

## TEXT FOR SESSION ONE

Esther 1-3

## SUGGESTED HYMN

My Faith Looks Up to Thee (*ELW* 635)

## OPENING PRAYER

Holy God, we seek your voice in the words we read and hear. May we open our hearts to your love. Be present with us in our time together so that we might serve you more faithfully. Amen.

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- Hymnals (*ELW*)
- Blank paper and pens or markers
- A map of the Persian empire (p. 2107) of the Lutheran Study Bible.

## NOTE TO READERS

*Gather* is trying something new. Each summer study session will include approximate times for completion of the sections. Also some sections or activities are now marked “optional.” We hope these additions will assist groups with shorter meeting times, while continuing to give groups that meet for a longer period plenty of material to discuss. Reading the Scripture passages ahead of time will also save time.

# *For just such a time as this*

## Session one

Esther the Queen:  
Voices in the king’s court

BY KAY WARD

## USING OUR VOICES

(5 minutes)

I like to think of this Bible study as a letter that I am writing to each of you. You may be reading these words by yourself with a cup of coffee, or you might be gathered around a table in someone’s home or at your church. I invite you to read the book of Esther as if you were preparing for a book club. Please read the whole book before the meeting. It has only 10 chapters.

Writing a Bible study about Esther has been a gift. Recently I suffered a serious case of laryngitis, losing my voice completely for more than two weeks. After beginning to feel better, my voice did not improve. A throat doctor prescribed treatment to heal my vocal cords. For three months, I was not to whisper, sing or yell! In my case, he interpreted the yelling to mean no public speaking.

As I’ve recuperated, I have had a lot of time to consider how my voice has defined my sense of self. I have a very loud voice, and I have always been able to depend on it. Who was I when I wasn’t able to use my voice in the usual way? I have loved using “voice” as a theme for exploring the book of Esther.

The book of Esther is a story of the Jews in exile—this time by the Persians, but there is a long history of the Jews being “carried off” by one conquering army or empire or another—the Greeks and the Romans would follow as conquerors up to



Map of the Ancient Persian Kingdom from Lutheran Study Bible copyright © 2009 Augsburg Fortress. Reproduced by permission.

the time of the first century. The Jews experienced hundreds of years of exile and being carried away from their homeland of Jerusalem—or Zion as it is sometimes called. Over the generations, some rulers allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem, but many Jews chose to settle down and try to make a home in a foreign country. The story of Esther takes place among Jews living outside of Israel, in the diaspora.

In our story, Esther and her adopted father are among the Jews who lived in Susa, living under the rule of Ahasuerus as a captured people. Some think that the king that is referred to in this story is Xerxes I who reigned about 400 years before

the common era—before the birth of Christ. The conquering kings differed in how they ruled, but in Susa, there was tolerance of the Jews as long as they didn't cause trouble, i.e. didn't break any laws. In most cases, these laws were arbitrary and absolute. Trying to maintain the Jewish culture and religious practice was difficult at best and often dangerous. We will see that in Esther's story.

As you read the Book of Esther, find ways that God is present even though God's name is never mentioned in the text. It is a good spiritual practice to always be on the lookout for God's presence in our ordinary lives.

As the story begins, see if you can discover how Esther and Mordecai happen to be living in Susa.

**THIS STORY HAPPENED...**  
(10 minutes)

 **Read:** Esther 1:1–9

The first word in the NRSV translation of the book of Esther is the word “this.” Other translations or paraphrases might read “this story happened.” It is the biblical version of once upon a time. The writer of the story wants the reader to know the geography as well as the extent of the Persian empire. (It was very large and very rich.)

After displaying his wealth at a lavish banquet for 180 days, the king gives a more modest banquet for just the people of Susa—a small affair that lasts only seven days. The banquet presumably is for all the people of the city, both “great and small.” Many verses are used to describe the décor of the palace.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

1. Look at the map of ancient Persia (p. 23) and locate the areas described. Familiarize yourself with where this story takes place.
2. The text tells us that Vashti, the king’s wife, gives a concurrent banquet for the women in the same palace. What does this tell us about who attends the king’s banquet?

**VOICES AT THE TABLE**  
(Approximate time 15 minutes)

 **Read:** Esther 1:9–22

For the king, this banquet is an opportunity to show off his women—in particular, his wife, Vashti. The text says she is known for her beauty. (Some scholars believe she was commanded to appear before the inebriated male crowd at this wild party either unveiled or wearing nothing except her crown. Both would have been insults, of course.) The king can command someone’s presence, and failure to comply can be a death sentence. Vashti knows the law, but she still refuses to come. Her actions infuriate the king. They show a lack of respect for his power in front of the whole male population of the city.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

3. Why do you think Vashti refuses to obey the king? What would give her the impression that she could disobey the king and not be destroyed?

King Ahasuerus, ruler of what was then the world’s largest empire, including lands from India to Ethiopia, had procedures that supported his reign. The text points out that the king made decisions by calling on his cabinet of wise men, a kind of think tank. In the hierarchy of the kingdom, these men had immediate access to the royal throne. They “sat first in the kingdom.” It’s hard to believe that the king would not know what to do in a case when someone disobeyed him, but we will give him the benefit of the doubt since he is now considering his queen’s disobedience. Everyone knows the law. The king has commanded Vashti to come, and she does not come.

So the wise men continue to speak. News from the royal court travels fast, and the advisors believe that when Vashti’s refusal reaches the ears of other women, they, too, will refuse to obey their husbands. The leaders of this vast empire seem to be suffering not only the effects of too much alcohol, but deep insecurity and emotional impulsivity. For the sake of the married men in the kingdom, the

king's advisors say he must act. Here is where we hear about the law of the Medes and the Persians. When these two kingdoms agree on some issue of law, it becomes irrefutable.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

4. How did the king's advisors raise the stakes in Vashti's actions?
5. What are the two mandates of the edict, and what does the edict guarantee?
6. "Every man should be master in his own house." How does this saying fall on the ears of women in the 21st century? How does it fall on your ears in particular?

