When I was 18 years old and a freshman in college I got invited to a very fancy dinner at the house of the President of the college. It was a dinner to honor a visiting scholar. I knew someone who knew someone and so I was someone's plus one. I felt like someone had made a mistake. But I borrowed a fancy red dress and bought a new pair of very pretty and just a little too tall pair of heals. I went to the dinner - did my best to make intelligent small talk and not let on just how young I was. I thought I was doing pretty well - that is until the buffet dinner was served. I got may plate of food - and was pretty excited too - it was a lot better than any plates of food I could get in the dining halls. I took that plate of food back to where my friend was sitting and as I walked across the living room and reached the one step up my shoe caught and I went flat on my face. I distinctly remember as I went down thinking "save the plate save the plate" It was one of those moments that plays out in my memory in slo-mo. That feeling when I knew I was going down - all heads turning to stare - the wait staff moving over to help me up. I'm sure my face was the same color as my dress. I don't even remember if I got another plate of food. I just remember feeling like I had been found out. I tried passing myself off as something I was not and I got found out.

That kind of experience is certainly part of the experience of Esther in this story for the Hebrew Scriptures. But it is more than that.

The Story of Esther and Purim is an interesting one. As with any biblical scholarship there is argument over this one. Some of the details of the Persian court appear accurate and yet there are details that cannot be confirmed as historical. Myth or history what bits of truth are held within this story?

First let us consider her name Esther - which is not her real name. If you were to read this book of the bible you find out that her Hebrew name was Hadassah, which is related to the myrtle bush. Her Hebrew identity is related to the myrtle bush and there is symbolism in that

Many world cultures assigned meaning to the myrtle blossom to include beauty, love, paradise, and immortality. For the Jews, myrtle can symbolize sweetness, justice, divine generosity, peace, God's promise, and recovery. (https://godasagardener.com/2012/12/16/zechariah-and-the-myrtle-tree-2/) But when Mordecai her uncle brings her to the king's court she is given the name Esther and told not to expose her identity. Esther is related to the name Ishtar the Babylonian goddess of fertility, love, war, sex, and power. She is attempting to pass as something she is not in order to survive. She is attempting to gain more privilege than she has had in order to survive.

Privilege is a word that is used a lot these days. "The idea of "privilege"—that some people benefit from unearned, and largely unacknowledged, advantages, even when those advantages aren't discriminatory —has a pretty long history. In the nineteen-thirties, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote about the "psychological wage" that enabled poor whites to feel superior to poor blacks; during the civil-rights era,

activists talked about “white-skin privilege.” But the concept really came into its own in the late eighties, when Peggy McIntosh, a women’s-studies scholar at Wellesley, started writing about it.” http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-origins-of-privilege She described "White privilege is like an invisible weightless backpack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.” http://code.ucsd.edu/pcosman/Backpack.pdf McIntosh had started by looking at white privilege and male privilege but we know that there are many kinds of privilege, class, physical ability, looks, sexual orientation, gender. And we know that this is not totally straightforward. One can have the privilege of being white-skinned while not having the privilege of class for instance.

In some ways Esther had little status or privilege except that she knew someone who knew someone. And isn’t that often the way we find our way into privilege? We may be born into it that is a form of knowing someone. WE may befriend someone. We may go to school and meet someone. We may work along side someone. We may marry up. We may pretend to be someone we are not. All of those are ways of finding or getting more privilege.

Esther’s uncle saw an opportunity. The king had gotten mad at his wife, the queen who had disobeyed him, and the king ordered her gone, vanquished from the kingdom. And when he calmed down he realized he was lonely and wanted a new wife. Mordecai put his young and pretty niece into the harem of eligible young women. Perhaps the only privilege that Esther came with already was her good looks and her strong character and her connection to her uncle Mordecai. It sounds like a lot but in reality in that culture at that time a young woman with no father to look after her with no family home to live in was a very very vulnerable person. What could that have to do with us?

Esther found favor with the King - evidently her beauty and her presence struck just the right note with him. And he made her queen. It is a fairy tale isn’t it? It’s a little Cinderella story tucked into the Hebrew Scriptures. Purim is not one of the major Jewish holidays and as I understand it is often more of a cultural holiday than a religious holiday - sort of like Halloween and Mardi Gras put together. And it is a story with two strong women in it. It is a story that is Wagnerian in its twists and turns. Lies are told, information is leaked, people are banished, threats are made.

Vashti disobeyed the king when he demanded that she come and dance naked before his guests. Unfortunately she defied him at the end of what sounds like one really long frat party and so she banished from the kingdom. Esther also disobeyed the king by coming into his court when she had not been called for. But she was a bit more politic. One the king was not so drunk and two she was not defiant she only asked that he and Haman come for a meal the next day. She used her privilege in a wily way.

This month the theme is about risk - now it takes risk to admit both our privilege and where we do not have privilege. Esther had a little privilege to start with her looks and her uncle and she was able to maneuver herself into a position where she would have even more privilege. And once she was queen she seemed pretty comfortable with her privilege and wanted to keep it. - Who could blame her? When her uncle Mordecai found out what Haman was doing, his plot to remove the Jews, he reached out to Esther to ask for her help. Her initial answer to him was "All the kings servants and the people of the kings 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." (Esther 4:11)
And Mordicai's response to Esther was " Do not think that in the kings 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 4:13-14)

To his initial request she reasonably said - look I may be queen but he is king - no one gets in without his permission and the punishment is death. Come one where is that going to get us. And Mordecai rightly responded don't think your privilege will protect you - if all the Jews die you will die also and if the relief comes from elsewhere and you are found to be on the side against the Jews you will not live in that scenario either. What choice do you have Esther?

And then Esther got wily. She got into the kings inner court and did not demand anything but instead asked that the king and Haman dine with her the next day. She knew that the King loved her and she counted on his compassion. It worked. In what is a complicated soap operas story of dinners and twists and counter twists Esther was able to reveal Haman for the lying snake that he was. She was able to show Mordicai as a loyal servant to the king and Haman as a man who wanted to kill or depot the Jews. In the end Haman is killed and Esther, Mordecai and the Jews are safe.

What does this have to do with us all here today?

Privilege really means having power over someone else or having more power than someone else. We UUs are good at using whatever privilege we have to help others. But we are not always so good at giving up some of our privilege so someone else can have more. And in that we are not different than Esther and no different than other human beings. But it is important to know this about ourselves.

For example here is something I see in our UU world - ministers who come from very poor backgrounds whose family are blue collar, or who grew up on government assistance, even when they feel the call to ministry and they go to college and they got graduate school degrees and they get the education n they often feel like they have to pass - they cannot admit to the less than beginnings,

they cannot admit to their white trash or red neck backgrounds, amidst the Harvard Divinity grads and those ministers who come from old money who are descended from members of the mayflower they feel like they must hide their roots. We UUs so often assume that those around also have a lot of education and the means to get that education that it is hard for those in our midst who do not have those means to always feel welcome.

This month the theme is about risk - now it takes risk to admit both our privilege and where we do not have privilege. When we start talking about privilege, about power, sometimes there is a fear that those who have less will understandably demand to have more. And if I am the one with privilege then I will be forced to give up some of my privilege. And I suspect that privilege, unlike love, is a zero sum game. And so people usually start to get afraid when we talk about privilege, and then they get angry. Esther took a risk to get her privilege, her status with the King. She might not have been chosen to be queen. And she took a risk to use her privilege to reveal Haman for who he was.

We can do no less. Who knows perhaps we have come into our privilege for just such a time as this.