

# “Hidden History”

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Mark 9:38-50

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From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational UCC, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 19, September 29, 2024, dedicated to the blessed memory of James Edson Kyle who entered eternal life on September 21st, to the blessed memory of Rick Sayre who loved this congregation like no one else, to the 27 women and 15 men who founded First Church as an abolitionist congregation on September 26, 1852, to Caroline and Holden Deliman and to their parents Katie and Steven on this day of baptism, to Rabbi Tali Esther Zelkowicz and the students, teachers and parents in the Columbus Jewish Day School Mamshichim program, to the all the people of Judaism worldwide who welcome 5785 this week and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.  
Amen.*

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Our Jewish siblings step into year 5785 after Sunset on the eve Rosh Hashanah, this Wednesday October 2. The shofar will sound. The people will sign and pray, new year’s blessings will be exchanged, and hope will be born anew – coming out of a year in which war in Israel and Gaza and record incidents of antisemitism here in central Ohio and across the nation and

world have been encountered by too many in the Jewish community. For this, I am heartbroken, and we are deeply sorry.

There is one whose story of courage and deliverance inspires us all in these war-torn, terror-torn times. Her name is Esther. In the little book of the Bible named for her (one of two named for women in the Hebrew Scriptures... Christians have none named for our women of faith and valor), we read her story – which has inspired the celebration of Purim – the Jewish people’s festival commemorating their survival from the plot to exterminate them in ancient Persia – now known as Iran. The story of Esther is a miracle of salvation story.

Hiddenness is a central theme of this tale of valor and liberation. All the heroes – Mordecai, Esther and God are hidden from view in various ways. Mordecai, the foster father of Esther following her parents’ deaths, is behind the scenes throughout the story – informing, encouraging and organizing his people. Esther becomes queen of Persia and though her beauty cannot be hidden from view, her identity as a Jew is hidden from her new husband and the king. And then there is God. In this short story in which the Persian King Ahasuerus is mentioned 190 times, God is never mentioned. King 190, God zero. God’s very absence cries out for attention. It is as though the writers and hearers of this story are winking at each other, “Where is God? Just watch and see!”

While the actively alcoholic king who gets suckered into many things and the evil Haman who seeks to destroy every single Jew in Persia are carrying on in plain sight, all the heroes in this story are hidden in plain view.

Today, I will not tell the whole story of Esther. I invite you all save the date of March 13-14, 2025 – Purim 2025 – to see this all come to life in a synagogue or Jewish Day School near you. Esther’s story might be one of the best known in all of Judaism. A story of salvation is always best served with partying and joyful delight! Come and see!

In the heat of Haman's genocidal attempt against the Jews, Mordecai pens a note to foster daughter, Esther. She doesn't think she can stop the destruction of the Jews all by herself and he writes to her, if she hides now and keeps silent now, help will come from somewhere else – but all of them – including her will be destroyed. These words in Esther 4:14 are immortal, *“Who knows? Perhaps you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this”* (Esther 4:14). For such a time as this. For such a time as this. Wow! This is so powerful! These words change Esther – and she steps up and saves her people. These words can apply to you and me and every single person in every single generation.

Inspired by the Book of Esther, there is stone in the Washington Gladden Social Justice Park that asks the question for our children and this generation – and the next. It says that *“In every generation God calls forth prophets. Will you be the one God calls to lead us know – in such a time as this?”*

On the 172nd anniversary of our church's founding, the question before us today is how has God chosen us to stand up and speak out and be witnesses of faith, justice and peace for such a time as this? It was the question 27 women, and 15 men answered in their time on September 29, 1852, when they signed their charter and founded this congregation as the first white abolitionist congregation in Columbus, Ohio. The 1850 census said that there were 8,848 people in Columbus. Only 42 of them were Christians who said that slavery was so wrong, so evil, that they needed to start a church which would worship and serve a God who was the God of justice and liberation. They chose salvation while others sat back and lived with slavery as “okay” at some level or another. Our forebearers' had the DNA of Esther in their bodies and souls. They stood up for justice in their generation – at such a time as this. They too were hidden in plain sight until that monumental day. And the history of our church that has evolved since then is filled with gems of hidden history which grow into the fullness of faith and courageous witness.

I want to share a few jewels of our hidden history – with a hiddenness hiding in plain sight. First, abolitionists believed that one person should own another person. They fought slavery in any and all ways possible. They fought to abolish slavery forever! In Columbus, our 42 were also involved in the Underground Railroad Movement. So our members hid runaway slaves. And, we were also spies. That's right, we were spies. We sat on capitol square and reported to others in the Underground Railroad movement where bounty hunters and federal troops were moving to capture slaves. It allowed the slaves to hide better and stay one step ahead of their violent pursuers. We were hiding in plain sight. Esther and Mordecai would love this band of believers!