**INTRODUCING QUEEN ESTHER**

📖 **Read:** Esther 2:1-4

After the edict has been sent to the provinces, the king does not have a queen since Vashti has been banished from the kingdom. The king once again turns to his advisors. They devise a procedure to help the king choose a new queen. The plan is not to choose a queen based on leadership skills or alliances, but to gather up young women from all the provinces and prepare them for an audience with the king. (At first glance, this might sound egalitarian to some, except for a few simple facts: the women have to be beautiful, have to be virgin, have to let go of their own hopes for their lives, and have to live out their remaining days in a harem.)

📖 **Read:** Esther 2:5-18

Chapter 2, verse 5 moves this story in a very different direction. Here, readers first learn who Esther is and that she and her adopted father (her older cousin) are Jews. The story had centered on the people of the Persian empire, with no acknowledgement that the empire includes groups of people who strangers--not Persians. The empire tolerates strangers who have been carried away from their homeland and brought as captives to Persia, as long as they obey the laws of the king. Esther is taken into the king's palace where she is looked after by Hegai, a eunuch. The girl pleases him, and he provides her with the necessary beauty treatments and her portion of food to advance her in the harem. Esther continues to obey Mordecai and does not reveal her Jewish identity. Mordecai tries to keep watch over his daughter by hanging around the court of the harem.

The beauty treatments and preparations last 12 months, and the text is very specific about what those treatments were. When the young women are summoned to the king's residence each night, they can take whatever they want from the harem to the king's quarters. In the morning, the young women are re-assigned to a "second harem" where "the concubines" live. A young woman will only return for another night with the king if he "delighted in her" (verse 14). In other words, the king is sleeping with the young women, one by one. Amid this backdrop of debauchery, the text highlights that when Esther is summoned to the king, she takes only what Hegai advises her to take. The dates are noted for when Esther was summoned and when she won the favor of the king. Esther becomes queen, and a banquet and a holiday are held to celebrate her selection.

Probably not an appropriate text for children, the book of Esther would be unlikely to earn a PG rating. Earlier we learned about eunuchs, and now we are witnesses to a young girl being summoned in the evening to go to the king and returning in the morning as the Queen of Persia.



**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

7. Do you think Esther went to the palace willingly? What choices would she have had once she had been chosen for the harem?
8. “Esther was given her portion of food.” How might that food have compromised her faith as a Jew? What other issues might have arisen as she participated in the harem?
9. What about Mordecai? How do you think he felt about what was happening to Esther?

**Optional activity (5-10 minutes)**

10. Imagine a modern-day re-telling of Esther, where all the women in the harem use Facebook to talk to their families or Twitter to talk to the world. Write a brief first-person message or “tweet,” limiting yourself to 16 or fewer words. Consider ending with a hashtag you’ve heard or created (i.e., #GoVashti, #MeToo, #MotivationMonday, #Kosher, etc.).

**TROUBLE IN THE COURT**  
(15 minutes)

📖 **Read:** Esther 2:19-23

Meanwhile back at the court of the harem, when the virgins are being gathered together, Mordecai is on duty checking on his daughter, and he overhears two of the eunuchs who guard the king’s threshold, complaining about the king. They are really doormen or gate keepers, and as happens in many workplaces, the employees are complaining about

the management. The guards become angrier and angrier and make plans to assassinate the king. When Mordecai reports this to Esther, who in turn tells the king, the two guards are hanged. Most importantly for the plot of the story, the event is recorded in the annual report prepared for the king.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

11. What do these verses tell us about the absolute power of this king?

📖 **Read:** Esther 3:1 – 7

“After these things” Haman is promoted to the top seat in the royal court. “After these things” may refer to Haman’s encounter with Mordecai. That encounter may have called attention to Mordecai’s role in the reporting of the guards. Whatever happened, Haman uses his new power and demands that the guards and Mordecai bow down to him to prove his authority. Mordecai will not bow down. The guards are curious about his refusal and try to persuade him to comply. Eventually Mordecai reveals that he is a Jew. Haman considers it beneath his station to kill Mordecai so instead uses his power to destroy all the Jews. The lot (Pur) is thrown to determine when this massacre will take place and a date is chosen. We will hear more about Pur in the last two chapters.

📖 **Read:** Esther 3:8-11

We should make special note of verse 8. It is a rationale that has been used since these ancient days to separate people from one another. It feeds on our worst inclinations to be suspicious of folks who are different from our own people. Some take from this suspicion an idea that strangers should be treated as enemies.

*There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them (Esther 3:8).*

Haman lays out his plot to get rid of the Jews and raises the ante. He will pay for this massacre to take place to the tune of 10,000 talents of silver. And the king agrees, once again unquestioningly following whoever is advising him. To seal the deal (a pun intended) the king gives Haman his signet ring which he uses to close deals in the kingdom. Verse 10 identifies Haman as the *enemy* of the Jews.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

12. Is it possible that the annihilation of an entire people can be perpetrated by one man who feels he has been disrespected? This story seems to say so. What evidence do you have from your experience that would substantiate that claim?
13. What folks do you know who might feel that strangers should not be tolerated? Have you ever felt that way?

**OPTIONAL ACTIVITY (IF TIME ALLOWS):  
LONGING FOR A HOMELAND**

📖 **Read:** Esther 3:12–15

This chapter demonstrates how the kingdom worked. The procedures are exhaustive and the city of Susa is thrown into chaos. The last verses of chapter 3 tell of the king and Haman sitting down to drink—the deed is done!

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

14. Make a list of the steps involved to ensure that everyone in the kingdom will be notified about what is to happen.
15. What can we tell about the king in the last verse? How do you think the people viewed his actions?

Some of the voices that we have heard in the first three chapters of Esther are loud, demanding voices from the royal court of the king. But there is also the quiet voice of God speaking to the hearts of Esther and Mordecai. Though they live in a kingdom that totally disregards their faith, they can still hear God's voice. The decision of Mordecai to not bow down to Haman seems to be that his king is God, not any human being (though the text does not say that.). Opinions may differ on his motivation but the overriding theme of the book of Esther is that the Jews are living in a place that does not tolerate their religious beliefs or practices. This intolerance breaks their hearts and puts them in jeopardy.

