

The book of Esther is something of a hybrid. A Hebrew original with later Greek additions, some of which duplicate the Hebrew text. But there are also some significant differences between them. One important difference is that the Hebrew version is famous for never mentioning God, while the Greek text does.

The book of Esther celebrates one Jewish person's loyalty to her people, even to the point of risking her life to save them. Esther is a story of mighty courage and of a willingness to hope against all odds. And, although there are no recorded prayers or miracles, many devout Jews of the time period when the book was composed would have needed no coaching to comprehend that the deliverance of the Jews was nothing other than the will of God. In other words, Esther did not need to pray to be seen as a devout woman. Her willingness to sacrifice herself to create safe space for her people is the ultimate act of giving. She acts boldly on behalf of God and God's unsheltered people.

The book of Esther begins and ends with a party. In fact, there are some 10 parties or banquets mentioned throughout the book.

The story centers on a young Jewish virgin, Esther, and her relative Mordecai. They are among the Jews living under Persian domination in the capital city of Susa, in the far eastern sector of the Persian Empire. The Persian king, Ahasuerus, is a partying man, and the story opens with a six-month-long party thrown for the upper crust of the land. A week long party for the citizens of Susa follows the first, with the guests being encouraged to drink to their hearts' content.

Kenneth Carter says this about our reading: “In the text we meet Esther, by heritage a Jew but now fully assimilated into a nonreligious culture, at the mercy of a male-dominated political system and yet, in the end, possessed by a cunning that allows her to overcome. We are at a great distance from tent, temple, and synagogue; in fact, we find ourselves at a feast, a banquet prepared by Esther for the king. The king has human power, in the form of unilateral political decisions, and so he grants a wish to Esther. She had been prepared for this moment in the warning of her relative Mordecai: ‘Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this’ (4:14). And here she is, in the presence of the king, with the power to change the course of events.”

As I was researching and reading to come up with some sort of sermon on the Esther reading, I thought about so many folks throughout history who have risked or lost their lives in the pursuit of justice.

I ran across an article written in April of this year by Judith Batalion, who is the author of *The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler’s Ghettos*.

She writes: “Some 14 years ago, I decided to research the life story of Hannah Senesh, a young Hungarian Jew who lived in Palestine but joined the allied forces to return to Europe and fight the Nazis. She was the only person I’d ever heard of who volunteered to return and fight Hitler. But soon into my sleuthing, I happened to come across a 1946 anthology about dozens of young Jewish women who took similar risks. As I learned more about these Jewish female ghetto fighters and ‘courier girls’ — who dyed their hair blonde, took off their star-of-David armbands, and secretly slipped in and out of ghettos, smuggling information, false Aryan papers, and

pistols, bullets, and grenades in marmalade jars, sacks of potatoes, and designer handbags—I marveled equally at these stories and their obscurity. Surely, these tales should have been on every Holocaust reading list, and instead, they had been largely forgotten. Over a decade, I learned many reasons why the tale of Jewish female resistors fell to the footnotes.”

The turn of events that unfolds in our reading demands celebration and the story ends with a party. The occasion of the survival and salvation of God’s people was one of feasting and celebration. The inauguration of the Festival of Purim called for Jews in every generation to celebrate when sorrow turned to gladness and mourning into a holiday. In Jewish life, Purim is observed in late February or early March. Traditional Jews observe a day of fasting (the Fast of Esther) before Purim, recalling the fasting of Jews before Esther’s appearance before the king. Purim is a carnival atmosphere with special noisemakers used to drown out the name of Haman each time it is heard in the reading of the scroll of Esther. Children dress in costumes, similar to Halloween, and adults are allowed to drink.

The story of Esther challenges us to consider how justice is administered. There is no mention of God in the Hebrew version, and there are no prayers. Whether the story is historical or not is debatable, but the plot rings true. We are painfully aware that our world is made up of the powerful and the powerless and that life lived out under the power of others is risky, to say the least. We know from history, if not experience, that folks who are different in race, religion, nationality, orientation, or other factors can find themselves

facing life or death based on the whim of those in authority. And we know that help can come from the most unexpected of places and in the most surprising ways. In the end the plan of Esther worked. She named the enemy and justice prevailed.

Carter Heyward says that “we are being called to see the good in one another, to love the good, but also to see beyond it to the harm that is being done to, and by, us. We are being called to see the evil as well as the good and to learn how to love one another with ever-deepening compassion.”

Heyward wrestles with the concept of whether our spiritual mandate as a people is to create safe space for one another. She questions whether that is an adequate ethical response to the problems of violence and danger in which we live. She says, “Surely Jesus, Peter, and the others would have loved some safe space for themselves and others. But this was exactly what they could not find as long as they were standing with those in danger, challenging structures of abusive power both within and beyond their religious institutions. There is little safe space for those empowering others to pick up their beds and walk toward liberation, healing, and safety. There are only *moments* of safe space in the struggle for justice—no permanent place of safety. This brings us to the paradox in all healing and liberation: seeking to find safe space for others as well as ourselves, we find ourselves in danger. In this sense, our vocation can never be simply to create safety but rather to take the risks involved in standing with those in danger, thereby putting ourselves in danger as well. Central to this spirituality is not an ‘ethic of

safety' but rather what theologian Sharon Welch has named an 'ethic of risk', which is an ethic of radical love."

It all comes back to love, a place near the heart of God.

Thanks be to God!