

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA
30 September 2018

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

We have a great story in the Book of Esther today. The famous *Purim* story is read on the night before the festival of purim all throughout the Jewish world. In the year 2018 this feast fell from February 28 to March 1. In 2019 it will be celebrated from March 20th to the 21st. This festival is much more than a religious feast, it is a national celebration and holiday. The Purim story tells us of a plot to kill King Ahasuerus, also known as King Xerxes of the Persians. A Jewish leader by the name of Mordecai becomes aware of the plot and uses his niece, which has become one of the queens of Ahasuerus to alert him of the plot. The plot is prevented and the king is saved. Up until now, the king does not know that Mordecai is the new Queen's uncle.

At this point, a new character enters the story, Haman, the Secretary of State of the King. According to many commentators, the Persian empire was incredibly wealthy. They had inherited the wealth of the Chaldean or Babylonian Empire, which they replaced, but their dominion extended all the way to India and other parts of Asia, and to Ethiopia and Northern Africa. Being the Secretary of State of such a wealthy empire made Haman a very powerful politician. The *Purim* story tells us that Haman ordered all citizens to bow to him and treat him with the reverence one reserves for God and for the king himself. Mordecai, the Jewish leader, refused to bow to Haman, which caused him to be extremely angry against all the Jews throughout the land.

Haman devises a plan to kill all the Jews in the land and has the king sign orders of extermination. He sets the day for the genocide by casting lots (sort of dice), called Purim (hence the name of the holiday). Mordecai and Queen Esther find out about the genocide and the impending death of all the Jews. The Queen prepares two consecutive banquets to entertain the King and his closest advisers, including Haman. After the first banquet the King offers Esther whatever she wants in return for the great meal. She requests that the King return a second night for another great meal and entertainment. It is at the end of this second banquet that Queen Esther appeals for her people's lives. The King is made aware of the relationship of the Jew who saved him of the plot against him at the beginning of the story and Queen Esther. He is also made aware of his Secretary of State's secret plans to kill all the Jews. The King then orders that Haman and his entire family be executed and he promotes Mordecai to the position of Secretary of State.

Now, the order that the king had signed could not be revoked, but the King allows the Jews permission to defend themselves against their would-be attackers. The Jews prepared for battle on two days of fighting, killed over 75,000 people. "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.”

This is exactly what happens today during the *Purim* celebration. The story of Esther and Mordecai is read the evening before the great feast. At the mention of Mordecai’s name all in attendance cheer and exclaim shouts of joy. At the time of Haman’s name everyone jeers, screams, and use noise makers and rattlers to block his name. On that evening they also say special prayers. During the *Purim* celebration, people give gifts of food to their friends and families, bring special charity baskets to the poor, and prepare a big meal with great desserts and rich foods. Alcohol is used liberally during Purim and the saying goes that everyone must drink until the expression “cursed be Haman” sounds just like the expression, “Blessed be Mordecai.” There is also great music, dancing, and parades on the streets. Another important feature of the feast is the wearing of costumes to ridicule Israel’s enemies or to commemorate victory and vengeance over the nation’s enemies. The feast has evolved over the centuries to include local customs and specific foods of the areas to where the Israelites have been exiled.

The story of Esther today is also our story. We believe in the Christian narrative that Jesus of Nazareth came to save humans when they were at the brink of Spiritual death. Jesus’s actions during his ministry, death, and resurrection are a grand Purim for us. Let us review the similarities. Israel is on the brink of death, sentenced unjustly by the enemy. Only the wise intervention of Mordecai and Esther save them at the last possible moment. God saw spared Israel and turned their laments into joy.

The Israel of Jesus’ day has also been sentenced to death, a death that is mostly spiritual and self-caused by their sin and disobedience. Jesus of Nazareth is the new Mordecai and Esther, who comes to save humanity just when things are at their worst. Whereas Mordecai and Esther save their people through political craftiness and diplomacy, however, Jesus of Nazareth accepts the sentence of death on their behalf and dies for them, that they may be spared. His death caused a reversal in fortunes: Israel is spared from eternal death and reconciled to the Father, but Jesus is killed. God turns the Christian story from lament to joy, however, by vindicating his Son through resurrection and new life. The outcome of *Purim*, which is joy and celebration, is magnified by the Easter alleluias and shouts of joy. The vindication from the treachery of enemies, becomes vindication from sin and death itself. The victory and restoration obtained through the violent death of the enemy, becomes victory and new life through the defeat of death, after the violent death of the Messiah and his glorious resurrection. The great banquets of celebration become the Lord’s Supper, which now provide strength and new life to generations of believers to the very end of days.

Now, I don’t mean to imply that Easter replaces *Purim*. In a way, *Purim* is more a national festival than a religious celebration. *Purim* is more 4th of July than Easter. And it is a Jewish Story that belongs to the Jewish people and is part of their great history. What I am saying, is that many of the themes of *Purim* remind faithful Christians of the great themes of Easter. From the unfair sentence of death to the casting of lots (*Purim*) for Jesus’

clothing, and from victory over enemies to victory over death, our greatest enemy. We often forget that in many ways, even if just spiritually, the Jewish story is part of our rich Judaeo-Christian tradition and their Scriptures are also part of our Scriptures.

To reclaim our common history, I have decided to preach and teach on various Jewish festivals as they come on the Lectionary schedule and build bridges of interpretation from the Old Testament to the New. For now, let us say that the Esther story is also our story. God hears the cries of his people and he vindicates the innocent. Through his Son and his cross, the sentence has been carried out, and we have been spared. Let us now come to the great banquet and celebrate our Savior's victory over death. And don't forget the rest of the tradition: Today is a day to celebrate, remember the poor, and give thanks that God turns our laments into shouts of joy. Amen!