Poetry is a powerful way to eloquently express this longing for the homeland, a place where they can live their faith openly, with joy.

*By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'*

*How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!*

*Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (Psalm 137:1-6)*

In such an alien place, there are certainly times when Mordecai has to decide what he can compromise in terms of his faith. Can he bow to the king to save his life and still be faithful? Can he bow to another person? Perhaps Esther has to ask herself whether she can eat food that breaks the dietary laws of the Jews? Both Esther and Mordecai must listen carefully for the voice of God.

Though hidden in the book of Esther, the voice of God is present throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Creation began with God speaking in a loud crashing voice to create something out of nothing and announcing that “it was good.”

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

16. That loud voice guides the Jews as they are forced to live in exile. That loud crashing voice of God continues to guide us in our journeys. Read Genesis 1:1-31 to hear the voice of God, speaking words in creation.

**CONCLUSION**

(10 minutes)

A profession of faith doesn't always need voices. Sometimes our actions speak louder than words. But there are times when we are called to use our voices, to speak up for our families, to speak out in small groups or to our congregations. There are times when we are called to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:11 – 16). We find aspects of both Vashti and Esther in all of us.

Sometimes it's harder when we are put on the spot and required to make a very public profession of what we believe. There are times in our lives when we are called to speak with a loud

crashing voice as we take a stand and speak truth to power.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

17. We may not all be eloquent, bold speakers, but we can be faithful voices. How can you use your voice to express your faith in family, congregational or community settings? How might you use your voice in the world?
18. There are many spiritual practices, biblical texts and worship that support our faith. What do you depend on to help you to continue to grow into a strong woman of faith?

**PRAYER**

Holy God, sometimes we feel very small. We wonder if our voices can be heard amid the roar of dissonant messages across the globe. Help us to search out places where we can be a strong voice for you. Grant us wisdom and courage for the living of our days. Amen.

**HYMN**

*ELW 635* 🌿

# *For just such a time as this*

## **Session one**

Esther the Queen: Voices in the king's court

BY KAY WARD

### **MANAGING YOUR GROUP'S TIME**

Your role as a leader is to gently guide your time so that you accomplish what you want to accomplish together. Your group may enjoy generous discussion and not be as interested in moving through all the material. That's perfectly fine.

In fact, this Bible study is experimenting with some new notes to help you manage your time effectively. You'll see in each section we've included an approximate time the Scripture, reading and discussion questions in that section should take. We've marked other sections as "optional, as time allows," should your group find yourself needing to speed things along. Your group may also choose to read the book of Esther before you meet (this is also a good idea if you meet for a shorter time).

### **DIGGING INTO THE TEXTS**

As is the custom in Gather, the Scripture passages in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. If time allows, your group may be interested to compare these readings to other translations of Esther, like the New International Version or King James Version. Comparing the text of these different translations may give your group insight into the nuances of the ways this story has been told over the years.

You may also note that the Bible study often uses the word "story" when referring to the book of Esther. I understand story to mean a narrative which can be factual or fictional. It's a perfectly good

way to speak of Esther, but it does not mean that the events did not happen.

As you read, you'll also note that there are a number of complicated questions and issues throughout this book. First, there is some discussion about the relationship of Esther and Mordecai. Some translations call them cousins; some call them niece and uncle. The point is: Esther was orphaned, and Mordecai raised her as his daughter.

The story also contains a number of details regarding sexual relationships in the king's empire—i.e., harems, virgins and eunuchs (castrated males who managed the women in the harems of kings; also see Acts 8:27-39). You know your group best and can determine how deeply you want to go into the many sexual issues in Esther. Wherever your discussion takes you, stress that women in this empire during this period of time had no rights, and the king had access to any woman in his court whenever he desired her. With rare exceptions, women were judged only on their beauty. 🌸



## TEXT FOR SESSION TWO

Esther 4:14

## SUGGESTED HYMN

For All the Faithful Women

(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 419)

## OPENING PRAYER

Holy God, look with favor on our time together, as we discuss and share our faith with each other. Give us the gift of imagination as we live with the words from the book of Esther. Help us to look for the silences in our lives where we can hear your voice. Speak to us of the times “such as this” when we are called to speak and act. Amen.

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- Hymnals (*ELW*)

# *For just such a time as this*

## Session two

Helping our voices bloom

BY KAY WARD

## INTRODUCTION

(2 minutes)

When I wrote this Bible study, I was struggling with not being able to use my voice in the normal way after undergoing treatment for a severe case of laryngitis. This experience got me thinking about voices, silence and, in particular, how God’s voice is heard in many different ways in the biblical text. Sometimes God’s voice is heard in the sound of sheer silence—such as in the prophet Elijah’s experience, as recorded in 1 Kings 19: 11-12, below:

*I have been zealous for you, Lord, but no one listened and now I am running for my life. The Lord then said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.*

The world is a noisy place, and the sounds of sheer silence may not be an everyday occurrence. But we do know silence, sometimes in crisis and struggle—sometimes in peace and relief.

This session explores the acts of being silent and speaking. Mordecai challenges Esther by saying, “if you keep silence at such a time as this...” (4:14).

### ESTHER’S STORY CONTINUES

(5 minutes)

📖 **Read:** Esther 4:1-4

As we pick up Esther’s story, Mordecai, overcome with emotion at learning the outcome of Haman’s hatred toward the Jews, puts on sackcloth and ashes and walks through the city. In those days, sackcloth and ashes were a visible sign of grief and mourning. In Susa, all the Jews react to this horrible news with the rituals of fasting and weeping and lamenting. Mordecai approaches the king’s gate, and the text reminds us that no one is allowed to enter the king’s gate in sackcloth. When Esther hears of her relative’s action, she is very worried and sends out clothes for Mordecai to wear.

#### **For sharing aloud or reflection:**

1. Imagine such news of impending death coming to your neighborhood. This might be unthinkable for some of us, but it is a reality for many of our global brothers and sisters. What situations come to mind?
2. Esther seems not to understand why Mordecai is outside in sackcloth and sends out some clothes for him. Is she missing the point of his wearing sackcloth? What might she be thinking?

