

Thought for Contemplation: *Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.* - T. S. Eliot

WORSHIP MARCH 17, 2019
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

INGATHERING CHIMES

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CHALICE LIGHTING reader: Schuyler Stevenson. Lighter: Ben Stevenson helper: Cora Stevenson

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person.

Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us. -Albert Schweitzer

CALL TO WORSHIP #416 Robert French Leavens

Holy and beautiful the custom
Which bring us together,
In the presence of the Most High
To face our ideals,
To remember our loved ones in absence,
To give thanks, to make confession,
To offer forgiveness,
To be enlightened, and to be strengthened.

Through this quiet hour breathes
The worship of the ages,
The cathedral music of history.
Three unseen guest attend,
Faith, hope and love.
Let all our hearts prepare them place.

HYMN *As We Come Marching, Marching* #109

CHILDREN'S TIME Esther's Story – Purim. Noisemakers hand out to the children to make noise when Haman's name is mentioned.

A long long time ago there was a King Ahasuerus who had a queen named Vashti. Ahasuerus was kind self-centered and lazy. He liked to throw parties with fancy food and lots of drink and left a lot of his job of running things to his advisors. Once the king got it into his head to throw a very big and fancy party- one that lasted for days. He invited a lot of special people who came from near and far to celebrate. Queen Vashti had a party for women who came.

Toward the end of the days of celebrating the king decided he wanted to show off his beautiful wife, Queen Vashti, so he sent for her to come. But Vashti was busy with her guests and she decided not to come.

The king was furious and didn't know what to do he was so angry. His advisors thought that this problem of a wife disobeying her husband's wishes could be big trouble, so they told the king to banish Vashti and make her leave the country forever, which he did.

But the king got lonely so he sent his people out to scour the countryside for the most beautiful young women in the kingdom and bring them back so that he could choose a new bride.

One of the women they found and brought back was Esther. Esther's parents had died, and her uncle Mordecai adopted her when she was a little girl. They were Jewish, not like the rest of the people in that country. And because they were different, they just tried to not make waves and blend in as best as they could. Mordecai advised Esther not to tell the king that she was Jewish, because he thought that might put her in danger. Esther did as her uncle advised.

The king had the women all wait together until it was their turn to be dressed up and then, one day at a time, had them introduced to him, so he could choose. All the time that Esther was with the women, her uncle Mordecai would hang around the outside of the palace watching and listening to make sure that Esther was okay. One day when he was hanging around the gates, he heard two men talking about trying to kill the king, and he reported it. The men were caught and tried

and hanged, and the king had it recorded that Mordecai had done that and saved the king's life.

Then it was Esther's turn. As soon as she walked into the room, the king fell in love with her. So smitten was he, that he placed the crown upon her head right then and there, pronouncing her Queen Esther.

During this time the king promoted Haman named Haman to be the highest person next to the king. Haman was not a very nice man. When he got promoted, he asked the king to tell everyone that now that he was such a big shot, closest to the king, all the people should bow down to him. And the king issued that decree. But when Haman walked by the palace gates where Mordecai was, Mordecai would not bow down, because he was Jewish, and Jewish people only bow down to God, not to other people.

This made Haman very angry. He decided that he would get back at Mordecai, and at the people like him, who would only bow down to God and not to other people, and he decided that he would have all the Jews in the land killed. Haman set a date when they would all be killed and got the king to agree.

Mordecai and all the Jews in the land were really scared, and somehow Mordecai got word to Esther that this had happened. He told her she had to talk to the king and talk him out of this or all her people would be killed.

Esther didn't know what to do. She was not allowed to go into the king unless he had called for her. She remembered what had happened to Vashti for not behaving the right way with the king. And the king had a terrible temper. She made a plan and hoped it would work.

She dressed herself up in her prettiest clothes that the king loved, sprinkled herself with sweet smelling perfumes, made her hair and her make up all beautiful and with sweetness and apology entered the king's rooms and smiling sweetly invited him and Haman to a banquet she had prepared for them. The king was delighted and ordered Haman to make himself ready.

They had a wonderful time together eating delicious food and drinking fine wine. At the end the king asked Esther if there was anything he could do for her. For

now, she said, smiling sweetly once again, all I ask is that you come again tomorrow for another banquet.

Haman left feeling all puffed up and important, until he waked out of the palace gate and passed Mordecai who would not bow down to him. He was furious. He told his wife, who said to him “Why don’t you just hang him?” And Haman decided that was just what he’d do. He ordered gallows built to teach everyone a lesson.

The next night was the second banquet. After the last desert, the king asked what it was Queen Esther would like of him.

“I ask that you save my life and the life of my people. It has been ordered that we all be destroyed.

“What are you talking about?” the King asked. “Who is this enemy of your people?”

“Haman, sire. It is Haman.”

The king jumped up in a rage. He ordered Haman hanged on the gallows that Haman had constructed for Mordecai.

Quiet, shy Queen Esther had saved the Jews of the land.

Song (seated) Go Now in Peace #413

(Children are invited to go now to their program)

MUSIC FOR REFLECTION

JOYS AND SORROWS

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

READING: *Book of Esther 1:16-20*

16 Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, “Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. **17** For this deed of the queen will be

made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' ¹⁸ This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against^[d] the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath! ¹⁹ If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. ²⁰ So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike."

