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Fast

THE BOOK OF ESTHER



GOAL

By hearing how Esther's community fasted together, children imagine how fasting can proactively strengthen one's relationship to God and others.

- A** Art
- AM** Active/Movement
- C** Conversation
- D** Drama
- F** Food
- G** Game
- M** Music
- NS** Nature/Science
- QC** Quiet/Contemplative
- S** Service
- T** Technology
- X** Extra Prep

Note: bit.ly addresses are case-sensitive.



PRAYER

Lord, help me trust that in absence there is space for you to fill and work. Amen.

THIS SESSION

Many people in the Bible, including Jesus, fasted. They model how abstaining from food can delete distractions while deepening our acknowledgment of and dependence on God. Choosing to *fast* from something other than food can similarly offer us a path to connecting to God's presence and guidance in our lives.

THE BIBLE STORY

The book of Esther tells the story of a woman and her Jewish community who respond to deep duress with a communal fast. Esther's community faced circumstances seemingly out of their control. Yet they exercised agency by fasting together. The fasting in Esther highlights how fasting is a form of solidarity.

CONNECTIONS WITH CHILDREN

The word *fasting* may be unfamiliar to young children. Rather than a noun (*fast*) or verb (*fasting*), they will probably think of *fast* as an adjective (she was a *fast* runner). The word *breakfast* can provide an entry point for children's understanding of fasting.

Food insecurity impacts millions of children in the United States,¹ perhaps including the children you lead. Take care to differentiate between abstaining from food as a choice versus going without food due to lack of resources.

SESSION PREPARATION

- "Decorating Purim Masks" (p. 8): Cut out masks from card-stock copies of Resource Pages 1 and 2.
- Depending on the options you choose:
 - "Would You Rather?" (p. 10): Obtain a pair of dice. On one die, cover the dots on each side with masking tape. Using one abbreviation per side, write the following units of time on the die in permanent marker: Sec., Min., Hr., Day, Wk., and Yr.
 - "Fasting as a Church Community" (p. 10): Invite a pastor or other church leader to be interviewed about fasting. Share questions you will ask from the activity.
 - "Keeping Your Focus Afloat" (p. 11): Write the word *GOD* on an inflated balloon.

1. USDA Economic Research Service, "Key Statistics & Graphics," U. S. Department of Agriculture, last updated September 8, 2021, www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx.



GETTING STARTED

- Prepared masks from card-stock copies of Resource Pages 1 and 2
- Large craft sticks and tape
- Markers and crayons
- Stickers

DECORATING PURIM MASKS



Provide masks cut out from card-stock copies of Resource Pages 1 and 2, crayons, and markers. As children enter, invite them to decorate a mask. Explain that they will use the masks in the session today. As the children decorate their masks, wonder together when and why masks are used. Tell the children there is a special Jewish holiday called *Purim* that celebrates Queen Esther and her Jewish community's story that they will hear about in today's Bible story.

Finish the masks by taping a craft stick on the back, left or right side, with a portion of the craft stick below the mask as a handle. The children will hold the mask up to their face. Set aside masks for "Purim Play" (p. 9).

DRAWING NEAR TO GOD



The opening ritual in this unit includes a responsive litany with one line changing to correspond to the spiritual discipline in each session. There are motions to help children learn their responses. The children's response is printed in the bold text and remains the same throughout this unit.

Draw near to God

and God (*raise both arms to the sky*)

will draw near to us. (*bring hands toward heart, crossing them over your heart*)

When we fast, we free up space to ponder God's goodness.

Let us (*extend arms forward, palms facing upward*)

keep company (*bend elbows and bring together hands in prayer*)

with Jesus. (*sign "Jesus" with hands using right middle finger to touch the middle of left palm and repeat with left middle finger to touch the middle of right palm*)



During this session on fasting, be aware of and sensitive to any children who experience food insecurity and who may not eat regularly.

- Paper plates
- Ping pong balls
- Masking tape



INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE

BREAK-FAST RACE



Ask the children when is the longest time each day they go without eating food. Suggest that overnight is a time of not eating, or *fasting* from food, and the word *breakfast*, or *break-fast*, is the act of breaking, or stopping, one's overnight fast by eating again.