During the Civil War, our pastor, the Rev. Dr. Edwin Goodwin could be found at Fort Hayes ministering to and caring for the soldiers preparing for the Civil War and in the field hospitals with wounded soldiers returning from war. He was also present to the Confederate prisoners of war at Camp Chase. He took a lot of criticism for caring for the enemies – especially when the men of his own congregation had been killed by the Confederates. When President Lincoln was assassinated, Mary Todd Lincoln asked that only Pastor Goodwin and one other pastor speak when her husband's body came to Columbus to lie in state at the state capitol (across the street from our church at the time). On April 29th, 1865, with 100,000 people present (in a city with a population of 18,500), Dr. Goodwin led the service on Capital Square. Later, at the invitation of the White House, he attended the trial of the conspirators who assassinated President Lincoln.

The members of First Church were committed to freeing slaves and caring for people in need all around us. In 1886 five women of First Church leased a 12-room home for homeless girls and this was the beginning of the YWCA in Columbus, Ohio. Six years later, the women of our church opened Children's Hospital in 1892 – and it has grown to be the largest in Ohio and ranked among the top five nationwide. In 1900, our member, Dr. James Baldwin opened Grant Hospital. By 1904, Grant was the largest private hospital in the world with a bed count of 303. Grant is now the top Level 1 Trauma

Center in Central Ohio. We also started the Godman Guild, the Gladden Community House and helped seed and start seven churches – including First Community, Dublin Community, North Congregational (Just North), and Advent Community Church. In the 1800s we sent more people to foreign mission service than any congregation in Ohio.

In addition to providing support for 55 years to the Neighborhood Nursery School, which the church founded in 1947, First Church founded and provided support for the **Columbus Metropolitan School** in 1969. The school was “intended as an attempt to provide an educational experience, along innovative lines, with a student body drawn from all social, economic, racial, and geographic parts of the community” (*First Church News*, May 7, 1972). First Church provided space for the school which grew quite quickly (opening with 60 5-7 year olds in 1970) and a few years later had to move to another location in order to accommodate its growth. Each school was a beacon of light during the Civil Rights movement and beyond. Also the founding of Bethlehem on Broad Street 35 years ago has changed the way our city cares for the poor and lonely on Christmas Day and throughout the season at Christmas time.

With the ministry of Washington Gladden, there are many hidden gems in the course of his 32 years as our pastor. One I loved is that Gladden had no formal theological training – only a Bachelor degree in 1859 from Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Nevertheless, over the course of his 82 years, he was granted 35 honorary doctorates – including Oxford, Harvard and Yale.

Nominated by President Rutherford B. Hayes, Washington Gladden would have become president of The Ohio State University except for the grudges that some nursed against him for his prophetic stands defending Roman Catholics from demagogic assault and attacking Congregationalism’s use of John D. Rockefeller’s (Standard Oil) “tainted money.” He later commented that they wouldn’t have paid him as well as First Church, so it was just as well.

Another that I will share is his leadership of the Franklin County delegation of the Ohio Constitution Convention in 1911. All 400+ changes to the constitution that Franklin County proposed were accepted including the mandate to change the constitution by statewide ballot issues. The only two proposals rejected by the majority of the other 87 counties was an end to the death penalty and giving all women the right to vote. As for the many other Gladden gems, you will either have to read Jacob Dorn's biography or wait for my book on Gladden to come out sometime in the near future.

Here a few other hidden history gems as we finish. The tons of stone which holds our Gothic beauty together was quarried 500 miles away in southeast Pennsylvania and shipped here by train from a quarry in Neshaminy PA. Our building was built to the memory of Washington Gladden – so between Cleveland Avenue and 9th Street, Gladden's name and honor is upheld on the whole block – with the first social justice park in America named for him.

Thanks to the amazing work of our late, great Archivist Emeritus, Rick Sayre, and his successors and colleagues David Mailer and Greg Duncan, we have an amazing amount of information on this House that Justice built – this Cathedral of Grace. Celebrated architect of our 1931 structure, **John Russell Pope**, designed or modified many structures in the US and abroad during his career. In addition to the well-known works (the Jefferson Memorial, The National Gallery of Art (East Building), First Congregational Church (Columbus), he remodeled the New York City home of Henry Clay Fricke, which today houses The Fricke Collection, and added a library; he added the Roosevelt Building (named for Theodore Roosevelt) to the Museum of Natural History complex in New York City; he designed the home of William K. Vanderbilt II which became the headquarters of the Consulate General of Romania in New York City. Outside of New York City and Washington, DC, Pope designed plans for a number of campuses, including those of Yale University, Johns Hopkins University, Syracuse University, and Dartmouth College (taken from a paper compiled by Rick Sayre, April 1982).

From Esther to this present day, we are surrounded by people who have answered the challenge, perhaps you have been chosen for such a time as this. And in these hidden histories, there is once presence which holds us all together – the presence of God. And now, may our God – who is hiding in plain sight – bless you Caroline and Holden – as you now bring your ever growing gifts to all of us! Amen.