

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Intro

Once upon a time ... in a land far, far away, there lived an orphan girl who was raised by a distant family member...”

And the little orphan girl's name was Cinderella ... ah, Annie ... no, it's Esther.

That's the way the story of Esther – our first reading today – could certainly begin.

It sounds almost like a Fairy tale – or a Disney Princess movie – as it is the story of what happens to this young orphan girl, and how she saves her people.

I. About Esther

A. The story of Esther is set in Persia, after the Jewish exiles were allowed to return to Israel following the Babylonian Exile – a period we would call the fifth-century B.C.

1. However, many Jews chose to stay in Persia – they had put down roots, and become wealthy and respected citizens and opted to continue to live their lives there.

2. One such Jew was **Mordecai** who lived in the Persian Capital city of Susa with his cousin **Esther** who he raised as his own daughter.

- Mordecai may well have been one of the Kings gate keepers.



3. Well, Queen Vashti defied King Ahasuerus – known to history as **Xerxes I** (who reigned from 486-465BC) – and so he decided to look for a new wife.

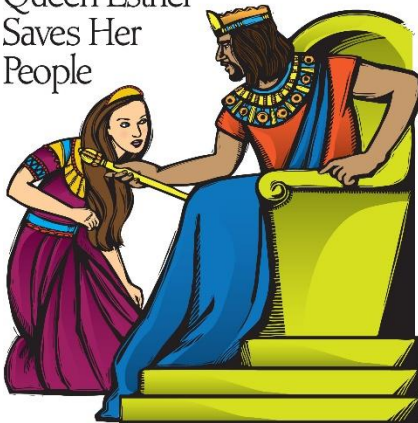
4. All the eligible women of the city were brought before him, and to make a long story short, the King fell in love with Esther and married her.

5. Now, on Mordecai's advice, Esther did not tell anyone that she was Jewish.

6. Mordecai used to visit Esther by sitting at the gate of the palace, waiting for her to come by and to see that all was well.

7. And on one such visit, Mordecai overheard a plot to assassinate the King – so he told Esther and she made sure the King knew about it and the plot was overturned and the conspirators executed.

Queen Esther
Saves Her
People



8. You didn't mess around with King Ahasuerus in those days.

B. Then, in a plot twist, the King appointed one of his counselors, **Haman**, to be above all others in the Kingdom.

1. It may be that the King thought that Haman uncovered the assassination plot – or that Haman took credit for it – but in any event, the King ordered that everyone must **bow down** to Haman whenever he walked by.

2. Mordecai, as a faithful Jew, refused to bow down to Haman, saying he would only kneel to God.

3. Haman was infuriated that Mordecai would not bow to him and decided to kill him, and at the same time eliminate all the Jews in the kingdom.

4. So he convinced the King that the Jews were enemies of Persia and asked for permission to kill them all; which Ahasuerus gave.

5. Haman cast LOTS – *pur* in Hebrew – (this is important later so remember that word – *pur*) – he cast lots to find an auspicious date for the executions – and the lots fell on the 13th day of the Hebrew month *Adar*.

6. And for his old enemy Mordechai, Haman had a special treat in store and ordered a gallows to be built 50 cubits high – about 70 feet, as tall as a 7 story building – certainly taller than anything in Camarillo.

C. When Mordechai hears of this, he tells Esther and together they conceive a risky plan for Esther to approach the King and appeal to him.

1. This plan was doubly risky because no one was allowed to come into the King’s Court without being called by him – and to do so was capital offense;

- and secondly, remember, Esther had not told the King she was Jewish and to do so would put her at risk of death along with her people.

2. It’s interesting to note that Esther is her Persian name – in Hebrew it’s Hadassah – which means Myrtle.

3. So Esther went before the King and the King is pleased to see her and invites her to come to him, and asks what she wants?

- She invites him to dinner party, and asks that Haman be invited as well – to which the King agrees.

4. Later that night, Ahasuerus can’t sleep – so he had all the court records and annals brought and read to him – in other words, he was going to listen to dull paperwork until he fell asleep.

5. And as they are reading the records Ahasuerus discovers that it was Mordechai who foiled the assassination attempt and that he had not been rewarded.

6. So the King calls for his advisor, Haman, and asks him, “What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?”

7. And Haman smugly thinks to himself, “Who would the king want to honor more than me?”

- And advises the king to give the man all kinds of fine clothes, and a royal steed, and throw him a big parade.

8. Which the king does – and Haman had to bear the humiliation of watching Mordecai receive all the honors he had proposed for himself.