Play a game to help the children grasp an understanding of the concept of fasting. Give each child a paper plate. Ask the children what they like to eat for breakfast, and place three ping pong balls on each plate, representing some of their favorite foods. Have children line up behind a masking tape start line. To complete the race, children need to cross the masking tape finish line without dropping the ping pong balls from their plate. If any of the balls drop off the plate before they cross the finish line, the child should place the ping pong ball(s) back on their plate and begin again at the starting line. Repeat the game, having children race with only one ping pong

ball on the plate. Repeat a final time, having children race with the plate and no ping pong balls.

Discuss what the children thought about the three different races. Draw connections between this game and fasting, using the following questions:

- What was the goal of this game?
- How did having one ping pong ball or removing all of them help us reach that goal?
- Were you able to focus more when there were less balls on your plate?
- How might removing some things in our lives help us focus on God?

Invite children to share what they know about fasting. Wonder if they or anyone they know has ever fasted. Discuss how fasting is a practice that helps us get closer with God that involves not eating or not doing other things for a set period of time. Share that, sometimes, people fast alone, and sometimes, people fast as a community.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

PURIM PLAY


AM D

Tell the children they are going to hear the Bible story about a queen named Esther and her people—the Jewish people. Explain that, every year, Jewish children hear the story of Queen Esther during a special holiday called *Purim*, and they wear costumes of the characters in the story. They “boo” loudly and stomp their feet whenever Haman, the villain’s name, is read. Have the children practice the different responses when the name of one of the four characters in the story is read:

- Haman: Boo and stomp feet
- Esther: Cheer
- The King: Bow
- Mordecai: Place hands together in prayer

Invite the children to put on their masks. Whichever mask a child is wearing does not matter. Read the story from Resource Page 3. Pause each time you say one of the character’s names that are in bold font so the children can respond. If there is time, invite the children to reenact the story, casting either themselves or toys as the various characters.

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- Resource Page 3
 - Masks from “Decorate Purim Masks” (p. 8)
 - Plush toys, actions figures, or dolls (optional)

 The book of Esther is condensed in this session for the purpose of telling the story of Esther and how community fasting helped her.

FINDING THE PRACTICE ALL AROUND US

Choose one or more options.


WHAT IS FASTING?


C T

Use a short video to help children understand what fasting is and how it can help us draw closer to God. Show the YouTube video “What Is Fasting?” (bit.ly/FMWhatIsFasting, 0:57). Discuss with the children what things can distract them from God. Write their responses on a sheet of newsprint.


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- Internet-connected device
 - Newsprint
 - Marker

- Newsprint from “What Is Fasting?” (p. 9) or newsprint and marker
- Prepared dice

 You may wish to use this activity along with the previous activity, “What Is Fasting?” (p. 9).

 To aid children in grasping units of time, try relating it to something they experience often. For example, one hour might be described as the time of a church worship service or two episodes of their favorite show.

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- Pastor or church leader
 - Puppet or large plush toy

 This activity lends itself well if you are doing this session during the Lenten season when some people choose to fast or refrain from something.

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- Internet-connected device
 - Newsprint
 - Markers and crayons
 - Drawing paper

WOULD YOU RATHER?

G C

If you did not watch the video in “What Is Fasting” (p. 9), have a conversation with the children about things that may distract them or keep them from spending time with God. Write their responses on newsprint.

Play a game to reinforce that there are all types of things people can fast from and different time periods to do so. Invite a volunteer to roll the dice. Ask the children a “Would you rather?” question using this framework and the results on the dice:

- ➔ Would you rather fast from (*insert something listed on the newsprint*) for (*insert number on die with dots; insert time period from the other die*) OR would you rather fast from (*insert something listed on the newsprint*) for (*insert number on die with dots; insert time period from the other die*)?

Take votes among the children and ask them to share why they voted the way they did. Continue with the children taking turns rolling the dice and asking different “Would you rather?” questions.

FASTING AS A CHURCH COMMUNITY

C X

Interview the pastor or church leader about fasting. Use the puppet or plush toy to be the interviewer. The puppet also helps if *you* are the church leader. You can interview yourself by changing your voice for the puppet when you ask questions, and answering in your normal voice. Begin the interview with some prepared questions from the puppet, and then follow with any questions from the children. For children who hesitate to ask questions, encourage them to whisper them into the puppet’s ear. Then, have the puppet ask the question for them. Possible interview questions:

- ➔ Can anyone fast?
- ➔ What are some things people fast from?
- ➔ I don’t like broccoli. What if I fast from broccoli?
- ➔ What happens if someone forgets or even purposely breaks their fast?
- ➔ Did you fast when you were my age? If so, from what and what was it like?
- ➔ Has our congregation ever had a time of communal fasting? If so, what was it like?
- ➔ What specific times could our church community be encouraged to fast?



PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Choose one or both options.

FASTING IRL (IN REAL LIFE)

C T

Ask the children if they like candy. Tell them they are going to watch a story about a boy who likes candy. Show the YouTube video “Trick or Treat: Boy Gives Up Own Candy When He Comes Across Empty Halloween Bowl” (bit.ly/FMHalloweenCandy, 1:06). Discuss the video with the children using the following questions:

- ➔ Why did the boy give up his candy?
- ➔ Do you think it was easy or hard for the boy to do this? Why?
- ➔ What do you think you might have done if you had come upon an empty bowl at Halloween?

- How were the boy's actions like a fast?
- What do you think Jesus might think of the boy's actions?

Wonder together what might be ways the children can fast, or give something up, or refrain from doing something that will help them spend that time with God or doing what is pleasing to God. Perhaps it is not having a snack, and they will spend that time reading a Bible story; perhaps they will stop ignoring a sibling who wants to play, and they will set a time to play together. Help the children think of various ideas. Write down their ideas on newsprint.

Ask the children to choose one idea that they think they would like to try and for how long they will do it. Provide paper, markers, and crayons. Invite the children to draw a picture of themselves and the action they would like to take. Have the children tell you what they would like to do and how they will spend that time with God. Write down what they say on their papers. Encourage the children to take home their pictures to remind them of what they would like to do.

KEEPING YOUR FOCUS AFLOAT



Prepared balloon

In this game, the children cooperate to keep the balloon (GOD) in the air, not touching the ground. They must focus on the balloon and work together as a community to keep it in the air where everyone can see it. After a couple of rounds, ask the children to keep one arm behind their back. Talk together about the game using the following questions:

- Why was the game harder when you had to keep one arm behind your back?
- How did focusing on keeping your arm behind your back impact your ability to focus on the balloon?
- When the game was more challenging, did you rely on your friends more?
- How is this game like fasting?



FOLLOWING JESUS

COME AND SEE



Rhythm instruments (optional)

Introduce the song you will sing to close each session of this unit. It is sung to the tune of "London Bridge Is Falling Down." Teach the chorus by singing one line at a time. Then have the children sing the chorus with you. Teach the verse of the song in the same way. Invite the children to sing the chorus and the verse using rhythm instruments, if you choose.

Chorus:

Jesus says to come and see, come and see, come and see.
 Jesus wants to be with me.
 I love Jesus!

