

Aliza Abolafia:

Good morning.

Congregation:

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Aliza Abolafia:

(singing) Esther did not tell who were her people and her kin, the Book of Esther 2.

Today, the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Adar and in this season of Lent is the Jewish holiday of Purim, which remembers the story of the biblical Queen Esther's bravery and celebrates Mordecai's victory, it is a story of queens and kings, of true villains and palace intrigue, but it is also a story of horrific violence, of painful absence, of uncertainty until the very last moment.

In Jewish tradition, the megillah scroll is read communally as a contemplative reading practice each year on Purim. Congregants are commanded to hear every word. It is the act of hearing that is center, yet there is also a practice of trying to block out the name of the evildoer, Haman, whenever it is uttered. This paradox leads to Haman's name being uttered over and over in the story, only to be drowned out, but first heard, erased and yet never, never forgotten.

Like all of the stories we tell and the stories which are sacred to us, the story of Queen Esther can be read and reread through many lenses. Esther is a hebraization of the name of the Near Eastern goddess Ishtar. In Hebrew, Esther means hidden, a nod perhaps to the nature of Esther hiding her religion for most of the book.

Esther is not the only hidden one though. God is also hidden. God's name is nowhere to be found in the Book of Esther. The only other book in the Torah which does not include God's name is Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs, which is a foundational text in both the Jewish and Christian mystical traditions.

"My dove, in the rocks' crevices, in the hollow of the cliff, show me how you look. Let me hear your voice. Your voice is sweet and your look desirable," chapter two, verse 14. Esther is a complicated figure in this text. Is she a feminist hero, a victim of sexual violence upon used by powerful men? Yes, she is all of these things. What strikes me is her bravery and her vulnerability amidst the unknown and the hidden.

What does it mean for God to conceal God's self from us? The anonymous medieval Christian mystic who wrote The Cloud of Unknowing helps us grapple with this question. "For when I say darkness, I mean in absence of knowing, in the sense that everything you do not know or have forgotten is dark to you because you cannot see it with your mind's eye. For this reason, it is not called a cloud in the air, but a cloud of unknowing that is between you and your God."

We read our sacred texts over and over, each time revealing more of their hidden meanings, more of their godliness, each time hoping to reveal more of God's presence for us to cleave to. If the meaning of the text of God's will of our very lives is hidden, hidden, but still present, then let us contemplate these moments and become co-creators in revealing the divine in ourselves and in the world. As Jesus tells Martha in Luke 10, "Mary has chosen the better part," let us choose the contemplative life as well.

This year, wonderfully, the month of Adar, this month, and the season of Lent began on the same day. During Adar, we are committed to grow in happiness and joy and delight. It seemed to me at first that we were traveling through this season together, but with what seemed like opposite spiritual guidelines, and yet that is the power of Purim. What appears to be is not quite as it is, and the unseen and the unknown are powerful forces in our lives. We are reminded that our own vulnerability in the face of the

unknown is resilience, which is our power. It leads to acts of creation, transformation, revolution, as The Cloud author teaches us, for love may reach God in life, but knowledge may not. Through our reading and rereading of the Book of Esther and through all of our sacred texts, the hidden becomes revealed to us.

My blessing to our congregation today is that we take strength and comfort in the hiddenness of God that exists in The Cloud and in our community this morning, later this afternoon, in the synagogue, in the church, in the classroom, in our world. May we choose the better part, and keep choosing the better part day after day reading, after reading, contemplate the mysteries that lead us to God and, in the process, lean into the boundless spiritual expanse of our own hearts and souls.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please rise in body or spirit for the Lord's Prayer.

Congregation:

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please join in our closing hymn, God is Our Refuge and Strength, number 192.

Congregation/Choir
(singing).

Elizabeth Propst:

God has no hands in this world but your hands, and no voice in this world but your voice, so may our hands and our voices do the work of justice and of love today and all days. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.