### OPTIONAL ACTIVITY, IF TIME ALLOWS (5 MINUTES)

#### **Esther Learns Of The Plot**

📖 **Read:** Esther 4:5-8

It doesn’t seem possible that Esther would not know what has transpired, but, apparently, she doesn’t because she sends her servant to Mordecai to find out. Mordecai tells the servant everything—including the fact that Haman is paying money for the destruction of the Jews. He even gives the servant a copy of the edict to take to Esther to explain the situation. The servant is to tell Esther to go to the king and plead the plight of the Jews.

#### **For sharing aloud or reflection:**

3. The curious question here is why didn’t Esther know about the edict? We have to speculate again because the text doesn’t tell us why she has been kept in the dark. Perhaps the king is protecting her? Maybe we can understand this better as the story continues.

### DELIVERANCE FOR THE JEWS

(10 minutes)

📖 **Read:** Esther 4:9-17

Esther’s servant, Hathach, is the go-between for Esther and Mordecai. It’s interesting to pull out the dialogue of this section. Some scholars read the words, “relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter” to mean that God will find another way to save the Jews.

*Esther: All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all*

*alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.*

*Mordecai: Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.*

*Esther: Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.*

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

4. We read of the ritual of fasting and praying as preparation for what is to come. Fasting is a very old Jewish and Christian practice. What experiences of fasting have you had that you might share?
5. We have heard several times that anyone who approaches the king's court without being summoned will be killed. What does this say about how the king rules or about his authority?
6. What do you think Esther means when she says that she hasn't been summoned by the king for 30 days? What significance might the number 30 have?
7. Verse 14, "For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will

rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this," is the text that most readers remember from the book of Esther. What might this text be saying to you in your life of faith?

**THE TABLES TURN**

**(18 minutes)**

■ **Read:** Esther 5:1-8

Esther puts on her royal attire, perhaps to remind herself that she is, indeed, the queen. As she is standing in the court, the king notices her and holds out the royal scepter, the signal that she may approach the throne. The text says, "she won his favor." Perhaps the king has a warm spot in his heart for Esther. Even before she asks the king for anything, the king says: "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom"

Esther asks the king to come to a banquet—a banquet for the king, Haman and Esther. It is a modest request in light of the impending disaster. Later (verse 7), the king's offer is repeated again, with the same wording. Esther again invites the king and Haman, this time for a second banquet to be held the following day.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

8. Go back and read Esther 2:15-17 to be reminded of the beginning of the relationship between Esther and the king. How might that relationship have made it possible for Esther to approach the king without being summoned?
9. Why do you think Esther repeats her request and invitation?

10. These few verses contain two important words in this story and in the biblical text—fasting and feasting. How does your own congregation use these two practices in doctrine and worship?

📖 **Read:** Esther 5:9-14

Haman is very pleased with himself after the first banquet. We can just see him strutting out of the palace courtyard after the first banquet. He can't wait to get home to tell his family and friends about the day. But his whole mood changes when he sees Mordecai, seemingly unimpressed by Haman, in the courtyard. Back home, Haman recounts his accomplishments, gloating about the feast that he and the king ate together and the feast that will follow the next day. But he laments that all the feasts in the world can't make up for the fact that Mordecai is still alive. His very presence taunts Haman. His family and friends are sympathetic to Haman and agree that something should be done. Their solution is to build a gallows 50 cubits high and ask the king to hang Mordecai on it. No more would Mordecai make his life miserable!

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

11. Fifty cubits is about 75 feet or the height of a 7-story building. Is this a reasonable suggestion? What else might be going on here?
12. When Haman sees Mordecai, it makes him so undone that he no longer can think about the rest of the day and all his good fortune. Sometimes one small event can make us unable to appreciate any of our many blessings. We lose our perspective. Share or reflect about a time when this loss of perspective happened to you.

📖 **Read:** Esther 6:1-3

When insomnia strikes the king, he gives orders for his servants to read to him. Oh, to be a king! Although I would have preferred a novel, the king asks for the annual report of the kingdom to be read to him. Since he has good secretaries, the story of Mordecai—and how he overheard the planning of an assassination attempt on the king—was accurately reported. (Re-read Esther 2:19-23 if you need to refresh your memory of this story.)

The king asks his servants what honor has been bestowed on such a hero, and the servants reply that nothing has been done to honor Mordecai. The king looks for anyone who is hanging around the court, and just then, Haman enters. He has come to ask the king to hang Mordecai. The king summons Haman and inquires of him what should be done to honor a hero. Haman, of course, assumes that he is the one that the king wishes to honor and eloquently describes how he would like to be honored. Instead, the king instructs him to take all the robes and the horse and give them to Mordecai so that he may be honored. Haman is disgraced, and his advisers and his wife warn him that he will not win against Mordecai and the Jews. As they are speaking, he is summoned to return to the second banquet. Esther and the king are waiting for him.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

13. What are the things that Haman suggested would be appropriate for a hero's welcome? Compare that welcome with the Palm Sunday welcome as Jesus enters Jerusalem (John 12:12-19 and Luke 19:28-40).
14. What was the mark of disgrace that Haman put on? What other marks of disgrace can you think of from past or present history?

15. The reversal that Haman experiences is a technique employed by storytellers. Jesus uses this technique often (i.e., “the first shall be last.”) What are some other examples of times that Jesus uses the reversal technique to speak of his new covenant and his new kingdom?

### ESTHER USES HER VOICE

(15 minutes)

📖 **Read:** Esther 7:1-10

Meanwhile, back at the second feast, the king asks a third time about what Esther wants. She can have anything, even half his kingdom. She asks him to save her people—the people Haman has planned to have annihilated. She appeals to the king’s sense of authority by suggesting that no enemy is worth the damage that this destruction would be to the king’s reputation. The king stomps out of the room in anger, leaving Haman and Esther alone in the banquet room. Haman, realizing that he is in grave danger, throws himself on the queen and begs for mercy. The gallows that had been prepared for Mordecai are now readied for Haman.

