

You might wonder why we're paying so much attention to Esther today. Sure, it's a great story, but what's it got to do with us? It's the only book in the Bible that doesn't mention God even once. Feminists don't like it because Esther gets by on her beauty and is under the control of her husband. Others condemn the violence at the end, when the Jews take revenge on those who had planned to kill them. So what's the attraction? This is the only time in the lectionary that we read from Esther. It seems fitting to give her her due as one of our ancestors, as one of our heroes. Did you know the name Esther means "star"? My mother, who died one year ago today, had Esther as her middle name, so this sermon is dedicated to her. The name also brings to mind those magi who followed a star – out of Persia – many centuries later. In any event, Queen Esther is the star of our story today. When the story begins, Esther is passing; no one except her cousin Mordecai knows she is Jewish. The Jews had been deported and assimilated into the Persian Empire. Maybe that's why God is never mentioned, nor any mention of the practices and institutions of Judaism, precisely to paint a picture of how much the Jewish community had been assimilated into the empire around them. You know the saying: "you have to go along to get along." So Mordecai warns her to keep her Jewishness secret - until he learns of Haman's plan of genocide and begs Esther to intercede with the king on behalf of her people.

When Haman plots this ethnic cleansing, he uses familiar words to do what advisors to despots have done for centuries. It doesn't take much to read this story and remember the Holocaust, only seventy years ago. And if you think that's ancient history, *The Utne Reader* reports that the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the unraveling of Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme have led to a resurgence of anti-Semitism. A study by Stanford and Columbia researchers indicates that anti-Semitism is not just a fact of history, it is a current event." So in that respect alone, it is important for us to read the story today. As inheritors of the religion of Jesus, we can read this story in context and understand its popularity. And even though we do not observe Purim as one of our holy days, we can understand the delight of hissing whenever the name of "Haman" is mentioned when the story is read. Or of writing the name "Haman" on your shoes and stamping every time the name occurs in the story, to wipe out the name of Haman, enemy of the Jews, from the face of the earth.

But here's the thing. Haman lives today. Haman lives in every person, country, or institution that orders some people to be marginalized, patronized, oppressed and even killed. Haman lives in every bully that tries to overpower those who are weaker or different. Haman tries to convince us that racism is patriotic, that hate language is simply free speech, that war is a first resort. Haman symbolizes the principalities and powers that stand over all of us, the bullies that threaten us. We need heroes like Esther. When Mordecai says those famous words, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this," Esther, who surely remembered what had happened when her predecessor, Queen Vashti, had defied the king, responds, "I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." In spite of the risk and her fear, she stepped up and did the right thing.

We need to be heroes like Esther. What's interesting is, that unlike other stories in the Bible, deliverance of the people in this story is not accomplished through an amazing, miraculous intervention by God, but through the actions of flawed but courageous human beings. As Ted Kennedy said of his brother, Bobby, he "saw wrong and tried to right it." But it isn't always easy to know how to go about righting wrongs, is it? And we're not always confident that we're the ones who are called to do so, and we're often unsure even of what to do. So we have to be open to the voice, which whispers to us: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this." And then seize the moment.

Like Mollie did. Mollie is a member of a small Baptist church in TX. One day at the beginning of her senior year, there was a pep rally at her high school and the cheerleaders started their weekly skit about how their team was going to defeat their opponents that night. Several kids came in dressed in the school colors of the opposing team and the cheerleaders went behind each of them, tied their hands behind their backs, and had them kneel

down on the floor. Then they took out toy pistols and acted out walking behind the kids and executing them – as the crowd of students, teachers, and parents cheered and screamed and clapped their approval. Mollie went home upset and told her mom, who also became upset and sent a concerned e-mail to the school principal. Then they went to see the principal, who dismissed their concerns by saying, “You’re the only ones complaining. No one else thinks there was anything wrong with the skit.”

I don’t know if Mollie knew the story of Esther, but maybe she heard a version of Mordecai’s challenge in her ear: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this." In any event, Mollie went to work. She rounded up her friends and circulated a petition against the use of guns, even toy ones, in the school. She discovered that the official school handbook explicitly prohibited guns, even toy ones, on school grounds. Then she wrote a column for the school paper, which the principal censored it because it questioned the cheerleaders' sponsors as well as the school administration for giving the go-ahead for the skit. He continued to say it was all a lot of fuss about nothing. But then the local paper ran the story on the front page, and the next day national news services were calling Mollie for interviews. The next week the school administration issued an apology on the front page of the paper, saying they’d been wrong, that Mollie and her friends had done the right thing in raising the issue, and that it would not happen again.

Like the Book of Esther, this is not an overtly religious story. Yet as followers of Jesus, we know that it is what is required of us. Discipleship is not easy. There are risks. Look at the gospel: Jesus has some awfully harsh words to say about the obligation we have towards others. Not that we take the language about cutting off body parts literally – but we do take the responsibility seriously. We are called to be salt, to contribute to the seasoning of our world. What does seasoning do to the flavor of a meal? It makes it better. And that is what we are called to be about.

Like Esther. Like Mollie. Harriet Beecher Stowe: *All serious daring starts from within.* Like Eleanor Roosevelt: *You must do the thing you think you cannot do.* Like Marian Wright Edelman: *Whoever said anybody has a right to give up?*

Like my mom who I remember marching down the street to tell an older kid who’d been bullying my little brother to lay off or else. I don’t know whether that actually did any good. But I do know that to my brother, my mom was a hero, an Esther, a star. She saw a wrong and tried to right it.

Where do you see the wrongs around you? Where are the Hamans threatening us today? And who just might be whispering in your ear: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this."

Amen