ANTHEM

OFFERING

SERMON

It's Been a Long Road

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

Two thousand, five hundred years ago a woman, a wife, refused a request of her husband, and was banished. Her husband was a king, so he could do that. His advisors warned him that if the public knew that his wife had asserted her right to refuse, every husband would be in

jeopardy, for it would suggest to women that they had the right to their own persons...the right to refuse. They were on to something.

When Esther became queen, she was well aware of what had happened to her predecessor. It had been broadcast all over the land. And Esther had not become queen because she wanted that job. She had been recruited, under the direction of the king, and taking a cue from what had happened to Vashti, young Esther did as she was told. On the surface she appeared a meek and mild, innocent young girl. Her back story reveals a little more depth to the tale. Esther's people, historically our people, the Jews, had been captured in war and taken prisoner. That is what she and Mordecai and the other Jews were doing in Persia. They had been forcibly moved there a generation earlier. I imagine that the skills of survival that had been passed down to this child, were passed on in the same way that our minority populations need to pass down the skills of survival to this day. For example, teaching their young "Hands up!" as our black parents need to teach their boys. "When you see a police officer be sure you have your hands up and visible." So, Esther too had probably been taught the basics of how to keep your head down, and travel as much under the radar, as possible.

But she was too beautiful, and too well known in the neighborhood as beautiful, to keep unnoticed by the king's scouts, which meant she was going to have to live in the enemy's house, quietly, concealing her true identity.

When events unfold and Esther learns that her people are about to be annihilated, she must do something, and the only things she can do are fraught with danger, for her and for her people. Using all of her feminine wiles, she seductively approaches the king, her self-absorbed, clueless husband, and wangles her way into his good graces, and attention. She uses behaviors we often disparage these days, as unhealthy, manipulative, pandering. I think that is a mistake, missing the larger more important insight.

Vashti and Esther had no legitimate power, no authorized power. They were, in that system, powerless. When Vashti tried to exert power, tried to claim power she believed rightfully hers, she was punished, severely, banished from her land, her home, her people. Esther could not afford that. Too much was on the line- her people's lives, not just her own. So, she screwed her courage to the sticking place, and used the only power she had- the power to influence the powerful. And she used it well. So well, that she saved her people and became one of only two women in the bible to have a book named

after her and her story. There are 23 books in the Hebrew bible that are named for the men whose story they tell. And 2 books named for women and the story they tell. There are no books or letters in the Christian testament from the women.

The bible is the record of our faith journey as a people. We need it to know from where we have come, what sustained us, and what hobbled us on the journey. As with any people, there are things in it of which we are proud, such as the values promoted by the prophets to which we still cling, and things in it of which we are not, such as the omission of the women. But it is our story, and if we are to understand who we are and how we came to be this way, knowing our story is important.

The lesson in Esther, however, is one for today. The dynamics are contemporary. It is about how people who do not have access to legitimate power are forced to use alternative methods to experience agency and impact the shape of events. If your only access to power, is through the influence of powerful people, you need to resort to coddling, flattery, manipulation, deceit, and distortion, to obtain influence and secure the results that protect your wellbeing.

I suggest that the next time you are feeling angry or annoyed with someone who is behaving in that way, ask yourself, in what way might

they be experiencing themselves as powerless? In what way might they be relating to you as the person with the power they are lacking, who they must influence for their sense of safety or wellness?

This month is Women's History Month, and it seemed to me as good a time as any to look at women's history back to biblical times. It may have been two thousand, five hundred years ago that the story of Queen Esther happened, but that it's issues and dynamics are still so recognizable to us today, suggests that it is not as long ago as we would like to imagine.

It is one hundred years ago this year, in 1919, that Maine ratified the nineteenth amendment to the United States Constitution giving women the right to vote. Maine was the nineteenth state to do so. It had been a long, hard struggle for women's suffrage, beginning before the Civil War. Unitarian Universalist women were front and center in the work for women's suffrage. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone all had strong UU connections, participating in Unitarian and Universalist congregations and networking with Unitarians and Universalists in the fight for women's rights.

The Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution, giving equal rights to all regardless of sex, was first introduced in 1921, the year after the nineteenth amendment granting women the right to

vote became law. The ERA didn't pass then and was reintroduced and passed in congress in 1972. it was ratified in Maine in 1974 but expired without enough states ratifying it. Women still do not have a constitutional protection for equal rights.

This isn't dusty history that we can glance over and then put back on the shelf. This is about now, and us and how we will continue to move forward. It is about the people on whose shoulders we stand, who lived and died for rights and the freedom to be. It is about you, and I admit, it is also about me, and my grandchildren, and their children.

It was T.S. Elliot who said:

“Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go. “

Vashti risked going to far. Esther risked going too far. The suffragettes risked going too far. Women enrolling in seminaries to become ministers risked going too far. Women starting their own businesses risked going too far. Women running for office risked going too far. We risk it for ourselves and our foremothers, Vashti, Esther, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the nameless women in the factories who went on strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts and around the country. We risk it for our children, sons

and daughters, and our children's children, because we cannot afford not to.

It is not just for women, but for any people denied access to life, liberty and self-determination. It is about what we all need, bread and roses, bread and roses.

CLOSING HYMN *If Every Woman in the World* #1026

BENEDICTION

CLOSING MUSIC (please remain seated for the closing music)