#### For sharing aloud or reflection:

16. The end of the chapter tells of another gross misunderstanding on the part of the king, who assumes that Haman is trying to seduce his wife. And there is another reversal. The gallows that was prepared for Mordecai is now going to be the death of Haman. How do these reversals and misunderstandings contribute to the story?

📖 **Read:** Esther 8:1-17

The reversals continue as Esther is given the house of Haman, and Mordecai is given the king’s ring. Esther pleads with the king to spare the lives of her people, and he agrees, giving Esther and Mordecai permission to write a new edict that will revoke the pogrom (or violent persecution of a people) Haman had sought for the Jews. The kingdom depends on the law to govern, even though the king has absolute power over the people. (We saw that process described in chapter 3.) The edict is written, but it might not be what we would expect. It does not allow the Jewish people to live happily ever after.

#### For sharing aloud or reflection:

17. This new edict also is to be written to every people in their own language. What does this tell us about the world as it was known at this time?
18. What are the three things guaranteed by this new edict?
19. Back in chapter 3, the lot (or *pur* in Hebrew) was thrown by Haman to determine when the Jews were to be destroyed. The second edict issued by Mordecai uses this same date to start the war. Can you think of another way this situation might have been resolved?
20. How do you reconcile the coming violence with the joy that was expressed by the Jews throughout the kingdom?

### WHEN TO KEEP SILENT

#### Optional activity (2 minutes)

The story of Esther shows us that patience and wisdom are required to know when it is time to keep silent and when it is time to speak and act. During



the Bible studies I've led over the years, folks have always been curious about Jesus' reactions to the crowds after his many miracles. Sometimes he tells them to keep silent, and other times, he charges them to run home and tell everyone. Consider the story in which Jesus cures a deaf man. In this story, even when he tells them to not tell anyone, the crowds cannot contain themselves.

*Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.' And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak' (Mark 7:31-37).*

The more Jesus ordered them to be silent, the more zealously they proclaimed the good news. In chapter 6 of Esther, we read about a way the king chose to honor a hero. It sounds very much like the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem which is recorded in John 12:12-19 and Luke 19:28-40. Christians celebrate that event on Palm Sunday. The disciples were praising God, with loud voices, and the church rulers ask Jesus to tell his disciples to stop their cheering.

*He answered "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (Luke 19:40).*

## CLOSING

(10 minutes)

Knowing when to speak and when to be silent is a challenge. Having the patience of Esther, with all her banquets, is a good reminder that sometimes being silent is the best way we can be faithful.

Knowing when to speak and how to speak enabled Esther to save the Jews. When I pray at a wedding, I ask God to help those of us who love the couple that is about to be married. I pray that we may have the wisdom and courage to know when to step in with advice and support and when to step back and let them grow as a couple. Parents know the challenge of loving their adult children and praying for strength to hold their tongues. Siblings, best friends, even work colleagues depend on our knowing when to be silent and when to speak.

21. Share some times when you have chosen to hold your tongue. What resources do you use to help you choose the right time to speak?
22. The phrase "Esther saves the Jews" is often used to describe the events of the book of Esther. What "saving" stories come to mind as you read those words?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Holy God, we trust you to be the saving grace for our lives. Open our hearts to your voice, and give us wisdom to know when to be silent and when to speak. Bless our good intentions to serve you and others. Amen.

## CLOSING HYMN

Amazing Grace (ELW 779) 

# *For just such a time as this*

## Session two

Helping our voices bloom

BY KAY WARD

### PLANNING YOUR TIME TOGETHER

As you plan to lead session two of “For just such a time as this,” first read over the suggested time limits included in each section. Just as we provided these with the first session of this study, we are continuing to experiment in session two with notes as to how long each section’s readings and discussion questions should take. Depending on how much time you have allowed for your study, you may choose to include some of the activities marked as “optional.” If you only have 60 minutes to meet, skip these optional sections.

### CONSIDERING SILENCE

The title of this session is “Finding our voices,” so it may seem ironic that there is quite a bit of discussion about silence. As we learn from Esther, a large part of finding our voice is understanding when and how to use it.

The session opens with a passage from 1 Kings about Elijah. These verses discuss a discouraging time for Elijah. He is on the run. He asks the Lord to take his life and sits down under a broom tree to die. An angel of the Lord comes with food and water and tells Elijah to eat and get up and move. Elijah comes to Mount Horeb, where he spends the night in a cave. When the Lord asks Elijah what he is doing, he confesses that he has been a complete failure. The Lord sends several signs to Elijah, but God does not speak. Instead, it is in God’s powerful actions that Elijah “hears” the Lord.

Perhaps you or others in your group have had similar

experiences. I have attempted to describe such moments in the poem below. If time allows, you might discuss your experiences—or the poem-- before you begin this session.

Make no mistake, however, about God’s intentions for the use of our voices. In Esther’s story we see her patiently waiting for exactly the right moment to use her voice to save her people. She may be silent at times, but she is not silent forever. God called Esther “for just such a time as this.” Similarly, God calls us to speak out when we encounter justice in the world. Silence can be a powerful place to listen, to ponder and to pray—but ultimately we must speak out for those who cannot speak out themselves.

### A POEM ABOUT SILENCE

*There is Silence*

*There is silence that heals and restores.*

*There is the silence -  
when the baby has finally fallen asleep -  
of a few stolen minutes with a cup of tea -  
of snow falling at midnight -  
in the house before anyone else is up.*

*There is the silence of crisis and loss.*

*When -  
harsh, hurting words have been spoken -  
the phone doesn’t ring -  
you don’t know what to say -  
there are no footsteps on the stairs -*

*fear makes you unable to speak -  
the dust settles after an accident and  
you look at each other and ask,  
“are you OK?”*

*There is the silence that transforms and  
gives us hope.  
When -*

*we see the light of Christ in another -  
the phone doesn't ring -  
our hearts are filled with a peace that the  
world cannot give -  
we know with certainty that Spirit is alive  
and well in us -  
we can hear the voice of God in the  
sheer silence. 🌸*

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## UPCOMING BIBLE STUDIES

This month we are finishing up our three-session study on the book of Esther.

