



When I served at St Michael and All Angels Episcopal church,
part of our annual calendar of celebrations was St Michael's feast day in
September

It was celebrated with children in costumes – angels and devils –
acting out the scene in Revelation where the angel Michael and all his host
defeat and banish the Dragon and its followers.

So the kids with white wings and the kids with red pitchforks would stage
a mock battle at the beginning of worship,
and evil would be vanquished once again.

I don't think they do it anymore –

in my time there we had moved the pageant from worship to education hour
but that pageant is what I remembered when I read about the celebration
of the Jewish festival of Purim established in the book of Esther.

To find out more about Purim, I looked at Chabad.org,
a Jewish orthodox educational website.

Purim celebrates the deliverance of the Jews

from their enemies in Persia in the 6th century BCE

Each year on Purim the story of Esther is read in the synagogue with much fanfare.

The melodramatic nature of the book makes it ideal for public reading,

with its hyperbole and exaggerated characters – the ridiculous king,
the noble Jew Mordecai, the brave queen Esther, and of course
the evil advisor, Haman, who plots the destruction of all the Jews in Persia.

During the reading, listeners use noisemakers and stomping
to drown out the name of the villain Haman.



So what is it about the story of Esther that invites such remembrance?
And what does it mean for us as people of faith and followers of Jesus
today?

The story is set during a time when the Jews were living as a recognized cultural
and religious minority in the Persian Empire (what is now Iran and Iraq).

Esther is the queen of Persia, and Mordecai, her uncle, is an advisor in the court.

When Mordecai learns of a plan, devised by the king's advisor Haman,
to kill him and all the Jews in Persia, he asks Esther to intervene with the king.

Although it is punishable by death to come into the king's presence
without being summoned, Esther seeks out the king and asks him to come
to two special banquets she will give for him and his advisor, Haman.

At the second banquet, Esther reveals Haman's plot to kill Mordecai and all the Jews.
The king responds by revising the decree to kill Mordecai and his people,
and instead has Haman killed.



In Sunday school we hear about brave Queen Esther
who risked her life to save her people;

yet reading the full story we see that Esther and Mordecai are no paragons of virtue.
As with so many Bible heroes – David and Solomon come to mind –
the story of Esther and Mordecai is filled with moral ambiguity.

Drinking to excess, scheming and plotting against enemies, and sexual intrigue
are all part of the story.

Most troubling is the final reversal in the story, when the Jews are not only spared,
but given permission by the king to defend themselves
and kill all who intended them harm.

The Lutheran Study Bible describes Esther as a story which “exaggerates familiar
human attitudes and behaviors. People can recognize themselves in the story.
The humor exposes foolish thoughts, harmful policies, and human weakness”.

It is only too easy to look at history, and to look around us today,
and see human actions that look like the people in the book of Esther –
greed and abuse of power among world leaders,
plotting and scheming against whole groups of people based on ethnicity,
violence intended as a solution to problems it can never solve.

Once again, we are reminded that the stories of scripture tell the truth about humanity
as well as telling us about God's faithfulness and care.

And we are reminded that God uses faithful, imperfect people
to do God's work in the world.



At the end of the story of Esther, Mordecai and Esther institute the Jewish
celebration of Purim to remember the day of their deliverance.

There are four commands for celebrating Purim.

First is to tell the story, remembering God's deliverance of God's people, then and now

The second is to give gifts of food to friends, and the third is to give to the poor – actions which emphasize the importance of community and mutual care. The fourth is a rich and hearty feast, breaking the fast that precedes Purim.

On the Chabad.org site, I came across an “Ask-a-rabbi” question about Purim. A woman had written with the question,

“Why do Jews go berserk on Purim?”

“Can you imagine the daze on [a stranger’s] face watching us enter our place of worship carrying noisemakers of all varieties and functions, dressed as clowns, princesses, Big Bird with a kippah and Obi-Wan Kenobi with a prayer shawl—to make noise while an ancient scroll is being read? Last [Purim](#) one guy came with a tuba, and another with a live goat!

The unnamed rabbi gave a beautiful response.

Purim, he said, celebrates the Jews becoming a *community* in diaspora, taking responsibility for living as God’s people for themselves.

It is a celebration of being Jewish – of claiming the identity and living the faith, with all the responsibilities and restrictions that set them apart.

It remembers the story of the first organized persecution of Jews by a nation in which they lived peacefully – a story which resonates throughout Jewish history.

In response, Jewish people united and claimed their Jewish identity, fasting and praying and taking action in resistance to persecution.

Then the rabbi writes that the highest priority of Purim, ahead of the feast and the gifts among friends, is the opportunity to *“gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows and the strangers.*

“When you bring happiness to the hearts of these dejected souls, you are like the Divine Presence”

reviving the spirit of the lowly and those with broken hearts.”

At the heart of Purim, the rabbi says, is the opportunity to embody for one another the divine presence of God:

“[Bringing] joy to the most dismal places, hope to the most downhearted, light to the blackest darkness. Let their joy be your joy.

“And then, the core of your own soul will break through like the dawn.”



One interesting thing in the book of Esther is that God's name is never used. Many commentaries suggest that this leaves it to us, as readers, to look for God's action behind the scenes.

Chabad.org says that the tradition of wearing costumes to synagogue on Purim is "an allusion to G-d's hand in the Purim miracle, which was disguised by natural events."

The king, the Persian culture, and the dominant religion did not recognize the God of Israel; the Jews lived in a foreign land, at best indifferent to them, at worst hostile.

Yet throughout the drama of Esther, there is an underlying hope that God will still deliver God's people.

And the community of faith has its own role in the drama:

as Esther prepares to act on behalf of her people, she asks them to pray and fast on her behalf.

Esther doesn't act alone, but with the support and care of her faithful community.

In exploring the book of Esther and the Jewish celebration of Purim, I think there is much we can learn from our Jewish neighbors about living faithfully in an unfaithful world.

We too are called to embody the presence of God in community and for people in need.

We too are invited to delve deeply into our faith identity in response to a world that so often lives counter to what we believe.



Professor Amy Oden offers these take-aways from the study of Esther:

- *Ultimately, deliverance comes through claiming identity in faith.*
- *While the powerful (and often evil) appear to be in control, there is an unseen hand at work in all things, leading to great reversals.*
- *God has not abandoned God's people. No matter how bad things get, God is still God.*

Finally she says,

- *This story is pretty useful for Christians who struggle to claim our identity within a dominant culture that would have us be Americans first, or employees first, or consumers first, other identities that compete for the hearts of those who follow Jesus.*

The story of Esther invites us to claim who we are as God's people.
It invites us to take risks in service to others in our community,
to those who are persecuted or in danger.
It invites us to speak truth to power in defense of our neighbors.
It invites us to carry the presence of God into the world.
And ultimately it invites us to trust and hope in the God who promises to be with
and to preserve God's people, no matter the threats and challenges we face.

Thanks be to God.

Amen