

This past week I went on a solo trip to New York City. I stayed in an Airbnb in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn. Based on a suggestion on the Airbnb app, I booked a walking tour with a rabbi through the Crown Heights neighborhood, about a mile south of where I was staying.

The Crown Heights neighborhood is the home of the Hasidic Jewish community. The Hasidic Jews are a tight knit community of conservative, orthodox Jews.

It was a fascinating tour and honestly brought Judaism to life for us. It's probably the closest I've come to understanding the Judaism of the Old Testament and Jesus' day.

The Hasidim believe that God is present in every aspect of every day life. The 613 laws in Torah, or the first five books of the Old Testament, cover all those aspects of life. For the Hasidim, following those laws is to honor God.

The rabbi contrasted their belief with that which some Christians have that our behavior gets us either to heaven or hell...it's a reward system. In contrast, the Hasidim believe that following God's law brings heaven to earth. Honestly, that's really what the teachings of Jesus were about too. Christians have turned it in to something that Jesus never intended.

Anyway, there was a word the rabbi used that he said was at the heart of it all. Anyone want to take a guess at the word? I'll give you a hint – we talked about it repeatedly as we went through Ruth's story.

It's Chesed. Lovingkindness, faithfulness, steadfast love and kindness.

The Hasidic community emphasizes chesed – kindness. Following the 613 laws isn't for purely legalistic reasons – it's a way to honor God and practice love and kindness to others – to keep chesed at the heart of their everyday lives.

I feel like what he talked about came pretty close to what I've been preaching about the teachings of Jesus my whole career. Not the 613 laws necessarily – honestly some of those were clearly ended for Christians by the work of Jesus.

But teaching the practice of chesed never went away.

As we went about this tour, I kept hearing echoes of what we talked about during our exploration of the book of Ruth.

But now we are done with Ruth and the next two Sundays we'll spend with Esther.

If Ruth was all about chesed in every day life, we might frame Esther with this question – how far are we willing to go to show chesed?

The book of Esther has arguably one of the most famous lines in the Bible – Who knows? Esther’s cousin Mordecai asks. Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.

Countless Bible studies and retreats have focused on “just such a time as this.”

OK – so who are these people in the story and what’s going on?

This is set after the exile. King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and let the Jews return to Judah and Jerusalem. But they didn’t all go. Mordecai and Esther were among the many Jews who stayed in Babylon.

Life under Cyrus and the Persians was pretty good. Their lives were established there and they became a part of a Jewish diaspora. There are still descendants from those Jews who live in modern day Iran, what was once Persia.

In this story we’re about 75 years into the Persian empire and on the 5th king. The king is named Ahasuerus in the story, but he is widely believed by historians to be Xerxes.

Xerxes is no Cyrus. The story describes him as a buffoonish character who is easily manipulated by his aides. He is prone to over-the-top excess in lavish parties and was mostly concerned with himself.

The Jewish festival of Purim celebrates the story of Esther. Jewish synagogues will often put on Purim plays. They are often performed as a melodrama, complete with boos and noisemakers whenever the bad guy, Haman, appears. If you want a fun way to waste time, see if you can find a good Purim play on YouTube.

I highly recommend reading the story in its entirety, but here in a nutshell is what happens. The king’s favorite wife, Queen Vashti, disrespected him at a lavish party by refusing to parade herself in front of the men he was trying to impress.

The men in the king’s court are alarmed – they’re worried that if Vashti gets away with standing up to the king, all the women will start standing up to men. They convinced the king to throw her out. Then a parade of young virgins was brought in so he could choose a new queen.

Esther was chosen. Esther will end up being the hero of the story. But Vashti gets credit too. She rose up against her powerful king. Her refusal to be made into an object by the king set this whole thing in motion.

Now Esther is queen, but she didn’t tell the king or anyone else she was Jewish.

Haman is the bad guy. Here's where you would boo if this were a Purim play. Let's practice.

BOO! Now when I say his name you know what to do.

Haman (boo) got promoted to the king's second in command. At his promotion, everyone was required to bow down to Haman. (boo)

But Mordecai refused. It was essentially idolatry as far as he was concerned.

Haman (boo) confronted Mordecai and learned that Mordecai was among the Jews who lived there.

Haman (boo) got the king to turn against the Jewish people and convinced him they should be destroyed. An order was sent out by couriers to all the king's provinces with instructions to annihilate the Jews and plunder their goods on a particular day – the 13th day of the 12th month. Of course Mordecai and all the other Jews are horrified and grieving and didn't know what to do.

Now, remember the king's new wife, Esther is Jewish, but he doesn't know that. And Esther didn't yet know about this order.

That brings us to today's reading. Mordecai figures his cousin, the Queen, is in just the right place at the right time to intervene and save the Jews.

Esther however is not so sure. She doesn't really believe she can change anything. And anyway, going in to the king without an invitation could be punished by death. She'd be risking her life.

And that's where Mordecai gives his famous statement.

Esther is the one book in the Bible in which God is never even mentioned. But behind Mordecai's statement, readers are to hear God's work through Esther in just that position and just that point in time.

But for Ester to do so was an enormous risk. The cross was still centuries away, but what Esther essentially was asked was to take up her cross for the sake of an entire people.

Esther ultimately practices chesed for her people at great risk to herself. This story tells us that sometimes chesed means standing up to powerful people. It tells us that chesed can come with great risk – and it can take great courage to show loving kindness to people who those in power would rather see gone.

So here we are, followers of Jesus who, through no real effort of our own have wound up in this time and place.

For what purpose might we be here in this time and place? What risks might we be asked to take to show chesed to a hurting world?

Who are the vulnerable and threatened people of our time? And what are we willing to risk for their sake? I know that for me, what's happening to immigrants right now leads the list. But knowing what to do that might actually make a difference is so far eluding me.

None of us may feel like we have the power to change things, but what small things might we be asked to do?

What truth do we need to speak in a world that can seem pretty hateful?

And who are the seemingly powerless people we should be listening to?

Next week we'll have finished our journey through Ruth and Esther's stories. Ruth reminded us that we can show chesed in our everyday dealings with family, friends, and neighbors. Esther tells us that our voice matters...and that showing steadfast love and faithfulness to the vulnerable can be risky.

In troubled times, maybe we too can say perhaps we are here for just such a time as this...to let God work through us.