

Saint Stephen's

EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 29, 2024

Such A Time as This

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50



Queen Esther



Harriet Tubman

[*Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22*] The king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, “What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me-- that is my petition-- and the lives of my people-- that is my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.” Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?” Esther said, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high.” And the king said, “Hang him on that.” So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated. 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.

I am excited to talk about our first reading today for several reasons: first, there is only one Sunday in our six-year cycle of Old Testament readings where we have a passage from the book of Esther, and today's the day! Second, Esther's story is a serious comedy that is the source of the only Jewish holiday whose main purpose is to eat, drink, and be merry. And, finally, the tale of this ancient Persian queen has resonance with one of our American saints, Harriet Tubman. That's what is happening on the front cover of the bulletin – so keep it handy. Let's begin.

The book of Esther is essentially an over-the-top novella set among the Jewish diaspora community in the Persian Empire during the reign of King Ahasuerus, in the mid-fifth century BCE. Esther, a young Jewish orphan whose only relative is her cousin Mordecai, becomes queen of Persia through a series of unlikely events. Some of those include a former queen's stubbornness, a king's fragile ego, a beauty contest for a new queen, a Jewish woman in disguise, and lots of cosmetics.

When Esther becomes queen, she learns that Haman, the king's advisor, wants to completely destroy the Jews. He convinces the king to

authorize a pogrom, designating the specific day on which all Jewish men, women and children will be killed and their possessions seized. Esther's cousin Mordecai is a bit of a resistance figure in the Jewish community and he appeals to Esther to use her influence with the king to stop the plan.

At risk to her own life, Esther approaches the king, reveals that she is Jewish and it is her people who are under threat. The king changes his mind, Haman is hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai's execution, and the Jews destroy their enemies on the day that was planned for their own annihilation.

This is the origin of the Jewish festival of Purim, which occurs in March and is almost a Jewish Halloween, with costumes and carnivals and parties alongside synagogue retelling of the story, gift exchanges, and sharing food with the poor.

Esther's story may seem like a minor relic from the back of the Bible's closet, but there is an exchange between Esther and Mordecai that has resonated across centuries. When Esther admits her meager power to change the king's mind, Mordecai replies, "If you keep silent at a time such as this, perhaps

deliverance will come from another source, but you and your family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to [your] dignity for just such a time as this.”

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Perhaps you were made for such a time as this. This is the idea that kindles courage and straightens the spine in the face of overwhelming injustice or crisis. And it inspired the African American artist Fred Wilson to see the connection between Queen Esther and Harriet Tubman, who almost all Americans know was the black woman born enslaved in Maryland in the 1820s and who escaped to freedom in Pennsylvania when she was 27. She became a conductor on the Underground Railroad, leading scores of people out of slavery to a new life. You may not know that she also served as a union spy, nurse, and suffragist, and that she was known as “Moses” for liberating her people.

I spent some time this week studying Wilson’s art, which he gifted to the Jewish Museum in New York for its 1992 Purim Ball.¹ It is a two-layered print with a sixteenth-century engraving of Queen Esther on the bottom and an

iconic photograph of Harriet Tubman overlaid on top.

You can see the full picture of Tubman, who is wearing simple clothes with a grave expression and folded hands at her waist. Behind her emerge the outstretched arms of Queen Esther, one hand holding a royal scepter and the other cradling a large, open book.

There is a contrast of wealth and bodily freedom between the two women, even as they are melded into a combined icon of liberation. The print is a little jarring, and I find it more fascinating than beautiful, to be honest. It seems to underscore the Jewish and Black communities’ shared history of oppression and racial persecution at the same time as it acknowledges contemporary tensions of racism and anti-Semitism.

You might be wondering right now whether you are listening to a sermon or an art history lesson. So far, there has been no mention of anything religious. But here’s the connection. Claiming the weight and implications of one’s own dignity in the face of present reality is a profoundly spiritual matter. It goes to the heart of what one

¹ <https://thejewishmuseum.org/collection/3651-queen-esther-harriet-tubman>

believes about God and about the purpose of existence.

In reflecting on her life, Tubman said, “God's time is always near. He gave me my strength and he set the North Star in the heavens; He meant I should be free. There was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death. If I could not have one, I would have the other, for no man should take me alive.”

Harriet Tubman knew her own dignity, her essential gravity and origin that made her both unique and steadfastly connected to other people. And in reading her biography, it is clear that this conviction of her own dignity and how it informed her daily life didn't just happen all by itself.

It was planted as a seed in her childhood that grew and bore fruit as she met the challenges and blessings of her particular experience, trusting that God desired freedom and life for her even more than she did herself.

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Knowledge of who we are and who God desires us to be is a lifelong journey. You may have already had moments in your life where you felt you were created for just those

circumstances. If so, I hope you will recognize them as expressions of your own essential dignity and you will share them with each other as a witness to God's presence in your life and in this world.

You may not have had such an experience. But you can expect to at some point in your life.

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This time in which we live is widely characterized by division, inequity, and fear of the future. And it is shot through with moments of beauty, clarity, and hope.

There is no way to reconcile the contradictions on a large scale, but each day we are presented with opportunities to remind ourselves and others that God desires freedom and life for all. Opportunities that require us to speak or act, not just observe or think.

I pray we will respond. Because, who knows? Perhaps we have come to our dignity – as individuals and a community – for just such a time as this.

Amen.