

Long ago, and far away, and once upon a time, there was a beautiful young woman named Esther. She lived in Persia, with the relative who had adopted her when her parents died. His name was Mordecai.

The king of Persia, Ahaseuras, had gotten divorced. It was the banishment kind, not the “off with her head” kind of royal divorce, thank God. But there were some similarities to Henry the Eighth. After the divorce, he had gotten lonely.

So, he had some extreme makeovers and beauty pageants conducted, and ended up picking out Esther, as the prettiest and most wonderful. She got to be the new queen.

What with the fate of the former queen and all, Mordecai advised Esther to keep their family’s Jewish heritage to herself. You had to be careful back then.

Now, Mordecai was very good to the King. When he learned of a plot to assassinate the King, Mordecai told Queen Esther, who told the King, who was then kept safe.

The king had one great practice. He had everything written down and recorded. So this heroic action of Mordecai was recorded. (this is a key point, and you need to remember it.)

However, the King could also be very foolish in whom he trusted and appointed. He promoted Haman to extra-special, grand high muckety-muck. (I don’t know that much about court life, so I will just call the position that.) The position went to Haman’s head. So, when Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, the grand high muckety-muck, Hama got angry and devised a way to get rid of Mordecai and all the Jewish people. He was a vicious fellow.

The way he did this was to tell the King that there were these bad people in the kingdom, which should not be tolerated. He did not even say that they were Jewish. So the King made a decree that these people were to be killed, on a certain day.

The King was too trusting of Haman. Haman was telling lies and half-truths. The Jewish people were not bad, or breaking laws. The truth was that Mordecai got on Haman’s nerves! And Haman wanted revenge.

The other problem was that the King’s decrees could not be revoked, once they had been made. They could not be revoked, even by the King himself.

When Mordecai hear of this, he talked to Esther about it. “Talk to the King. Help us.” Esther was scared to do this. Her position as queen was new, and she had little real power. She had been chosen because she was pretty. If she were to go to the King, without being sent for, she could be killed, just like anyone else.

But Mordecai insisted.

“Mordecai went [Esther] this message: ‘Don’t think that just because you live in the King’s house you’re the one Jew who will get out of this alive.

If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this.’ “ [The Message]

So, Esther agreed:

“Esther sent back her answer to Mordecai: ‘Go and get all the Jews living in Susa together. Fast for me. Don’t eat or drink for three days, either day or night. I and my maids will fast with you. If you will do this, I’ll go to the King, even though it’s forbidden. If I die, I die.’ “ [The Message}

She went before the King, as you see on the screen. And the King was in a good mood, thank God. So she invited him and Haman to a banquet. Haman just got more full of himself. Esther did not yet dare to speak to the King, so she invited the King and Haman to another banquet, the next day.

That night, the King couldn't sleep, so he decided to read the royal records. He got to the part about the assassination plot which Mordecai had revealed.

He asked the servant what had been done to honor Mordecai.

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Well, who is around the palace tonight?"

"Haman."

They sent for Haman and he came. The King asked for suggestions on how to honor someone. Haman thought that it was going to be he himself, who would be honored, and he gave some suggestions.

"Great," said the King. "Go do this for Mordecai."

Mordecai? Oh, no. Haman obeyed, but he was so angry. He couldn't wait to have Mordecai hung on the gallows which he had built! That's right. Haman was so excited about getting rid of Mordecai he had built a high gallows.

Banquet day number two came. Esther got up her nerve and when the King asked for her request, she asked for her life and the lives of her people to be spared from the plot.

"Who started this plot?" asked the King.

"Haman! That guy! Right there!"

So guess who was hung on the gallows? Haman.

The first decree could not be taken back, but a new decree was issued that the Jewish people could defend themselves.

A holiday was proclaimed, and is celebrated even now, in the spring, Purim, with gifts of food and with charity to the poor.

That was my version of the story. But please read it in the Bible yourself. The original is always the best. Or you could rent the movie, "One Night with the King." That is the picture we had on the screen. The movie came out a couple of years ago.

Besides being a great story for entertainment, it is a great story to help us.

One thing we can see in the story is to be careful who we trust and how we decide. I read somewhere that this king's name also translates to "headache." His decisions led to headaches. He was so foolish and rash when it came to people and decisions.

But we also need to look at the big picture. This is what Eugene Peterson says about it [in *The Message*]:

"It seems odd that the awareness of God, or even of the people of God, brings out the worst in some people. God, the source of all goodness and

And blessing and joy, at times becomes the occasion for nearly unimaginable acts of cruelty, atrocity, and evil.

There is a long history of king men and women simply because they are perceived as reminders or representatives of the living God, as if killing people who worship God gets rid of God himself. We've recently completed a century marked by an extraordinary frenzy of such . . . killings. To no one's surprise, God is still alive and present.

The book of Esther opens a window on this world of violence directed, whether openly or covertly against God and God's people. The perspective it provides transcends

the occasion that provoked it, a nasty scheme to massacre all the exiled Jews who lived in the vast expanse of fifth-century B.C.

Persia. . . .

. . . millions before and after Esther have been . . . killed. There is hardly a culture or century that doesn't eventually find a Haman determined to rid the world of evidence and reminders of God. Meanwhile, Esther continues to speak the final and definitive word:

You can't eliminate God's people. No matter how many of them you kill, you can't get rid of the communities of God-honoring, God-serving,

God-worshiping people scattered all over the earth. This is still the final and definitive word." [The Message]

We don't live in the same conditions as Esther. But each one of us lives or works in some sort of "kingdom," so to speak—a corporation, a school district, a neighborhood, whatever the setting. From time to time, deceit, and evil, and vindictiveness can crop up. We can find ourselves in tough situations.

When and if that happens, it is our job, as Christians to do something.

We are not to just hunker down and hope it will go away. That never works. When good people do nothing, evil gets worse and prevails.

Also, we've made that promise in our baptism vows, to resist and fight evil as it presents itself. And God is so helpful to us when we work at keeping these promises.

Perhaps God will give us an extra helping of courage, like Esther had, as she faced the possibility of death.

Perhaps God will give us the strength we need to keep doing the right thing—as Mordecai did, from adopting an orphan, to saving the King, to refusing to bow down to a person.

Perhaps will supply us with the cleverest way to manage a situation, as Esther and Mordecai both found with all the banquet business.

God will prevail with goodness and justice, and God wants us to be part of that.

Let's take inspiration from this story of "God's undoing of oppression and vengeance made possible because someone spoke up, exposed the genocidal plans, and called for the powers that be to end them." [United Methodist worship resources]

Amen.

(by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters)