

The Book of Esther is a fictional account that nevertheless reveals truth about our relationship with God. A Persian king is advised by an evil man who wants to exterminate the Jewish people. Manipulating the unwitting king, Haman betrays the trust of his position to issue royal decrees to annihilate the Jews. In each of the provinces, when the Jewish people heard of the new law enforcing genocide, they turned to God in prayer. They “went into deep mourning, with fasting, weeping, and lament; most of them lay on sackcloth and ashes” (Est 4:3).

The two heroes of the story are Mordecai and Esther who plead with God to help save their people. Mordecai offers his prayer to God first and explains that he would rather die than denounce his faith in order to save his own life. “Hear my prayer; have pity on your inheritance and turn our mourning into feasting, that we may live to sing praise to your name, Lord. Do not silence the mouths of those who praise you.” (Est 4:10). Mordecai is a very decent man. He foils a plot to assassinate the very king whose edict put his own life in jeopardy. He understands that the center of evil lies with Haman, the king’s advisor.

Mordecai’s niece is Esther. She is very beautiful and lives in the royal household as part of the king’s harem. She holds the special status of a queen. She is horrified by the evil plot of Haman to eliminate all of her kinspeople. Like her uncle, she turns to God in prayer and in penance. “Put in my mouth persuasive words in the presence of the lion and turn his heart to hatred for our enemy, so that he and those who are in league with him may perish” (4:24).

Enamored with Queen Esther’s beauty, the king says to Esther, “Whatever you ask, Queen Esther, shall be granted you. Whatever request you make, even for half the kingdom, shall be honored” (5:3). At this point, Esther pleads with the king to spare her people. She uses her position of personal privilege to help the common good of all of the Jewish people. The king is unaware that his named has been used by Haman to exterminate the Jews. Esther speaks truth to power and the king responds with a righteous anger against Haman who is sentenced to death for his capital crimes. At stories end, Mordecai is elevated to a position of great responsibility. He replaces Haman as the king’s chief minister.

This fictional account in the Book of Esther tells a story of the deliverance of the Jewish people. This deliverance is commemorated by the inauguration of the Jewish festival of Purim which is held annually between mid-February and mid-March (Intro to Esther). While the heroes of the story are Esther and Mordecai, the true reversal of fortune and the deliverance are because of the saving power of God. Every Jewish person recognized the need to offer prayer and fasting to invoke God’s help.

While the Book of Esther presents a fictional story, sadly it is a story that has been repeated throughout history. From the Book of Exodus, we know that pharaoh ordered the death of every newborn male child by his edict to midwives to destroy the newborn. The Lord heard the cry of the mothers and sent Moses as a savior for his people ... eventually helping Moses to lead every Jewish person out of slavery in Egypt.

We read the story of Esther in conjunction with the rest of the gospels “Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you’” (Mt 7:7). The implication is a simple one. As we ask, we should also exercise our Lenten discipline of serious prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The Lord responds to faith in the Book of Esther and throughout the bible. The Lord will respond to our faith as well. “Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (Lk 10:27). Like Mordecai, may we love our enemy and do good to those who wish us harm. Like Esther, may we use whatever stature we have to lift others up and to work for the common good.