D. When it was time for Queen Esther’s dinner, King Ahasuerus and Haman attend along with other Court Officials.

1. Our first reading today tells what happened at the end of *the second day* of Esther’s dinner party

2. The King was so pleased with Esther that he said to her, “What is your request? It shall be granted to you, even up to half my kingdom.”

3. And Esther says (in Chapter 7 verse 3-4): “If I have won your favor, O King, and if it pleased 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.”

4. She goes on to say, “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.”

5. Then we get to the kicker in verses 5 and 6: “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.”

6. The King is furious and leaves the room – and Haman throws himself at Esther’s feet begging for mercy – and when the King returns he thinks Haman is attacking Esther, and has him dragged from the room.

7. And of course, in good Biblical Irony, Haman is hung on the 70 foot gallows he prepared for Mordechai in his front yard

E. And so the story ends.

1. Esther and the Jews are saved.
2. Mordechai becomes Grand Vizier in Haman's place.
3. All of Haman's property is given to Esther.
4. And the Jews are given permission to defend themselves against anyone who was going to harm them – which was not a good thing for Haman's 10 sons and their 500 followers.
5. And everybody else lived happily ever after.

II. Purim

A. Now it's an interesting fact that the Book of Esther and the Song of Solomon are the only books in the Bible in which the name of God is never mentioned.

1. So why do you think Esther made it into the Bible – and it's right up front in the History books BEFORE the Prophets.

2. And the reason is that it celebrates the deliverance of the Jews from Haman – and has been an encouragement to persecuted Jews around the world ever since.

3. In fact, by some accounts, Hitler made it a capital offense for anyone – Jew or Christian – to possess a copy of the Book of Esther.

4. And this story also explains why the Jews celebrate the Feast of Purim (*poor-im*) every March.

5. Purim – like Hanukah – is a feast not found in the Torah, and commemorates the deliverance of the Jews from this massacre.



6. It gets its name from ...
Haman's lots – the *pur* – that he used to decide the date of the massacre – which is

PURIM

now the date of the feast itself, the 14th and 15th of the Jewish month of Adar.

B. The Feast of Purim is a day of feasting and rejoicing.

1. In Chapter 9 of the Book of Esther, Mordechai instructs the people to celebrate with feasting and gladness, by sending food to one another and giving gifts to the poor.

2. And so that is how the Feast of Purim is celebrated:

- by exchanging gifts of food and drink
- by donating to charity
- by eating a celebratory meal
- and by reading the story of Esther

3. One of the special foods of Purim – that is available at other times – are these little cookies called *Hamantash* or *Hamantashen* – if you eat more than one – literally meaning “Haman’s pocket or pouch”.

4. They are created to look like Haman’s three corner hat – it’s a round cookie with the sides folded in, with a sweet middle.

5. The sweet in the pocket represents the riches Haman offered the King in exchange for permission to destroy the Jews.

III. Esther and Us

A. So we hear the story of Esther today, both in its historical context, but also as a reminder to care for others.

1 The question Esther raises is not that far removed from us and our lives today.

2. Who are the OTHERS in your life – the ones who are different – and how do you treat them?

3. It’s the same question we explored last week about who is a CHILD OF GOD, and how should we treat them?

3. But with some politicians trying to outdo one another to see who can be harshest on immigration;

- with thousands of refugees fleeing Afghanistan and Haiti –
- with stories of Border Patrol Agents on horseback whipping Haitian Refugees back across the border
- with hundreds of immigrant children still separated from their families – it's a very significant question for us today as well.

4. Who are the OTHERS in your life – the ones who are different – and how do you treat them?

- Do you want to wipe them out like Haman?
- Or do we want to open our hearts to them, as the Story of Esther calls US to do?

5. And on a more personal level, how do you treat the OTHER in your life every day?

- Do you ignore them – make fun of them – or reach out in love – knowing it is hard for them as well?

6. All these are questions the story of Esther calls us to consider – both on the larger basis and the personal level as well.

7. And now, next Summer, when we use Eucharistic Prayer C again – you'll know why we speak of “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the God of Hannah, **Esther**, and Ruth.”

Let Us Pray

I close today, with three blessings from the Feast of Purim:

Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, Master of the Universe, who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us regarding reading of the Megillah – the story of Esther – Amen.

Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, Master of the Universe, who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days at this time. Amen.

Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, Master of the Universe, who has kept us alive and has sustained us, and brought us to this season. Amen.