

Esther

The events of the book of Esther are celebrated by Jewish people every March in the festival of Purim. If you want to spend a fun half hour, go to YouTube and enter Purim play into the search bar. The Jewish word is Purim schpiel.

I watched two pretty hilarious ones. One was produced by a Messianic Jewish Youth group in Houston. It was presented as a western melodrama with a very funny techno version of western dance music.

The other one was a pandemic version with a very clever Zoom schpiel using Abba's Mama Mia as its inspiration.

While that might seem sort of sacrilegious to some, it's widely believed by Jewish scholars as well as many Christian ones, that Esther isn't based on real events. Instead, it's more like Jonah – a satirical piece, or a parody. It's meant to poke fun at the excess of the Persian royal culture. The descriptions of people and events...including the royal banquets are outlandish.

Esther is one of the latest writings in the New Testament – probably written between 150 to 400 years before Jesus' birth. There are no clues who wrote it.

It was after the exile because the Persians had defeated Babylon and the captive Jews were released to return to Jerusalem. But they didn't all go back.

In fact, there were always Jewish people living in foreign lands. In part, the story of Esther speaks of maintaining a sense of identity with a faith community while living in a foreign land.

The book never mentions God. We are left to assume that the events as they play out were a result of God's divine hand, but it never says so.

So, here's the story in a nutshell.

King Ahasuerus does not appear to be a historical figure, but rather a parody of King Xerxes. He is the all-powerful ruler of Persia. He also loves women and loves to party – extravagantly.

He has many wives. They can only come to him when he summons them, but if he does, they'd better come or else. Failing on either count can be grounds for death.

One of his wives, Vashti, was said to be very beautiful. One day the king summoned her, but she refused him. Curtains for her!

Now King Ahasuerus needed a new wife. He had multiple young women parade before him. Finally, he picked Esther. Esther is a Jewish woman. Mordecai is her cousin.

The fourth major character is Haman. Haman is Ahasuerus' right-hand man. He despised Mordecai.

Haman imagines himself almost god-like and demands that everyone bow down to him. Mordecai refuses – he will only bow down to God. This enrages Haman and he tricks Ahasuerus into ordering the death of not only Mordecai, but all the Jewish people throughout the entire empire.

So, if you imagine this as a melodrama, the audience cheers when Mordecai or Esther enter. They laugh at foolish King Ahasuerus when he enters, and they boo and hiss at Haman.

The story then picks up in our reading for today. What happens is that Esther plans a great banquet for the King where she asks him to grant her a request. He agrees and she then plans another banquet to deliver her request.

In the meantime, the king learns of a heroic action done by Mordecai. He summons Haman and asks him how the king should bestow great honor on a hero. Haman, thinking the king means him, tells him that it should be with fine robes and a ring and a horse that the king has ridden.

Haman's appalled to learn that the king is talking about Mordecai and that such an honor would go to him. At Esther's second banquet, Haman's plot is revealed.

Esther's request is that the Jewish people not be killed, and that Haman be hung on the gallows he had built instead of Mordecai. And that's what happens. Esther saves the Jews. Esther and Mordecai are elevated in the king's court and Mordecai takes Haman's position.

And they all live happily ever after.

So, the idea that a story in the Bible might not be a factual account might bother our western Christian sensibilities. But satire is often better at revealing some truths than fact is.

In the tale of Esther, the extravagance and arrogance of a powerful ruler is revealed to be a foolish sham – sort of like the Wizard of Oz turns out to be a little man with a microphone behind a curtain. The foolish image of King Ahasuerus invites us to be a little skeptical of such displays of wealth and power among rulers.

The story also lifts up the importance of maintaining connections to a faith community and practicing your faith, even when you're living in a land dominated by another world view.

And of course, the story gives us the one line in the whole book that's probably worthy of a whole sermon. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.

For such a time as this. Esther was in the right place at the right time to save her people. Although God was never mentioned, we are invited to see God's work nonetheless.

And then, we're invited to trust that we are in the place God needs us to be in the time God needs us to be...that we are here for a time such as this.

So what is needed in this time we are here?

Like Esther, we may not really know yet completely what God will reveal to us. We may not know in what specific situation we may be called to act. It may come as a surprise even.

Maybe you'll find yourself at a holiday gathering where someone makes a joke that's racist or antisemitic or anti-gay or anti-Muslim. And maybe you are there to be the one that says, hey, that's not funny.

Maybe you're in this time and place to be love and kindness in a world shot through with meanness. We live in a time and place where Christian identity is too often equated with meanness. Maybe we are in this time and place to show a more Jesus-y way of being Christian.

Maybe you're in this time and place to mentor or just befriend a young person who feels alone in the world and wonders why they're even here.

Maybe this Advent is the time and place when you will look at yourself and have the courage to tackle unhealthy habits and make changes...maybe even be willing to get help if you need it.

Maybe this is the time you will simply be able to love yourself as God loves you...as God created you.

And maybe, like the Purim plays, it's a time when it's ok to not always take ourselves so seriously...to laugh...to experience joy with those around us.

No matter the time, God is paying attention. The book of Esther never mentions God, and yet Esther is where she needs to be to do God's work. There is no time ever that God is not with us.

Advent is when we think about time. It's a time of waiting, but not just for Christmas and the celebration of Jesus' birth. It's a time of waiting for Jesus' return and the fulfillment of the

kingdom in the future that is both here now and not yet here completely. It's a time of watching and pointing to the revelation of God at work in our time and place.

It's a time to pay attention to what's going on around us and wonder, maybe I am here for just such a time as this.