power, "This is who I am. I cannot and will not pretend otherwise any longer."

We have an open canon, which means we believe revelation is ongoing. We believe in every age there will be prophets who rise up and speak truth to power, who say what needs to change, who speak on behalf of the downtrodden, who help us imagine how the world could be.

One implication of having an open canon and believing that there are always prophets among us, is a belief in the prophethood of all believers. We all have elements of the characters of Esther and Mordecai within us. The gift of prophecy is a virtue we can all develop and practice. Its power is a power each of us can claim. We all can contribute to the wisdom of our tradition, we can all be revealers of the truth and casters of the dream.

Our religion has chosen to keep its canon open, but other religions chose differently. Given how much it can speak to us even today, it doesn't surprise me that the book of Esther made it into the closed canons of the Jewish and Christian religions way back in the fourth century. After all, it has important things to say about courage, truth, and about human nature.

Not only that, the topsy-turvy feast of Purim has at its wise heart the message that even our laughter can be redemptive. Laughing at ourselves and at what scares us can free us from the oppressions of the spirit so that we may walk on this earth with lighter hearts. This is as it should be. So may it be.