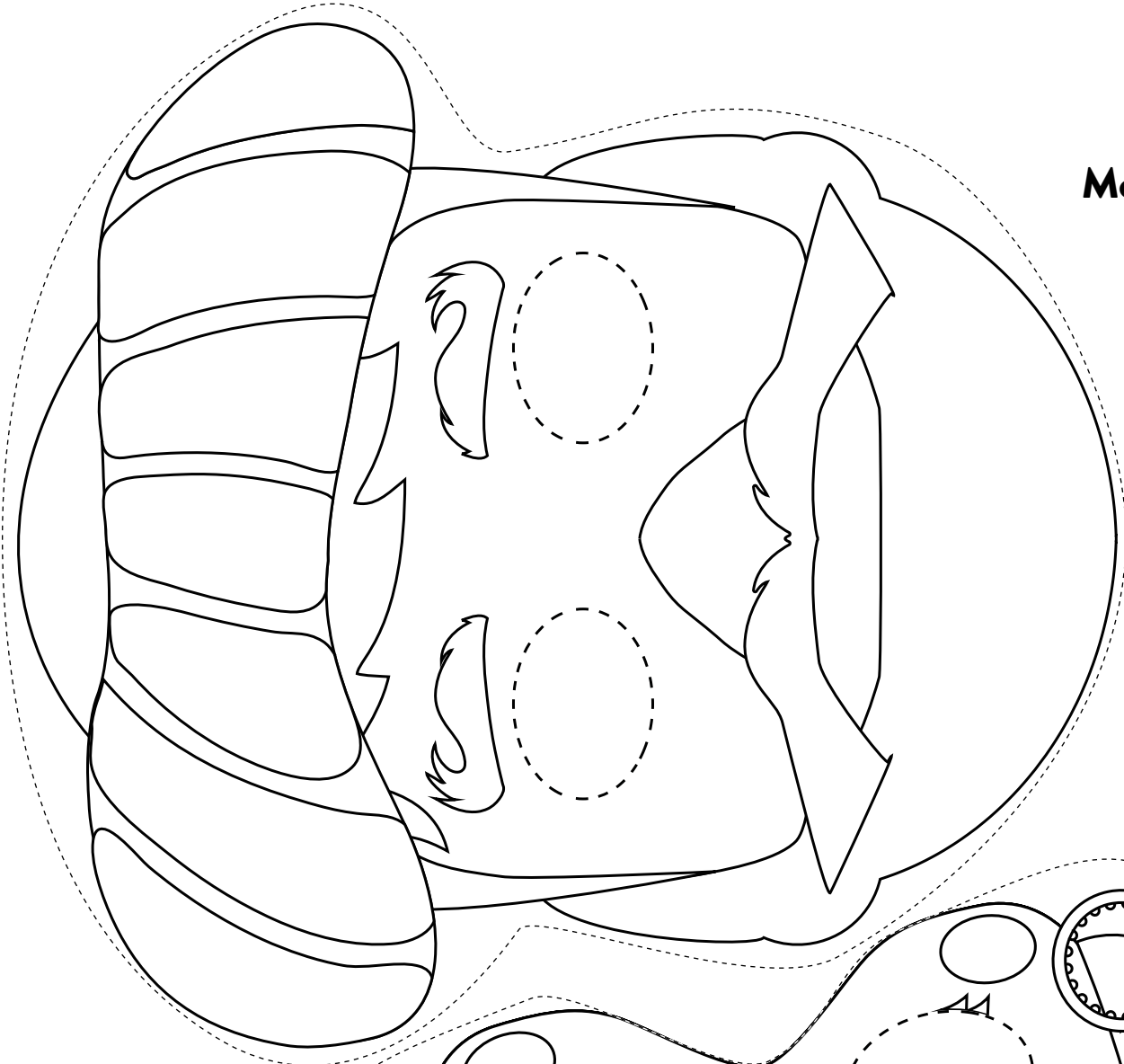
Verse:

Fasting draws us near to God, when we stop! When we stop!
 Practice fasting as a way
 to be near God.