Interested in what's next? Here's what we have in store:

### Fall 2019

*Poetry of the Old Testament*

BY ANNA MADSEN

In this three-session study we will explore selections of Old Testament poetry from Job, Psalms and Lamentations. Drawing from the experiences of these ancient writers, we will learn to look for God in times of deep emotions, such as joy, anger, celebration, depression, misunderstanding and contentment, finding hope and grace along the way.

### December 2019

*Walking through the wilderness of Advent:*

*A creative retreat with Isaiah*

BY VONDA DREES

In this unique take on *Gather's* annual Advent/Christmas devotional, we will walk through the seasons with a visual artist, Vonda Drees. Using the words of the prophet Isaiah, she will help us to contemplate the true meaning of this season using creative, artistic exercises.

Note: No artistic ability is needed to participate!

### January-April 2020

*Four-session study on vocation/calling*

BY KATHRYN A. KLEINHANS

A four-session study on vocation and calling will kick off the new year—and the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the ELCA—with a look at how God calls us to faithful, fruitful work.

Visit [gathermagazine.org](http://gathermagazine.org) for more exciting updates in the coming months!

## TEXT FOR SESSION TWO

Esther 10:3

## SUGGESTED HYMN

O God our Help in Ages Past  
(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 632)

## OPENING PRAYER

Holy God, when we read the story of Esther, we remember that we also live in a multicultural world that brings opportunities and challenges. Help us to read these texts and hear each other's stories with patience and understanding. Amen.

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- Hymnals (*ELW*)
- Blank paper and pens or markers

# *For just such a time as this*

## Session three

Using our voices

BY KAY WARD

## NOTE TO READERS

(7 minutes)

In sessions one and two, we focused on the ways we use our voices and how to discern when to speak up and when to be silent. “For just such a time as this” is the phrase Mordecai employs when he urges Esther to use the power of her voice to save the Jews. “For just such a time as this” is also scriptural encouragement for Christians as we answer the call to boldly use the power of our voices every time we are confronted with evils and hopelessness—forces that might feel overwhelming if we did not speak up and stand together.

Biblical scholars believe the book of Esther was remembered and included in our Scriptures because it tells of a time when two people of faith used their power to save the Jewish people. As we will see in session three, saving the Jews is not without bloodshed and violence, but it offers hope to the generations that follow, just as today it inspires us as Christians to find and use our own voices as we serve our neighbors.

 **Read:** Esther 9:1-10

You may remember that the second session ended with the king ordering that Haman be put in the gallows and that the Jews be free to capture and annihilate anyone who might attack them. Now, as chapter nine begins, the Jews are preparing

for war with their enemies. One wonders why Esther and Mordecai couldn't have used their power to call the whole thing off, but when the day the Jews were to have been annihilated arrives, the Jews now are able to begin to destroy their enemies.

*Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day, when the king's command and edict were about to be executed, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain power over them, but which had been changed to a day when the Jews would gain power over their foes (Esther 9:1).*

Remember that Mordecai has become very powerful in the king's palace. He is given what amounts to a blank check to act in the name of the king. And in the name of the king, he has written letters (Esther 8:10) that give the Jews the king's permission to do "as they pleased to those who hated them." They kill 500 people in Susa alone. They also kill the sons of Haman, who is always identified as the enemy of the Jews. The text does not present a very humane approach to dealing with one's enemy, but states at several points in the passage that they do not plunder, underscoring a motivation other than material gain.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

1. The king seems to allow Mordecai to take over running the kingdom as the war begins, giving him his signet ring and the power to make edicts in the king's name. Why do you think the king allows this to happen? Is this the first time the king has given his power to someone else? How has the king been making his decisions in ruling the kingdom in previous chapters?

**THE WAR CONTINUES**

(20 minutes)

📖 **Read:** Esther 9:11-15

After the first day of battle, the king again asks Esther to name anything that she wants and he will grant it. She asks for two things: that the war be extended one more day and that the sons of Haman be hanged. This is a bit confusing because the death of Haman's sons was reported earlier in Esther 9:7-8. It may have been added if several versions of the story existed and were combined to tell the story. (This is only speculation on my part, but it further explains how the sons were killed.)

Dates are very important in this story. In chapter 9, readers are given an explanation of why the war carried over into another day when the edict was clear that this was to be a one-day war. The number of people killed in Susa in these two days doesn't seem to be as important to the author as clarifying that by not plundering their enemies, the Jews did not exact the full retaliation to which they were entitled.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

2. It feels uneven to equate the loss of life with the loss of possessions. Why do you think there is such emphasis on the fact that the Jews did not plunder?

📖 **Read:** Esther 9:16-19

These verses report on the actions of Jews around the provinces. On the third day, the Jews rested and feasted. The attention to the dates probably is meant to explain why folks celebrated Purim on different days. Chapter 9 contains many descriptions of what happened in this two-day war, but the NRSV never uses the word "war." Here are some of the phrases used to describe the action of the Jews:



- Gain power over their foes (verse 1)
- Laid hands on those who had sought their ruin (verse 2)
- Defended their lives (verse 16)
- Gained relief from their enemies (verse 16)
- Did as they pleased to those who hated them (verse 5)

It is important to remember that in this story, the violence only begins because the Jews are going to be destroyed by their enemies after the king's first edict (3:7-15). Despite Esther's plea (8:3), the first edict was not revoked because, as the king says, "an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked" (8:8). So the king gave Mordecai power to enact a second edict (8:8-14), allowing the Jews to defend themselves. The edict calls for the Jewish people to assemble, gather their forces and prepare for a battle of one day. The Jews are never described as taking the initiative or being culpable for the violence.

