

Esther's Table

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
September 7, 2025 – Worship with Communion
Text: Esther 2:8-10, 16-18 & 7:1-6

Without a doubt, Esther is one of the best books in the entire Bible and Esther herself is one of my favorite characters. The book reads like an action adventure novel. It has it all – beautiful heroine, a true villain, a wise old uncle offering advice, hidden personal truths and finally, a brilliant act of courage in the face of tremendous personal risk. This is such a good book that it has actually been made into a movie, several in fact. My favorite of these is *One Night with the King*, released in 2006. It is pretty faithful to the biblical story although there is an expanded storyline, especially with regard to Haman, the story's primary villain. It's available to watch for free on Amazon Prime, if you're interested. I do recommend it.

One of the more fascinating aspects of the Book of Esther is that it is one of only two books in the entire Bible – Song of Solomon being the other one – which never mentions God. And yet it is still a powerful story about faith. I think this simple reality is one of the reasons Esther is so popular, in Judaism and even in Christianity. In fact, Esther and her story are the foundation of one of the more popular, and fun, Jewish holidays. Purim, usually celebrated in March, is the celebration of Esther's act of heroism which saved her people from an act of genocide. It is a joyous day when gifts are exchanged, donations are made to the poor and a celebratory meal, with lots of wine, is enjoyed by all. Sometimes costumes are worn and parades take place. Her story is read in its entirety in the synagogue. Everyone celebrates the story of the brave Queen Esther who saved her people! Still, we have to wonder if her story is true, and even if it's not, what does it have to do with us, in our church. Is it just some kind of biblical fairy tale, like Cinderella with a Jewish heroine? Or is there something more going on here?

First of all, Esther is like so many other good stories in the Bible, and elsewhere. It's sort of historical fiction. Some of the characters and historical locations and events are real but other pieces of the story are most likely fictional. That's why for me, whether it is "true" is beside the point. Its importance is in the story itself, and what it reveals about human nature. We do know that the king who makes Esther his queen was real. In the Bible he is referred to as Ahasuerus but the Persians knew him by another name and it is this name history records. He is the great Persian king Xerxes. Similarly, Susa, where his palace was located and Esther's story unfolds, was a real place. It was one of the capital cities of the Achaemenid Empire – known as Persia. Based in what is now Iran, the empire was huge, including at one time the Balkans, Egypt, along with most of west Asia and Central Asia including the Indus Valley. It was the largest and most powerful of the empires in its time. And it is in this unusual setting that the story of Esther, also known as Hadassah, takes place.

Was Esther as described in this story a real person? Probably not. For one thing, we know the Persian kings only married within the seven Persian noble families so it is highly unlikely Xerxes would ever marry a Jewish peasant girl, whether she was beautiful or not. Also, we know the name of Xerxes' wife. She was Amestris, not Vashti or Esther, as the biblical story claims.¹ But none of this changes how wonderful this story is! Let me see if I can summarize it briefly so we can continue our reflections.

Esther's parents were killed when she was a little girl but we don't know how. What the text tells is that she ended up in the care of her much older cousin, Mordecai, although she thought of him as her uncle. They ended up in Susa in the aftermath of the Babylonian captivity period when Jerusalem was attacked and destroyed and the leaders of the community were taken back to Persia. Xerxes was the king of the Persian empire at the time this story takes place, and he

¹ [Esther - Wikipedia](#)

gives the impression of being young and a bit immature. Case in point, he was holding a banquet with local officials and military leaders and, after having a bit too much to drink, he commanded that his first wife, Queen Vashti, come in to the banquet to show herself to everyone because he wanted them all to know how beautiful she was. This did not work out well because Vashti said no. The king decided not to tolerate her disobedience, at the urging of the other leaders in his council, because they were afraid that if Vashti got away with being so blatantly disobedient as queen, their wives would be tempted to do the same. So, she had to go. Xerxes removes her as queen – we don't know what that means but it implies she was sent away. He spent some time moping around until his advisors told him he needed to find a new queen. They convinced him to have all the beautiful maidens of the empire rounded up and brought to him.

This is where Esther enters the picture as she was one of the women rounded up and brought to the Temple. Once there she went into the harem quarters where she received a crash course of what it meant to be in the royal court, and what would be expected of her if she was chosen to be the next queen. Long story short, she did captivate the king and did become the next queen. Things were going along just fine although Esther never had told anyone she was a Jew. Meanwhile her cousin/uncle Mordecai, himself a minor government official, was getting himself into trouble because he refused to bow down to one of the king's officials. Apparently, this was an unusual request on the part of this official and Mordecai refused to bow to him. This made the official, Haman, furious and he began plotting to take revenge on Mordecai and all the Jews. He tricked the king into signing a royal edict which would allow Haman to send the armies out to destroy all the Jews on suspicion of treason. Mordecai learned of this so he sent word to Esther that he needed her help. He asked her to go in to the king to plead for her people. Esther was terrified because one of the first rules she learned about being the queen was that she could only go to the king when he asked for her. To go to see

him without such an invitation was to risk everything. This is when Mordecai speaks one of the most well-known quotes from this text when he says to her, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” (Esther 4:14)

Esther takes this to heart and replies to Mordecai, “Gather all the Jews in Susa and hold a fast on my behalf and I and my maids will fast too. [Then] I will go to the king and if I perish, I perish.” And at the end of the three days she does just that. She goes in to the king and he is very pleased to see her. He asks why she has come and she said she wants to hold a banquet that evening for the king and Haman who by now was the king’s foremost advisor. She promises that she herself will prepare it. The king loved the idea and sent for Haman. The banquet happens and the king is so delighted with the queen that he offers to give her anything she desires. She has but to ask and it will be hers. So, she asks for her own life and the lives of her people. The king is confused so she explains that she is a Jew and Haman’s edict which he tricked the king into signing calls for her and all her people to be killed. The king becomes outraged at Haman and – again, long and very dramatic story short – orders Haman hanged on the gallows Haman had had built for Mordecai. Now, this didn’t solve Esther’s problem because once a king’s edict was issued, it could not be reversed by anyone, even the king. But, he did tell Esther that he would grant the Jews permission to arm themselves so they could defend themselves. When the appointed day came, the Jews were ready and defeated their attackers. Then they celebrated their redemption due to the efforts of Queen Esther and the Purim festival was created.

