

Esther

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, May 26, 2019, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Esther 4:9-17](#) and [Matthew 7:15-20](#)

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From time to time, writing a sermon seems like a waste of time. This is especially true when someone has already written what I want to say. In her book [Inspired](#), Rachel Held Evans wrote a wonderful reflection on the story of Esther.¹ Almost all of today's sermon is from that reflection.

A teenage boy wearing a black cape and felt hat strolls across the stage. Behind him, a cavalcade of middle school princesses, pirates, and superheroes bows.

"Make way for Lord Haman!" cries the caller, a boy of eleven or twelve wearing a Mad Hatter costume.

At Haman's name, the audience erupts into a deafening roar, drowning the villain's words in boos, catcalls, and thunderous stomps....

Onstage, only Mordecai stands erect, declaring with muffled defiance through his costume beard, "I only bow to God!" The audience cheers.

"What kind of man is this?" asks Haman of a nearby Princess Elsa.

"A Jew," she replies.

Everyone in the audience knows what's next....

It's a strange way to mark a thwarted genocide, but every year, this is how Jews across the world celebrate Purim, a holiday recounting the tale of Haman, Mordecai, King Xerxes, and Queen Esther – one of the best resistance stories in Scripture.

As Lauren Winner wrote, "Purim is like Halloween and Mardi Gras and bunch of other stuff all mixed up together. It's a holiday in which there's revelry and inversion and people all dress up. They wear masks. When you go to the synagogue to hear the book of Esther read, you are instructed by the rabbis to shout and scream whenever you hear the name Haman so that his name gets drowned out. You're also instructed to get really drunk on Purim, so drunk, the rabbis say, that you can no longer tell the difference between Haman's name and the king's name."

Indeed, the biblical story, which tells how Mordecai and Esther helped saved their people from a pogrom by the Persian Empire, lends itself to such an interpretation. Many of the characters, particularly those of the Persian court, are so hapless and exaggerated, you can't help but laugh. Nearly every major plot point unfolds at some banquet, and the text includes all sorts of dramatic twists and turns. It's a story fit for the stage.

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018), 130-137.

Yet the text itself includes some disturbing details. As a kid, I always imagined Queen Esther to be something of a beauty pageant contestant. Having received the PG version of the tale in church, I figured that in addition to the “twelve months of beautification” Esther underwent before meeting King Xerxes, she must have performed some kind of talent and answered questions from a glass bowl before winning the heart of a love-struck royal. I never learned in Sunday school that Esther, whose Jewish name was Hadassah, was forced, along with perhaps thousands of virgin girls from Susa, into King Xerxes’s harem. Or that the king had banished his first wife, Queen Vashti, for refusing to publicly flaunt her body before his drunken friends. Or that under the care of the royal eunuchs, Esther and the women of the king’s harem each took a turn in the king’s bed to see who would please him best. Or that the women received just one night with the king, after which they were transferred to the eunuchs in charge of the concubines, with the instruction not to return to the king’s chamber unless summoned by name, under the penalty of death.

They left those details out of the flannelgraphs....

The Greek historian Herodotus, author of *History of the Persian Wars*, wrote just twenty-five years after the reign of Xerxes and provided some insight into his might and cruelty, including the fact that five hundred young boys were gathered each year from the kingdom and castrated to serve as eunuchs in the Persian court. It’s important to remember that the bodies of these eunuchs, and the bodies of the women like Esther who were forced into the royal harem, were the property of the empire. This was the forced concubinage of women who, in a patriarchal culture in an occupied territory, had no authority over their own marriages or bodies.

The story begins with a banquet. At the height of his glory and wealth, King Xerxes throws a lavish, multiday celebration for all the nobles of his court. He hosts feasts day and night in the palace garden, where fine linens hang from marble pillars and merrymakers lounge on couches made of gold. The king tells his servants to give each man as much wine as he wants to drink, so as the days wear on, the party grows wilder.

On the seventh day, when Xerxes is “in high spirits from wine,” he commands his eunuchs to bring Queen Vashti to the garden. He wants to display his wife’s body before all the drunken men of the court, for she is “lovely to look at” (Esther 1:10-11).

Well, when the attendants deliver the king’s command, Vashti refuses to obey. The woman simply won’t come out.

Her defiance infuriates the king, who consults his closest advisers on how to respond to his wife’s disobedience. A confidant named Memukan takes advantage and turns this little domestic dispute into a full-blown national crisis....

[Letting a woman say “No” to the king, he argues, will cause the collapse of the social structure. If someone at the bottom of the power pyramid can get away with saying “No” to the person at the top of the pyramid, then anyone anywhere in the pyramid will think they can get away with saying “No” to those above them.

So, Vashti is banished and a decree is sent forth,] delivered to every province and in every language of the empire, [that] proclaims that “all the women will respect their

husbands, from the least to the greatest” and that “every man should be ruler of his own household” (vv. 20, 22).

The overreaction is downright comical.

Audiences at Purim plays roar with laughter at these pathetic, insecure men, so threatened by one woman’s autonomy that they issue kingdom-wide edicts declaring men the rulers of their homes.

But behind the joke is a warning. Xerxes and his court have a habit of making major, national decisions based on personal offense and whims. [This is a warning for us, too.] Beneath the pomp and wealth is a dangerous fragility with which our heroes, and the Jewish people, must contend.