In our world, many words are used to describe the violence that is carried out between people and nations. We use words such as defense, retribution, revenge, justification and national security. Wars have even been identified as "holy wars." Just as some people of faith ponder such descriptions and wonder how they resonate with the 10 Commandments and the words of Jesus, some people of faith see war as a necessary part of living in a complicated world, necessary for the protection of all people.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

3. Does it seem fair that the king's two edicts create a situation causing great loss of life? How might leadership lessons be seen in the actions of various characters from the book of Esther?

3. Allow time for group members to share thoughts about our capacity as human beings to engage in violence and war. How does your understanding of God affect your opinions?
4. The city of Susa was the seat of the Persian empire. How might the experience of the people of Susa be different from the people in the provinces?

■ **Read:** Esther 9:20-32

Mordecai sends out a letter to all the Jews to remember and observe these two days as festival days—days when sorrow was turned into gladness and mourning into a holiday. The text says that the Jews adopted this festival as a custom. The text then does a recap of the history of the festival, perhaps in case some recipients of Mordecai's letter did not know the whole story.

Esther's letters differ from those sent by Mordecai, seeming more like our contemporary custom of sending greeting cards to offer hopes and good wishes. Esther sends out letters wishing peace and security to all Jews in the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire. She also establishes directions for the observance of Purim. Certainly, not all people in the empire could read and write, but enough would have been literate for these letters to be effective.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

5. How were the Jews to celebrate these days of the festival?
6. What two other observances are used as examples of how to celebrate Purim?

### OPTIONAL ACTIVITY AS TIME ALLOWS

(7 minutes)

📖 **Read:** Esther 10:1-3

Mordecai, an influential leader in the kingdom, now leads the Jews. At the same time, the king remains the ruler of the entire Persian Empire. The book of Esther shows a kind of governance that still existed in the time of Jesus: There is a ruler of the empire, and a leader of the Jews.

The book of Esther has a fairy tale ending (10:3), similar to “and they all lived happily ever after.” Yet we know from history that the Jews continued to live under the rule of foreign empires for hundreds of years, and that the Middle East is still a place of conflict.

#### **For sharing aloud or reflection:**

7. This two-tiered governance is evident at the time of the nativity and the crucifixion of Christ. How is the leadership of Herod the Great (Matthew 2) different from Mordecai’s in the story of Esther? How does the leadership of his son, Herod Antipas, also called the Tetrarch (Luke 3:1, 23; Matthew 14), compare?

### LIVING FAITHFULLY

(13 minutes)

Living under foreign rule is debilitating and harmful to the spirit of the people. The festival of Purim comes out of that experience, but it is a boisterous, joyful celebration. Some special parts of the celebration are still practiced today, including:

- Giving money gifts to at least two poor people.
- Sending gifts of two kinds of food to at least one person.
- A festive Purim feast, which often includes wine.

Some groups retell the story of Esther in a farcical way with actors playing the main characters. It becomes a melodrama as the audience cheers loudly for Mordecai and Esther and boos when Haman appears on stage. The king is often portrayed as a fool or a clown. This “making fun of the king” can be a way for those who live under foreign rule to find relief from their oppression.

In many situations, this wouldn’t be a safe thing to do, but where possible, such activities can be a helpful coping mechanism. Consider the early American colonists and their portrayals of King George III, or enslaved people in the American South who poked fun at the oppressive slave-owning class with Brer Rabbit. Political cartoons also use this method, often exaggerating character traits.

There is much talk about enemies in the book of Esther. As previously discussed, Esther lived in a multicultural world. Much of the story’s drama revolves around the fact that Esther and Mordecai were part of a small Jewish minority in a large Persian empire. Trying to maintain Jewish culture and religious practice was difficult at best—often forcing Esther and Mordecai to choose the practices and rituals of their faith in which they could safely participate. Bowing to Haman was a deal breaker for Mordecai, forcing the latter to reveal his faith.

We also live in a multicultural world; sometimes we, too, must make choices. We are called to live out our faith without being disrespectful of another’s. We need to be able to name what we must hold tightly and where we are able to compromise. I think of living in communities that hold sport games on Sunday mornings, jeopardizing children’s

involvement in church activities. We find ways to live with these challenges. We accommodate, capitulate, assimilate, concede, abdicate, acquiesce and make concessions. Some of those words carry negative feelings and make us feel uncomfortable. We struggle with being faithful.

Many religious communities try to lay down boundaries for believers. Some are very rigid, with strict rules. Some are very open, with few rules. Each community tries to help guide their members to live faithfully. Moravians (and other groups) use the following motto to express how to make these tough decisions: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things love.”

For Moravians the essentials come from a time of persecution. The essentials speak of the God whom we worship and our human response to God. The non-essentials are the practices of faith we enjoy, which vary according to custom and culture. Both the essentials and non-essentials must be done in love.

It is the essentials—the faith of Esther and Mordecai—that brings them into conflict with the ruler of Persia. It is their faith and their love for their people and God that gives them courage to speak and act. Establishing the festival of Purim reveals their hope for the future. Faith, love and hope—all are responses that relate to God’s gifts of creation, salvation and blessing.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

8. What are some things you hold tightly in your devotional life? In the life of your congregation?
9. How has your faith in God moved you to speak and act in your small corner of the world? Are there ways you’ve been able to move from your private world to a more public place to make a difference?

**CONCLUSION**

**(15 minutes)**

We began our study in session one with a look at Psalm 137. It so perfectly captures the despair of being a people kept captive in a foreign land.

*By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’*

*How could we sing the Lord’s song  
in a foreign land?  
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!  
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy (Psalm 137:1-6).*

In session one, I purposefully didn’t include the last few verses of the psalm. Those verses call on God to destroy the enemies of the Jews—the Edomites and Babylon, empires that had ruled over the Jewish people in the past. This is a call for revenge on all who would enslave the people of God. Verses 7-9 of the psalm continue:

*Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites  
the day of Jerusalem’s fall,  
how they said, ‘Tear it down! Tear it down!  
Down to its foundations!’  
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!*

*Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!*

These verses—calling for destruction and vengeance—are difficult to read, but when we read them through the lens of the story of Esther, we can at least understand a bit better the place of fear that the author might have been coming from.

