The Rev. John Sampson, Pastor
Glen Ridge Congregational Church

To Tell the Truth



"The Descent of Holy Spirit" by Khrystyna Kvyk

Sunday, October 11, 2026
Esther 9:24 - 28

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

So, I've said it about three times already this morning, and I will say it again. Today, we celebrate National Coming Out Day, which is a day in which our LGBTQI selves, neighbors, friends, family, and co-workers celebrate their sharing with us, or perhaps our sharing with them, of the truths of who we are, of who God made us to be. And we might ask, what does National Coming Out Day have to do with us as people of faith? Is it just another woke plot to take over everything in our world?

I say no.

And I say no because I think the dynamics and the story and the concerns and the joys of what it means to come out are embedded within our sacred stories. And the story of Esther is one of those stories. I have - in the eNews and from the pulpit - been encouraging all of you to read the book of Esther so that what I'm about to say will hopefully make a little bit more sense.

Here is the Cliffnote version of the story. The king of Persia is in his palace one day getting drunk with his buddies, and he has the bright idea that he should invite his queen to come out and do a dance for them, give them a little show. So, the servants go to the queen, and

she says, as she should, "No way. I'm not doing that." The king gets really mad. He doesn't cut off her head, but he demotes her. She's no longer the queen. He wakes up the next day and he's got a hangover and he realizes, "I've got to get myself a new queen." So, he has the idea he's going to hold a beauty pageant. He's going to invite women from all across his empire to come and to perform in this pageant and the one who's the winner is going to be his next queen. Now, at this time, there were Jews living in the Persian Empire and they were there mostly because the Persians had come in and destroyed their land, captured many of the elite people and taken them back in bondage. The Jews at this time were a conquered people, a shackled people, a people on the margins, maybe not even second-class citizens, maybe third or fourth-class citizens. There is a man, Mordecai, who is one of these Jewish people, and he has a daughter named Esther, and he says to Esther that she should enter this beauty pageant but whatever she does she shouldn't don't tell them that she is a Jew. So she doesn't, and long story short she wins. the beauty pageant. She becomes the next queen.

There's another minister, Haman, who because of his hatred for Mordecai, cooks up a plan and gets the king to agree that he will destroy all of the Jews everywhere across the empire. And so, the time is ticking down. It's getting closer and closer to the day in which all of the Jews will be murdered. And something within Esther changes and she says to herself, "I'm going to try to save myself and my people because I'm going to go into the king and I'm going to reveal to him that I am a Jew and that by following his own edict, he will kill not only me but my family and all of the people I love." And she says, "Come what may, if I die, I die. but this is what I need to do." She goes into the king's chamber. She tells him, she reveals to him that she is a Jew and that her people are the Jewish people. And he relents and he takes back his edict. And as we heard in our reading, he actually ends up having Haman killed along with his family.

This story is the basis of the Jewish holiday Purim. It is a story so dear to the Jewish people that they retell it every year.

You may ask, what does National Coming Out Day have to do with this story, told annually during a Jewish holiday? And I say it has everything to do with this story.

If you grow up LGBTQI, certainly when I was growing up, less so today, but I think still it is the truth for many of our younger people, even older people, there can be a price to pay if you tell the truth about who you are. This is especially true in an environment in which the rights that we have finally achieved are being stripped away piece by piece, where it is no longer a problem for our leaders to get on national TV and say the most hateful, crude lies about who LGBTQI people are.

To live in the closet, to hide who you are, is an act of survival. It is a way of keeping yourself safe. Esther had to do it. Esther's real name is not Esther. It is Hadassa. Hadassa is her Jewish name. But to hide who she is, she takes on a Persian name. She denies her people and her faith, her history. That is exactly what many LGBTQI people choose to do today.

They choose, perhaps our society demands, that at certain points in our lives, we deny who we are. I can't tell you how many parties I went to in middle school and ended up kissing girls, not because I wanted to, but because it was part of the mask I felt I had to wear. Perhaps there are those here in the sanctuary today, those who are online who have gone through similar experiences, or known people who have.

It is an act of survival to live in the closet. But it is also an act that creates a vacuum. It creates a vacuum in which all kinds of lies can fill it. You've heard it. LGBTQI people are a threat to our country, a threat to our families, a threat to the church. And so, we hide who we are just like Esther. We take on other names and other identities just to survive.

But there comes a time for many of us, a time of pressure, a time of crisis, perhaps a time of just being so sick of telling lies, that we finally decide to tell the truth. And just like Esther, we say to ourselves, "Come what may." There's a quotation by Harvey Milk in your bulletin. Harvey Milk, the first openly gay councilman in San Francisco, was assassinated partially because he told the truth of who he was. Matthew Shepard was strung up on a fence out west because he told the truth of who he was. To come out can have real and damaging consequences. But telling the truth also has the power to take all of the oxygen away from the lies.

Hear these words from Harvey Milk:

“Every LGBTQI plus person must come out. As difficult as it is, you must tell your immediate family. You must tell your relatives. You must tell your friends if indeed they are your friends. You must tell the people you work with. You must tell the people in the stores you shop in. Once they realize that we are indeed their children, that we are indeed everywhere, every myth, every lie, every innuendo will be destroyed once and for all.”

And that is what Esther did. She went into the king, the man who loved her, and she told him the truth. She said, "I am a Jew." And in that moment, all of the lies that Haman, and others, had been telling him about who the Jewish people were, all of the reasons they said that the Jews must be destroyed, fell away as his heart looked at this woman he loved and knew, the person he knew the truth about, and he knew he had been told lies.

This story of coming out, of the ability to say the truth, and the way in which it can save us, and our people, is at the root of the LGBTQI rights movement. By telling the truth of who we are, all of the lies that have been told about us can no longer stand.

I will say coming out is a deeply personal experience. No one should be pushed out of the closet. That is each person's decision because it can lead to damaging consequences. But for those who feel like it is the right thing to do, the thing that they can do, we are all encouraged to do it - like Esther and like Harvey Milk.

But more than simply an act of truth, coming out is also a great practice of spiritual force. Because it also tells the truth about God. God makes humanity not in one note but in many notes that come together in beautiful harmony. To deny the truth of LGBTQI people is to deny the diversity and the range of God's creation. It is an act of faithlessness. It is an act that denies the wonder of God.

So, on this National Coming Out Day, you ask me what our scriptures and our tradition and our beliefs have to do with National Coming Out Day? And I will tell you a lot; actually quite a lot.

Amen.