

We Need a Holiday
Esther 9:20-23
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
20 August 2017

Sidnie White Crawford, a Hebrew Bible scholar who teaches at UNL, gives this introduction to the Book of Esther:

The Hebrew book of Esther is an exciting, fast-paced story that has captured the imagination of Jews over the centuries, although it has been less well-received by the Christian church. It contains all the elements of a popular romance novel: a young and beautiful heroine; a wicked, scheming villain; a wise older father figure; and an inept and laughable ruler. In the story good triumphs, evil is destroyed, and all ends happily. It is no surprise, then, that the book of Esther was so popular that, despite certain objections, including its failure to mention God even once, it made its way into the Jewish canon by popular acclaim. Beneath its lighthearted surface, however, the book of Esther explores darker themes: racial hatred, the threat of genocide, and the evil of overweening pride and vanity. These layers of meaning make this book a worthwhile object of study.

Hear now this story from the Book of Esther:

Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor. So the Jews adopted as a custom what they had begun to do, as Mordecai had written to them.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

Do you remember the film *The Birdcage*, starring Robin Williams, Nathan Lane, Gene Hackman, and Diane Wiest? Robin Williams and Nathan Lane are a gay couple who own a drag club in Miami, Florida. Gene Hackman and Diane Wiest are the parents of the young woman

their son is going to marry. The film is about the *meet the parents dinner* and how everything goes horribly, comically wrong.

I went to see *The Birdcage* with two of my good friends, John Eggleston and Laura Picazo. We went to see the movie in our small town of Shawnee, Oklahoma. The theatre was packed, maybe because of the cast who were at the peaks of their careers. Throughout the movie, John, Laura, and I were often the only people laughing at the jokes and gags. And we laughed loud and heartily. I guess the crowd of mostly small town straight people just didn't get all the campy jokes.

For us queer people camp is an important part of what we do and who we are. When we get together socially we often get really silly. We play up all sorts of stereotypes. Sometimes we dress in outrageous and stupid clothing. We enjoy drag shows.

It is easy to see the artistic contributions and importance to gay history and culture of works of art like Homer's *Iliad*, Plato's *Symposium*, the poetry of Sappho, Shakespeare, and Whitman, the paintings of Michelangelo, the novels of Herman Melville, Virginia Woolf, Henry James, and E. M. Forster, and so many other masterworks of world culture.

But deep significance also exists in our lighter moments, our silliness, our camp. And why? Why do queer people sometimes act silly and enjoy absurd things?

Largely, because we can.

Because we have been an oppressed people, our lives are filled with absurdity. So, in response, we played up the absurd and enjoyed every minute of it. It's our expression of freedom.

Our stories, our humour, our movies, our music, our fashion, all of these are expressions of freedom. Together these elements of our culture tell the story of an outcast and oppressed people longing for liberation.

So, what does any of this have to do with the biblical book of Esther? I hope you are asking that question.

Mona West, in her intriguing essay on Esther says that this book is a form of camp and the purpose of Esther is to make us laugh. The book is full of hilarious comedy, parody, exaggeration, cross-dressing, queer characters, wild parties, and more. The purpose of all of this is "provide subversive critique" of power and gender and all the ways identity is constructed.

Here is the story in a nutshell.

The Persian emperor Ahasuerus, known most commonly to history as Xerxes, holds a six month long party. Near the end he wants his queen Vashti to appear so that he can show her off. Vashti doesn't want to be a sexual object ogled by the court, so she refuses. Xerxes divorces her for fear that her disobedience will spread to the other women of the empire. Then he holds a beauty pageant to find a new wife and Esther, a Jew, wins.

Meanwhile Xerxes' evil court official Haman gets angry when the Jew Mordecai doesn't bow down before him, so he gets the king to sign a law that on a certain day people throughout the empire can kill Jews with impunity.

Meanwhile Mordecai saves the king from a plot two eunuchs hatched. The king compels Haman to honor Mordecai in an over-the-top public display.

Mordecai also happens to be Esther's uncle, so he lets her know about the threat to the Jews and calls for her to courageously speak to the king about it.

Esther does that. She leaves the harem and enters the presence of the king. We are told that this is dangerous and yet she succeeds at enticing him. She invites him to two banquets, along with Haman. And at the second one she reveals that she is a Jew and that Haman has been plotting against the Jews.

The king then orders Haman to be killed on the gallows he built for Mordecai and gives Mordecai Haman's old job. He also allows the Jews to defend themselves on the day appointed for genocide, and the Jews do, killing thousands of their enemies.

And so Mordecai instructs the people to have a celebration, that became the feast of Purim.

Now, that's the quickest of surveys of a rich and wonderful story.

One of my friends, Jane Ward, wrote on Facebook this week:

Daily we are robbed of our peace and our ability to function as people who have families to care for and neighbors to care for and communities to care for. Instead we fear for our gay children, our black children, our Jewish children, all of our children who are learning no good lessons from this spectacle.

Many of you and many of my other friends and clergy colleagues have expressed a growing weariness, a compassion fatigue. The events of last weekend and this week—the white supremacist violence and the President's pitiful even racist reaction to it—has finally overwhelmed many of us. Me included.

This week I experienced so many emotions—horror, anger, disgust, outrage, sadness, disappointment, confusion. How not to be overwhelmed?

We must remember that humour, joy, and celebration are necessary. And they are essential tools of resistance and social justice.

When life is absurd our celebration can be an expression of our freedom and our hope and that we have not yet been defeated.

The Esther story of threatened genocide ends with a party. They turned "sorrow into gladness and mourning into a holiday." We need a holiday.

You can turn this world around
And bring back all of those happy days
Put your troubles down
It's time to celebrate
Let love shine
And we will find
A way to come together
And make things better
We need a holiday