Great story, right? Feels like it should be a Disney movie. But I hope that never happens. I would shudder to think of Esther as yet another “Disney princess.” Still, that she is a remarkable woman of the Old Testament is beyond question. She is most likely a fictional character but this is really beside the point of why her story made it into the canon of Scripture. Some scholars think this happened

because the Jews in captivity had begun celebrating a local holiday which was remarkably similar to Purim so a justification was needed for a popular holiday with no origins in the Jewish faith. Others think it was just a popular story around which religious traditions developed. So, even here, we can't be sure of exactly why Esther's story became so popular in Judaism. But it did, and it still is. How ironic that a woman that may never have been real still holds such a vital place in the Jewish faith, and in our own.

This brings us back to our other question. What does Esther's story have to do with us? What meaning or value can we find in her story for us? For one thing, most of us have a lot in common with Esther. We don't make a big deal about our religious identity. We know we're Christians and, hopefully, we want to think people will, as the old folk hymn goes, know we are Christians by our love. But do they, really? I think we're more like Esther in this regard than we want to believe. Our faith is present in our lives. It's important to us. But how often does it come up in conversation – with friends or even family? Let's be honest – faith is just not dinner table conversation for most of us. I mean, how would we even bring it up as a topic of conversation? “So, heard anything good from Jesus lately?” is just not a question we'd ever ask anybody. Sure, we might offer to pray for someone we're talking with when they share a problem or an illness or a fear they have, but that's about it. That's as far as it goes. Esther thought the same thing. Her Jewish faith, her religious identity, was a part of who she knew herself to be but she didn't make a big deal of it. None of the people in the king's household knew about it.

Here's the thing, though. All that changed when she had to act on behalf of her people. She had to do this thing she didn't want to do because she knew she was the only one who could. She decided that Mordecai's words about her being who she was really might be so that she could intervene for her people in “such a time as this.” Thus, after fasting with her fellow Jews in Susa, she dared to face the wrath of the king, just to tell him who she really was and to ask for his help. Even

once she asked him, there was no guarantee he wouldn't banish her then and there for being dishonest about who she was. He'd done it before with Vashti. She knew this and she did it anyway. Esther's faith in God gave her the courage to do the impossible.

So, I encourage us to reflect deeply on the question of what might it be like for us to do the same? When might we need such courage? I would like to suggest that one place to find and use courage like Esther's is at your own dinner table. That's where Esther revealed hers and you can do the same. How? Well, take a deep breath and talk to someone about your faith in Jesus, in God, and how it impacts your life each day. You could even start the conversation by sharing Esther's story. It is an interesting conversation starter that her story in the Bible never mentions God. Have they heard the story? Have they ever thought about how difficult it is to talk about faith? Are they even people of faith? If they are, what does that mean to them. If they are not, why is that the case? What about faith do they question? You might just be surprised at how people respond. Faith and the questions it raises are often just below the surface for many people. Creating an opportunity to talk about it can actually be a gift.

Then there is also the possibility of looking for those moments when people come to you for help because you "seem to be so grounded." Here's a perfect opportunity to explain to that friend who confides problems and fears over lunch that you are who you are because of your faith in God. You might even – *gasp* – offer to pray with them, right then, in that moment. Another courageous act of faith is to make it a faith practice to say grace at meals when you are out at a restaurant. Heck, maybe you need to start by making it a practice to say grace at every meal at home – whether you are eating at the kitchen table or on tray tables in the family room. This kind of unabashed public prayer is the simplest means of acknowledging your faith – witnessing if you will – that any of us can do. It's also a great way of creating space for others to talk about their own faith or even ask their own questions. And yet so few of us do this.

Dear ones, we look around us and we know all churches are experiencing the same shrinking numbers that we are. And those few that aren't, will be doing so soon enough. Numbers don't lie. Fewer and fewer people are finding value and meaning in the church even though these same people admit on survey after survey that they have a deep hunger to know more about faith, about God, about Jesus especially when the messages about him in the larger culture right now are so at odds with each other. One big reason why this is our current reality is that we do not talk about our faith. At all. Even with our families. We "don't want to be pushy" or we feel like we have to respect some unspoken boundaries about not talking about religion or politics so we can keep the peace. Well, honestly, neither of those restrictions has worked out very well, have they? Public discourse on religion and politics is full of people shouting at each other, as though their lives depended on it. And the loudest voices are, all too often and sad to say, the Hamans of our time. The loudest voices tend to be angry and shrill, calling down judgment on those with whom they disagree. You know who I mean. These are the people no one wants to invite for Thanksgiving or family celebrations or even work gatherings. No one wants them at the table because of what they love to spew. We are afraid of being seen as them when we dare to talk about why church on Sundays is an important anchor point in our lives. This must change if our church is to survive over the long haul.

This is why, dear ones, we need to hold on to Esther's courage and her belief that her voice could make a difference. Esther found her voice at her own dinner table where trusting her own worth to God and to herself allowed her to make new life possible for others she didn't even know. Now, am I saying we can change history by having a few folks over for dinner, or by daring to talk about God and Jesus and the church with our family and friends? No. Well, actually, maybe I am. So, tell me, what do you think? Who are you inviting to your table to hear Esther's story? Amen.