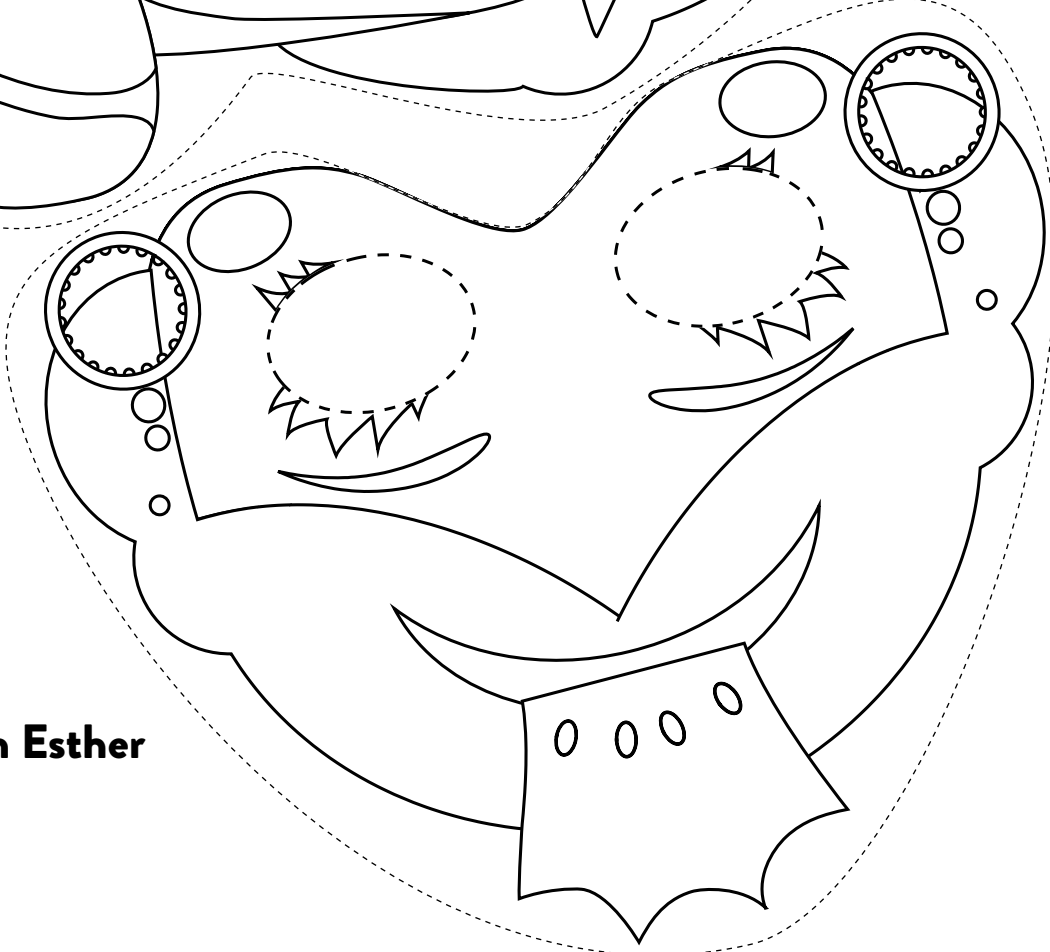


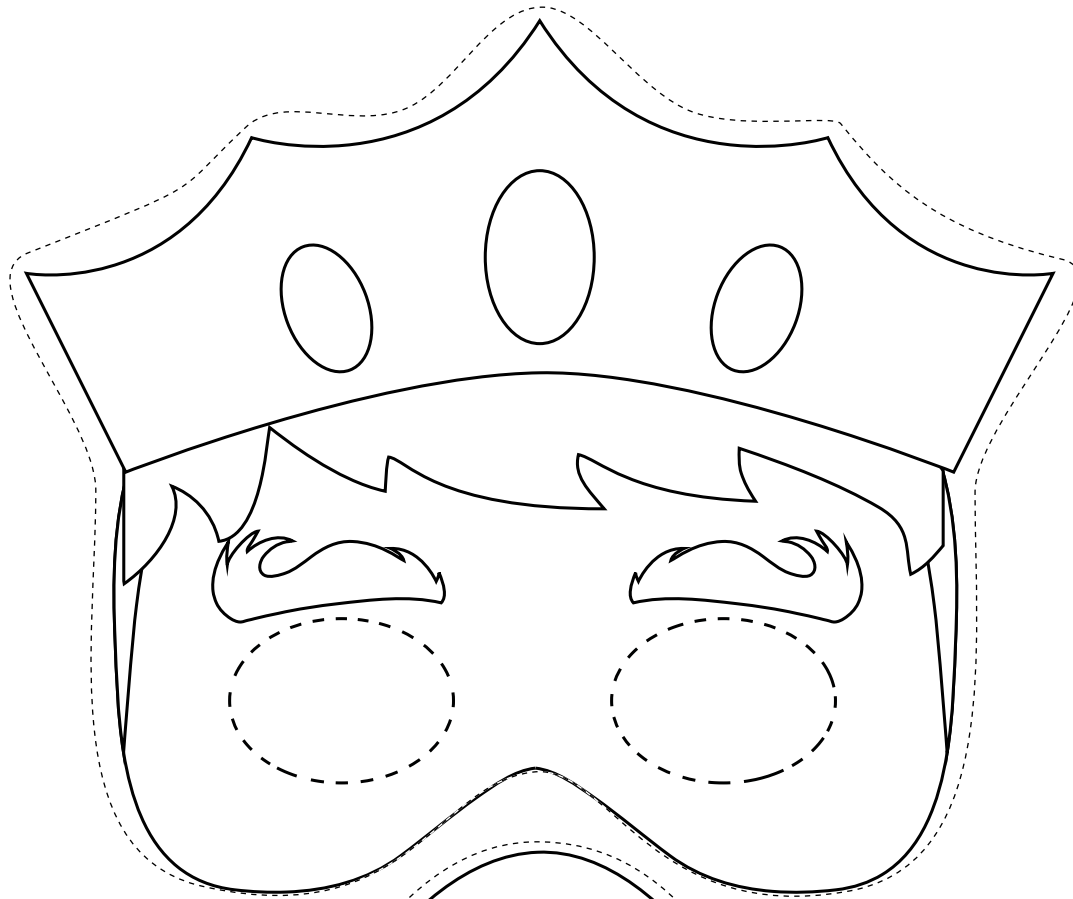
The chorus of the song is repeated in each session of this unit. The verse changes to reflect the spiritual practice highlighted in that session.

