

Esther is one of just *two* women who has a book named after her in the Protestant bible; compare this to *thirty-two* different men who have books named for them. Unlike the men-with-books in the Hebrew Bible, Esther is not a prophet; and though she comes before the time of Jesus, she was not a disciple or a founder of the early church like the men-with-books in the New Testament. But Esther doesn't need to be remembered as a prophet or a founder of the early church for her to teach us important lessons about salvation and sacrifice.

The story of Esther is commended as a tale of a woman rescuing her people from immanent death. She is a Jewish woman who becomes queen of a Persian city just before all the Jews of the city are decreed to be killed – except the king does not know her true identity. With the help of her uncle, she concocts a plan to save her people from what would otherwise be a genocide. Though there is some cunning and trickery involved, what ultimately saves them is not her guile, but her willingness to take her own life into her hands in an effort to save all the rest: we hear this in the words she is known for, *if I perish, I perish*. Esther's readiness to give up everything for something that matters so much is why I think this story makes it into the bible – had she hedged her bets, they would not have survived, and it would be nothing more to us than a forgotten cautionary-tale.

But I wish this were *just* the story of laying down all our cards for the sake of doing the right thing – and having it pay off in a massive, life-saving way. I wish this were *just* the story of a woman answering the call of her community in a dire situation and leading them on a path to salvation. I wish this were *just* the story of people in power sacrificing what they have so that everyone may have longer life. The Book of Esther *is* those things, but it is not *only* those things. Because after Esther answers the urgent call and exposes herself to danger and gives up her

power and wealth, she does one more thing to save her people. She orders the Jews, her own people, “to destroy, to kill, to annihilate” anyone who might attack them, including women and children.

With this act, Esther enters a line of biblical women who assert that violence is a stop on the road to salvation. She follows in the footsteps of Jael, who drives a stake through a man’s head, and Deborah, who sings Jael’s praises; she walks with Delilah who tortures her husband when he won’t give up his power and Jezebel who had a man stoned to death so that her husband could take his land; Esther is like Judith, who cuts off the head of the opposing general to save her people.

This is not easy to hear. Violence is never easy to look at, and when it comes from the hands of a woman, we especially want to turn away. We want our women – especially our biblical women – to be exemplars of compassion and peace, love and understanding. Even we who were raised to be strong women, or who pray that our daughters will know and become strong women – well, my stomach turns at the thought of a severed head.

As it should. But the thing is – violence demands our attention. Violence causes pain, yes, and violence also *stems from* pain. Violence is a scream, calling out in hurt, calling out for attention.

There is another woman among us screaming out with violence. Cultures around the world have known the earth as “our mother” – the one who nurtures and protects us and gives us life. The earth, our mother, has been rising up with violent responses for decades. Each of the subsequent warmest-year-on-record is a sign of her violence, and the proliferation of heat-related illness is a wound on all of us. Her violence begets violence, and these record-breaking

heat waves only bring more periods of drought as the moisture is absorbed by the dry air – affecting 9 million people worldwide in 2018 alone. Drought reduces the ability of plants to grow, and reduced vegetation decreases the rate at which carbon is removed from the atmosphere. The earth’s, our mother’s, pain begets more pain, and increased carbon leads to increased temperature which leads to increased sea level which leads to more moisture in the system, which produces ever more severe storms, with just flooding affecting 35 million people in 2018. Heat and drought and hurricane and flood are a wound on all of us. But as with all forms of violence, some people are more likely to be in the line of fire: according to a UN report, “the countries with high exposure to climate extremes have *more than double* the number of *undernourished people* as those without high exposure” to climate extremes. It is also the case that those most vulnerable countries are among those who have initiated the most significant responses. But recent warming has increased poverty and disadvantage, and poverty makes a person more susceptible to the effects of warming. This is not easy to hear. Violence is never easy to look at, and when it comes from the hands of a woman – our mother, the one who is meant to nurture and protect us – we especially want to turn away.¹

The gift of this kind of violence is not that it offers us a model for how to behave or that it gives us a right kind of ethics – the gift of this kind of violence is that it shakes us. Violence demands our attention, and if we are willing to grant it, it is clarifying. With this newfound lucidity, we grow in our understanding of right and wrong, which in turn grants us certainty in choosing righteous responses.

¹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>
<http://www.ghf-ge.org/human-impact-report.pdf>

Faced with immanent violence, perhaps Esther thought that she could save herself a lot of trouble – and keep herself from harm’s way – if she just stayed out of it. Perhaps she thought someone else could deal with it. Whatever she was thinking, her uncle Mordecai seems to have read her mind, because he says, *“do you not think that you can escape in the king’s palace?”* In other words, *“do you think you’re safe just because you’re the queen?”* The idea seems to have taken hold. I imagine that Esther begins to consider everything she has to lose – at first, I wonder if she would think about what the king would say when he finds out who she really is; then I can imagine her realizing that she will have to give up the riches of the palace; finally, I think it dawns on her that she could actually die. As she is reflecting, Mordecai says something else: *“Could it be that you have come into the kingdom for a time such as this?”* In other words – *“We don’t know why you’re queen, Esther! But could it be so that you can save us?”* As Esther reflects on all that she has to sacrifice, these words inspire a new thought – could it be that sacrifice is not a burden, but a gift? The violence that has demanded her attention starts to open up her thinking and to shift her priorities. Could it be that sacrifice is more like becoming queen than like watching the ones she loves be killed?

And so, having reflected on her status, the reason for her being there, and her looming death, Esther says, *“Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.”* In other words, *“I will do the thing that all the powers that be want to keep me from, and if I give up everything, I give up everything.”*

When Esther reveals that sacrifice is not a burden but a gift, she shows us that this is an ingredient in salvation. She helps us see that salvation is not merely about what happens when we die, but about how we choose to live. She shows us that this willingness to give up

everything – or what seems like everything – grants her the gift of everything else. She trades in her riches and the security of her status for all else that life has to offer – including the lives of her community and her relationship with them. Esther helps us see that salvation is about bringing ourselves into right relationship with God and others – not only when we are dying, but also when we are living. Esther helps us see that right relationship with God and others requires that we give something of ourselves. She shows us that this is not a form of self-denial and suffering, but the way we access a fuller life.

The season of Lent is an invitation to considering our mortality and salvation. Esther and the other violent women of the bible invite us to pay attention to violence and pain – they demand that we stop, look, and listen to the places of hurt in ourselves and our communities. The earth, our mother, is also raging with violence, and she too invites us to pay attention to this pain. Queen Esther invites us to pay attention to the riches we have in our lives, whether those are spiritual gifts or monetary treasures, and demands that we ask, could it be that these are for a time such as this? The earth, our mother, also cares how we use our resources – for they all are grounded in her – and she too invites us to ask ourselves what a time such as this requires. Esther our sister and the earth our mother invite us to remember that each of us will die, and they demand that we consider what we would give up in order for all to access fuller life.