



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

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[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, September 18, 2011**  
*The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Choral Evensong*  
*at 4pm*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels  
on  
Esther 3:1—4:3  
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### *QUEEN ESTHER*

It is always a treat when the lectionary falls to entertaining narratives like the famous story of Esther, as it has for the evening office the last few days, and will for the coming week. This short book, found in the latter part of the Hebrew Scriptures, tells the story of the crafty and clever Queen Esther, as she saves her fellow Hebrews from the diabolical plans of the nefarious Haman, the king's prime minister, who is referred to as "Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews." And an enemy he certainly proves himself to be. The book of Esther tells the story of the exiled Jews as they sought to maintain their faith, "singing the Lord's song in an alien land" as the Psalm says, among the Persians. It is a story of Israel's fidelity to God, in spite of the dangers of doing so, and God's fidelity to Israel, in spite of all odds.

A bit of background: Before Esther was queen, she was an orphan, being raised by her older cousin Mordecai, the person whose actions instigate the plans undertaken in today's reading, and part of the diaspora of Jews there. Esther was given the crown after the king selected her from all the "maidens" in his land; he didn't ask if she was Jewish, and she didn't volunteer the information. They were all set to live happily ever after. As we join the story today, we hear the crux of the problem. As a religious Jew, cousin Mordecai was unable to "bow down" or "reverence" prime minister Haman, as per the royal decree. "Reverence" means "worship," and worship is reserved for God alone. Incensed, the arch-villain hatches a plot to have not only Mordecai, but all the Jews in Persia, killed.

There is more Esther to hear this week, so I won't give away all the twists and turns of the plot, though they are marvelously entertaining: ironic reversals, misunderstandings, the courage of Queen Esther, and a climactic battle scene where the good guys come out far ahead, and the bad guys get what they had coming to them – including arch-villain Haman, who we last see impaled on the pole he had prepared for cousin Mordecai – who is now Prime Minister Mordecai. Haman had "cast lots" to determine the date to carry out his plan of killing the Hebrews; the Hebrew word for "lots" is *pur*, which is why the yearly commemoration of this episode in Jewish history is called Purim. On that day every year, up to the present, the book of Esther is read in its entirety, usually twice, there are celebratory feasts and parties, and alternate side parking rules are suspended. The true gauge of a day's importance. On Purim God's keeping his promise is celebrated, as described in this evening's Psalm: "The eyes of the LORD are over the righteous... The countenance of the LORD is against them that do evil... The righteous cry, and the LORD hears them, and delivers them out of all their troubles."

While our world is thousands of years, thousands of miles, and almost unimaginably culturally distant from ancient Persia, the story of Esther continues to have relevance for our lives of faith. The light thrown off by this often overlooked book can illuminate our own situation; it challenges us with questions. I would like to mention just two of them this evening.

First, Esther is another Scriptural example of the fruits of a holy trust in the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ, and the promise that God's providence will be fulfilled. The possibilities for this fulfillment may be nearly invisible sometimes – we know that the Babylonian captivity a hundred years before Esther had caused a serious religious crisis, as “by the waters of Babylon” they sat down and wept. The fact that God remains active even when it seems impossible, even in the midst of captivity of one kind or another, active in the most hopeless situations, should both give us hope, and remind us to place our trust in God. No darkness can ultimately overcome the light of Christ; no tomb can contain him; through him we will have life and have it abundantly. God is trustworthy.

And this is related to the second question: are there places or times when – in spite of God's trustworthiness – we are giving obeisance, or worship, to something or someone who is not God? Whom, or what, do we worship, really? In a context where there is a person, like Haman, explicitly claiming this divine priority, disobedience may be more dangerous, but the transgression is also more clear. Hearing about Mordecai refusing to bow, at great risk, may cause us to ask: has any kind of idolatry found its way into our own lives? To call Jesus Lord is to say that all other lords are inferior to him; to call Jesus King is to say that one's ultimate allegiance is to him, and any other allegiance – national or familial or whatever – is subordinate to that. Important, perhaps, and even nourishing, but not ultimate. We worship the one God, revealed in Jesus Christ, and the many, many things that seek to replace him are pagan temptations. Those hollow idols are inferior substitutes, and they can sneak into the most well-meaning life, wearing modern-day disguises that belie their ancient roots. The first commandment just might be the hardest one to keep, and Mordecai's example should inspire us to remain faithful to God, in whose image we are made.

And one final note. Next week at this hour we'll commemorate the tenth anniversary of the agreement signed by the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I would say that faithful ecumenical efforts are marked by these two Esther-like characteristics of trust in God, and worship of God, and God alone. Trust in God: the belief that Jesus' desire that all Christians may be one, as he and the Father are one, is possible, in spite of all the obstacles that stand in its way, in spite of the seeming intractability of the problems. And worship of God: this is reflected in an effort to resist the deification of our own way of doing things as the only possible way, the only faithful response to the call of the Gospel: the idolatry of practices.

Certainly there are real challenges to this kind of work across communions, even among people of good will, and papering over disagreements for the purposes of only superficial unity is no more suitable than digging in one's heels and saying “my way or the highway.” So it is a cause for celebration when an agreement can be reached among the disciples of Jesus Christ to worship God and serve their neighbor together.

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