The Jews were (and in some places still are) a people under threat from their enemies. The story of Esther is not just the story of a woman who used her power and position to speak up for her people. It's the story of a woman who did just the right thing, at just the right time, to lead her people to rise against that which threatened them.

It would take approximately four more centuries for a human (named Jesus) to enter the world telling another kind of story about how we defeat enemies.

**For sharing aloud or reflection:**

10. What can we learn from the book of Esther about how we're called to face "enemies"?
11. Think about Esther's story—her rise to power, her response to Mordecai's plea for help for the Jews and the war that followed. Can you see yourself or the world around you in this story?
12. Where you might be called to use your voice "for such a time as this"?

**CLOSING PRAYER**

Holy God, we thank you for creating us to praise you, for sending your son to save us and for giving us your spirit to work in our lives. Open our minds so that when we read the stories of all God's people, they inspire us to speak and act. Amen.

**HYMN**

Rise Up, O Saints of God! (ELW 669) 🌿

*Is she walking the aisle?*



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# *For just such a time as this*

## Session three

Using our voices

BY KAY WARD

### SOME NOTES OF INTEREST FOR LEADERS

- Make sure that folks understand the word “plunder.” This word, defined by Merriam Webster as “to take the goods of by force (as in war),” comes up several times in this session.
- Use your computer or smartphone to look up “short wars,” a term for some wars that have lasted for only a few days. While most wars are long events that go on for years and years, some have been short for a variety of reasons. Interestingly, one of the shortest was the six-day war also called the Arab-Israeli war.
- If you haven’t already done so, look up the Jewish calendar for the name of the months. These battles took place on the 13th and 14th day of Adar.
- There is biblical evidence in the story of Christ’s crucifixion that the world at the time of Jesus was a multi-cultural, multi-linguistic world (see John 19:18-20).
- Looking up “observance for Purim” will be fun!
- Two-tiered governance is evident in the nativity—King Herod (Luke 1:5) and Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1). The Jewish kings often colluded with the Roman rulers (Matthew 2:16).
- Two-tiered governance is evident in the account of the crucifixion—John 18 and 19—the high priest and Pilate. In the crucifixion account, notice the use of the term “King of the Jews.”

- Look for articles about the synagogue murders in October 2018 in Pittsburgh, and April 2019 in Poway, California—anti-Semitism is still very much with us.
- When discussing the use of humor as a coping mechanism, you might ask if anyone has seen the show “Hamilton,” which contains a wonderful caricature of King George III.

### THE FESTIVAL OF PURIM

The book of Esther is the basis of the Jewish festival of Purim. Celebrated every year on the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Adar (in late winter/early spring), the festival commemorates the salvation of the Jewish people from Haman’s plot to annihilate all the Jews in a single day. Purim is a boisterous festival that features carnivals, costumes and feasting.

In the Bible study, we’ll learn a bit about some of the traditions that make up this festival, but your group may want to learn more about modern day celebrations of this festivals. As the group leader, perhaps you can do a little research into the traditions used to celebrate this festival. Your group might consider sharing a gift of food with someone in need—a festival tradition. If your congregation already has a relationship with a Jewish worshiping community, perhaps you might share that you are studying the book of Esther and ask how they celebrate Purim.

### AVOIDING THE TRAP OF SEEING “ENEMIES”

The final two chapters of Esther detail the war that takes place once the king grants permission to the



Jews to “destroy their enemies,” which of course, is after the king has already ordered the non-Jewish population to destroy the Jews. Because the king’s decrees, once made, cannot be revoked, many lives are lost.

For many it may be difficult to read such a horrifying end to this empowering story of a woman who stood up proudly to save her people. As Christians, we know we are called to love our neighbors, to turn the other cheek toward our enemies, and as Lutherans we understand that it is by God’s grace that we are free to forgive and to live in accordance with the love shown us in Christ.

You can encourage group members to consider deeper questions such as: How do we draw the line between revenge and justice? Could there have been a more peaceful way to resolve this situation and the threat of war? How is war presented as a failure of leadership on the part of the king or a triumph of leadership on the part of Esther and Mordecai? What leadership lessons can be learned from the successes and failures of the characters? Share your own ideas and reflections.

Tell your group that it can be easy to see anyone who is not like us as the “other,” a practice based on our own biases that can slip into mistakenly mis-identifying other people as “enemies” instead of the neighbors God would have us serve. Even those of us who have experienced being mis-labeled as “enemies” by others can fall into this trap when we are the ones with privilege in a given situation. In other words, it’s not as easy to avoid this as one might think, as this story reveals:

*I was getting settled into my seat on an airplane when I first heard the conversation. The voices came from several rows behind me but I couldn’t see the two people. I could sure hear them. It wasn’t a noisy plane. Not many folks were speaking at all. Most sat by themselves, traveling alone like I was but the voices continued,*

*loud and strong. Were these people arguing? Were those words being thrown back and forth words of anger, words of frustration? I had no idea what was being said. The language being spoken sounded foreign and edgy. After 9/11, we questioned everything. Should I be concerned? Should someone be alerted? The voices rose and fell, emphatic and explosive. Were these two plotting something sinister? I could imagine the two of them now, faces red with the force of their words.*

*When we reached cruising altitude, I was “free to move about the cabin.” The couple was seated about five rows behind me on the left side. They were still speaking very loudly. I was surprised when I saw them. They were not what I had expected.*

*In the seat were two elderly souls, speaking some Slavic language, clearly both in need of hearing aids. The woman wore a print dress, buttoned down the front with a warm wool cardigan over her shoulders and a scarf covering her gray hair. The old gentleman wore a black suit with a collarless white shirt that had seen more than its share of washings. He wore an old gray felt hat. They were holding hands and they were smiling! In a world that is becoming more and more multi-cultural, it is so easy to misunderstand each other. I had prematurely decided that someone who was a stranger to me was my enemy.*

Encourage your group to discuss the topics raised in the Bible study with respect for the many backgrounds and perspectives of all study participants. After all, it is only through thoughtful, prayerful conversation that we can come to understand one another and find new ways to move forward as the body of Christ at work in the world. 🌿