After banishing Vashti, the king gets lonely. Once his “fury had subsided” (2:1), he is persuaded by his attendants to search the land for its most beautiful virgins with the goal of finding a new, more obedient queen. Among the women forced into the harem is Esther, a beautiful Jewish orphan under the care of her cousin, Mordecai. While preparing for her encounter with the king, Esther wins the favor of everyone she meets, including the royal eunuchs, who, like Esther, had themselves been taken and used by the king. The cunning eunuchs pull more strings in the palace than anyone realizes, and they prove important allies as the story unfolds.

With the help of the eunuchs, Esther is chosen queen, though she is forbidden from speaking with the king without a summons. No one in the palace knows she is a Jew. Meanwhile, Mordecai, too, is commended when he uncovers an assassination plot by two of King Xerxes’s courtiers. The cousins seem poised to live a relatively privileged lifestyle among the occupying empire, until Haman – Boooooooooo! – is appointed viceroy.

When Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman as he passes, Haman’s fury turns to disdain for all Jews. The villain convinces a disinterested, persuadable King Xerxes to exterminate every Jew in the empire, then sends dispatches throughout the land with the order to “destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews – young and old, women and children – on a single day” (3:13). Haman chooses the day by casting lots, the fate of an entire race left to a game of chance.... While the Jews fast and pray in fear, King Xerxes and Haman celebrate over drinks. The text says, “The city of Susa was bewildered” (v. 15).

Terrified for his people, Mordecai implores Esther to intercede with the king, urging that perhaps she has “come to royal position for such a time as this” (4:14). After three days of fasting, Esther works up the courage to approach the throne without a summons. To her relief, the king extends his scepter to indicate her life will be spared. Esther invites both the king and Haman to a series of banquets, setting just the right stage to reveal her true identity.

Meanwhile, Haman plots to have Mordecai hanged, but a bout with insomnia leads King Xerxes to a bunch of old court records that remind him that Mordecai has yet to be honored for saving his life. (King Xerxes, you will find, is a rather forgetful fellow.) In a deliciously ironic scene, King Xerxes asks Haman how a man faithful to the king ought to be honored. Assuming Xerxes is referring to Haman himself, he tells the king to throw a grand parade for the man, dress him in the king’s royal robes and give him a royal horse, and

declare throughout the city that this is how a man who loves his king will be praised. Imagine Haman's horror when King Xerxes tells him to do these things for Mordecai!

Mordecai gets his parade, Haman goes home to cry to his wife, and Esther plans her big reveal.

At Esther's second banquet, she tells the king that her people have been targeted for genocide and begs him for mercy. The king is horrified. "Who on earth would plan such a thing?" he essentially demands, his previous conversation with Haman about eliminating an entire people group apparently slipping his mind.

Esther points to the villain. "An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!"

Haman, seeing he's been bested, falls onto Esther's couch in agony to beg for pardon. Xerxes interprets this as the man making a pass at his wife, and Haman's fate is sealed. The villain is hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Esther secures permission for the Jews to take revenge on their enemies, on the very day those enemies had planned to eliminate them. The story ends in a Tarantino-style bloodbath [which I could have done without].

Many people notice that the book of Esther is the only one in Scripture that fails to mention God, and indeed its religious themes are covert. However, God's presence is discernible, not simply in the providential unfolding of the Jewish people's deliverance, but as a contrast to the impotent, aimless reign of the bumbling King Xerxes and his Persian court. Though intent on flaunting the "vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor of his majesty" (1:4), Xerxes turns out to be little more than a pathetic puppet, coaxed and coddled by advisers, eunuchs, and villains, and ultimately controlled by a Jewish orphan and her cousin. Haman's rage against the Jews is petty and childish. Major empire-wide decisions get made, not after prayer and fasting, but over drinks at banquets or by casting lots. The story of Esther pulls back the veil on the empire to reveal that behind the golden chairs and packed harems and patriarchal edicts are a bunch of insecure, weak men whose attempts to puff themselves up only make them look silly. It is an empty, foolish power. The emperor has no clothes.

This would all be terribly frightening were it not for the quiet, and at times hidden, hand of God, working all things together for good. I suspect this is why the Jews dress up in costume, feast, celebrate, and laugh in response to a story about their near destruction as a people. They laugh because, like a thrown-together middle school Purim play, the power of the empire is just a big show. In the end, the God of Israel – of Abraham, Moses, and Esther – gets the last word, using the weak to humble the powerful.

The² story of Esther as a story of resistance. It is a story of civil disobedience. It is a story of feminism. And I am grateful that there is a story like this one – of resistance, civil disobedience, and feminism – in the bible.

² The conclusion of the sermon (these next three paragraphs) is mine, though it is influenced by RHE (and I quote her in the final sentence).

Vashti's "No" to being objectified could have led to her execution. Esther's "Yes" to standing up for her people could have led to her execution. Nevertheless, they persisted. And their story calls us to persist.

And while I hear the challenge to persist, to risk, to speak truth to power and to stand on the side of justice, I also find comfort in this story. I find comfort because it reminds me "that a misogynistic king running a dangerously dysfunctional superpower is nothing new and nothing God can't handle." Amen.

Questions for Contemplation:

How might you be called to act in such a time as this?

How might we as a church be called to act in such a time as this?

How can you be of support to those who are persisting?