

## “Step Up”

### Sermon – September 29, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

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Imagine a leader of an all-powerful nation who is a pompous fool;  
one who has difficulty reading situations;  
one who is unable to make his own decisions without consulting with advisors at every turn;  
one who overreacts to small-scale problems;  
one whose temper is irrational and vicious;  
one who acts neither independently nor proportionally.

And imagine you are in a position to potentially influence this leader to save your people, but if you don't handle it just right it could mean your life.

On the other hand, if you do nothing you might go down with your people anyway.

I am talking—of course—about King Ahasuerus [*uh-HAZ-er-us*] and Esther in today's Old Testament passage. Ahasuerus is thought to be King Xerxes I [*zurk-seez*] of Persia in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE after they had conquered Babylon and released the Jews from exile, though still under their control.

The book of Esther is an odd one. It has no mention of Jerusalem, the law, prophets, the Promised Land or exile, or even God. It includes no formal prayers or miracles, though does depict fasting as a pious practice. Its only internal tie to the rest of the Hebrew Bible is that it involves the survival of the Jewish people, which apparently was crucial enough to include as scripture.

It also gives the origin of the Purim, a joyous, fun festival to celebrate this survival. During Purim, which occurs around March, people give money and food to some poor persons, read the book of Esther out

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loud with participation from the listeners, and have an intoxicating feast.

Indeed, as my Jewish friends joke, “Jewish holidays can be summed up as: ‘They tried to kill us. We survived. Let’s eat!’”

Though it’s too long to tell at a worship service, I like the story of Esther so much I may do it as part of an epic storytelling sometime, but since this is the only week in the three-year lectionary cycle that we discuss Esther, let me give a somewhat shorter version here.

To begin, after dumping his first wife because she refused to come to his obscenely grandiose party, King Ahasuerus asks for a bunch of young virgins to pick a replacement from, like in a beauty pageant.

Hadassah, who changes her name to Esther and hides her Jewish identity, is in the group, finds favor with the king, and becomes his queen.

Meanwhile, the king makes this guy Haman in charge of everything. As a result, Haman wants everyone to bow down and pay him homage, but Mordecai refuses. Now Mordecai is a Jew and a cousin of Esther and raised her when her parents died.

Haman is furious and vows to have Mordecai and his people destroyed. He gets the king to cluelessly sign an edict to that effect. Mordecai is mortified, goes to Esther and tells her she has to intervene. He tells her staying on the sidelines will do her no good, particularly when they find out she is Jewish. Besides maybe this is her destiny.

Esther can’t go to the king without being invited so she maneuvers that he does. She then tells him she wants to throw him a banquet—two in fact and to have Haman come along.

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That night the king can't sleep and has the records read to him, apparently to bore him to sleep. But he learns for the first time that Mordecai had previously uncovered and stopped a plot from the king being assassinated.

The next day, to Haman's horror, the king rewards Mordecai and honors him a hero. Then at the second banquet the king asks Esther what she wants. She asks that she and her people be spared. If they were to become only slaves, she wouldn't complain, but they are to be destroyed and annihilated and this will damage the king.

He asks who is responsible and she says, "Haman."

The king is furious leaves the room. Haman then begs Esther for his life, but when the king returns and sees it, he misinterprets that Haman is assaulting Esther and has had enough.

A servant points out that there are gallows right here that Haman had planned for Mordecai, the guy who saved the king's life. So they hanged Haman instead. Then the king puts Mordecai in charge instead.

At Esther's request to the king, Mordecai sends out an edict in the king's name that lets the Jews kill those who would have killed them—but just over a two-day period. They end up killing over 75,000, including Haman's sons. But they take no plunder, so it's "honorable." Then they establish the feast of Purim and celebrate.

The book concludes with Mordecai honored, in some ways like Joseph was with the Pharaoh centuries earlier.

So why spend this time on this story? What are we to get out of it?

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For one, the book of Esther reminds us that throughout the Bible, the machinations of politics and imperialism are not tangential to the experiences of people of faith, but rather deeply shape our everyday engagement with God.

This phenomenon is especially clear in the work of the prophets, who often address kings and rulers directly, and who portray foreign powers as instruments of God’s judgment.

The book of Esther, though, takes a less direct approach than the prophets, using satire and humor—literally gallows humor—to expose the empire as a farce, and confronting its violence with ridicule in order to mitigate its terrors.

The book does not, however, provide a guidebook for finding moral responses to state terror; the victories of the “good guys” in Esther are as excessively violent as the plots by the “bad guys.” Like many things in life, it is more shades of gray than black and white.

Still, there are some salient points.

One, is that is a woman rather than a man who is the protagonist, which is rare in the bible.

Further, Esther is a Jewish orphan; she is the least powerful member (orphan) of the least powerful gender (female) of a powerless people (Jews) in the mighty Persian Empire.

And while we certainly do not want to promote or glorify retributive violence by any means, she is able to save her people through courage and grit, using the power of her position that she happened to get.

While we do see those in power and influence today who are either feckless and capricious like king Ahasuerus or conniving and vindictive like

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Haman, both of which are dangerous, none of us is likely to be in a position like Esther.

Still, we can in our own little worlds, stand up to Hamans around us and proclaim the good news of God’s redemptive love for all people.

Esther witnesses to the power of a good story to give us hope. Rather than succumbing to despair, Esther—like the carnival-esque festival of Purim it inspires—encourages us to meet terror with ridicule. Satiric storytelling is not the only response to oppression we can or should muster, but the book of Esther reminds us it is indeed a valid response, one that helps us hold fast to our conviction that the grace-filled power of God ultimately will overcome the destructive powers of this world.

Here, then, is one place where this humorous, raucous story of Esther might lead us: to the understanding that in the ordinary events of life, and sometimes in the not-so-ordinary events, in the coincidences and chance encounters of our days, we are called and claimed by God. And we may even, like Esther, find the courage to step up and answer that call.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.  
Amen.