

The story of Esther takes place after many Jewish exiles have returned to Judea, but many have stayed in Persia. Esther and her older cousin Mordecai are Diaspora Jews, living discreetly as Jews in a non-Jewish realm. Persia's king, Ahasuerus, is a buffoon, but a powerful buffoon. Rebuffed by his wife Vashti when he wants to show her off to his friends, he overreacts and throws her out of the palace. Then, big-time classy problem-solver like he is, he holds a beauty contest to find a replacement for Vashti. Not to imply that he's a superficial clown, but actions speak louder than words. This is how Esther comes to be in the royal household; she won the beauty pageant.

Ahasuerus' closest associates are similarly buffoonish and thin-skinned. His henchman Haman, encountering Esther's guardian Mordecai in the street, is offended that Mordecai won't bow down to him (being a good Jew). So he persuades King Ahasuerus to decree that all the Jews in the city should be killed, just to show Mordecai. It's at this juncture that our reading begins, with Mordecai putting on public mourning and telling Esther that she is their only hope.

This is a society run by caprice. The powerful act on whims, and there is no trustworthy mechanism by which to correct or escape their reckless decisions. It's a little like watching your country pull out of the Paris climate accord for no good reason, while climate change accelerates all around you. Or like watching measles make a comeback because people seem to have chosen now to understand how vaccines work. Real people are at the mercy of the magical thinking of decision-makers, and there is no escaping.

When Mordecai tells Esther that she is the only hope of the Jewish diaspora,

she says the equivalent of “Who, me?” She reminds him that anybody who approaches the king without being called will be put to death. She may be queen, but that doesn’t mean she has any power. But Mordecai answers her, “When they come after the Jews, don’t imagine you’ll escape. Besides, perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Unready for the challenge as she is, she is all that stands between the Jews and annihilation. Little Esther, orphan, who’d a thought?

As you’ll remember, Esther rises to the challenge, and with ingenuity not only gets Ahasuerus to rescind his decree to kill all the Jews, but also gets him to sentence Haman to death and promote Mordecai to Haman’s old job. So, without one single mention of God in the entire book, God’s people chalk up another win, thanks to little Esther the orphan and, who knows, perhaps thanks to God too. Because God is, as someone has observed, subtle to a fault. For every theophany in a burning bush, there are about ten thousand episodes in which God’s presence is unsatisfactorily elusive. The prophet Elijah famously failed to detect God in a strong wind, an earthquake, and a fire, because God was in the stillness. For most of us, it’s the same way. God does not make Godself known in an unambiguous and attention-getting way. Much of the time we’re left guessing, or recognizing the hand of God only in retrospect.

This is something that Jews have figured out how to celebrate in the festival of Purim, which commemorates Esther’s triumph. At Purim, people dress up in costumes precisely because God’s presence was hidden. Therefore they “hide” behind costumes. Both before Purim starts and then immediately after, the scroll of

Esther is read aloud, which takes about half an hour. Complete silence is maintained during the reading, except when the name of the villainous Haman is mentioned, at which boos, footstomping, and those rotary hand-held noisemakers break out. Afterwards there is a meal featuring as many delicious foods as possible and what is referred to as “Purim Torah,” which appears to be a parody of more conventional forms of Torah teaching, with homiletic lessons that may border on the absurd. And of course there are Purim songs.

The cumulative effect of the Purim celebration is to recognize the hiddenness of God *and* to laugh in the face of what is truly fearsome and threatening. After all, in a world in which the powerful do not take seriously the value of human life, “relief and deliverance” are simply going to have to come from the un-powerful. That would be pretty much the way God has always operated, from the shepherd boy David who felled Goliath with his sling through little immigrant Esther all the way to the baby Jesus born in a stable far from home and visited by random farm laborers. You have to admit that’s funny. As well as scary.

Lauren Winner recounts the words of the rabbi at the Purim service she visited one year: *All through Torah we find people looking for God, and not finding God, because God doesn't often conform to our expectations. God is somewhere other than the place we think to look. And our sages show that you can respond to God's hiddenness in many different ways. You can, like the writer of Lamentations, respond to God's hiddenness by mourning. Or, like the writer of Ecclesiastes, instead of asking where the God you thought you were looking for had gone, ask what God is like now. Or you can respond to God's hiddenness by being like Esther: if God is hiding, then you*

*must act on God's behalf. If you look around the world and wonder where God has gone, why God isn't intervening on behalf of just and righteous causes, your very wondering may be a nudge to work in God's stead. (Still, pp. 114-115)*

A few years ago someone (Jan?) shared a story I can't find now about some Christians who came up with gifts and Christmas treats for those sharing their difficult situation (wartime?). They knew their non-Christian companions didn't expect a Christmas celebration, but *they* expected one from themselves. They gave, not because others were celebrating Christmas, but because *they* were. As with Purim, the very absurdity of the situation gives power to the celebrants—or perhaps, makes the celebrants aware of the power they do have. As another wise woman, Deb, posted recently to Facebook, “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

The hiddenness of God is in no way an indication of God's absence. That would be silly. It simply calls forth from us the obligation to see what needs to be done and not to wait to act until we know it will work. After all, we are the people who contemplate the darkest time of the year with hopeful expectation, because that's when, according to the promise, a light will flicker on in the darkness and the darkness will be broken.

God of justice, you sent your servant Esther into a life of privilege so that those without would be taken care of. Helpless and hopeless as we may be, we ask that we might advocate for those who have less, so that your world might be peaceful and just. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.