Mordecai

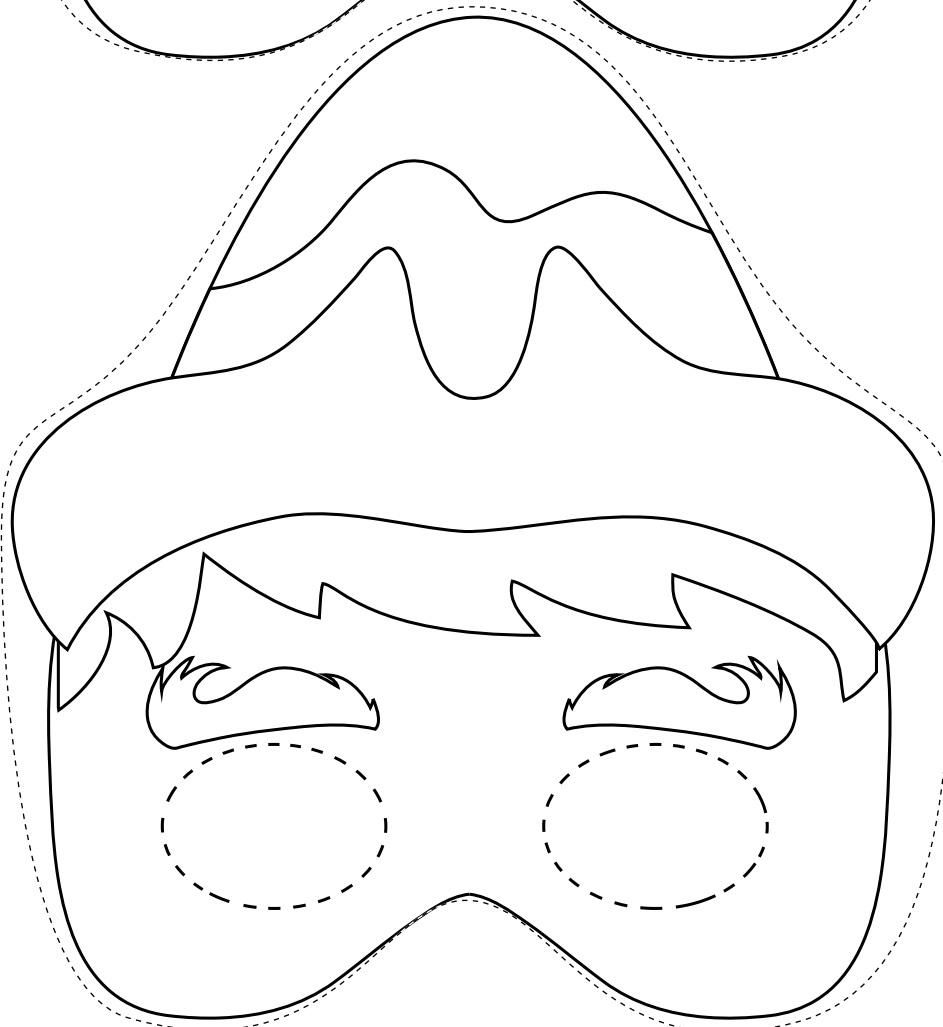


Queen Esther

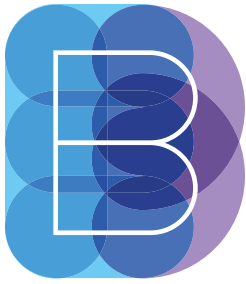




King



Haman



BIBLE STORY

BASED ON THE BOOK OF ESTHER

A long time ago, there was a mighty **king** (*bowing*) in a faraway land. He lived in a big palace and liked to throw fancy parties. But during one of those parties, the queen made him mad. She refused to let him boss her around. The angry **king** (*bowing*) decided she could no longer be queen.

The **king's** (*bowing*) officials searched the entire kingdom for a new queen. The **king** (*bowing*) chose a young woman named **Esther** (*cheering*). Everyone agreed **Queen Esther** (*cheering*) was beautiful, but no one knew her hidden identity. **Esther** (*cheering*) was Jewish. Her **Uncle Mordecai** (*praying*), who was like a dad to her after her parents died, warned her to hide her family's Jewish heritage. The Jewish people were not from this land; because of a big battle many years before, they were forced to leave their homeland and now lived in this kingdom.

Unfortunately, there was a powerful aide to the **king** (*bowing*) who wanted to destroy all the Jewish people living in the kingdom. His name was **Haman** (*booing*). **Haman** (*booing*) was an important person in the **king's** (*bowing*) palace, but **Mordecai** (*praying*) refused to let **Haman** (*booing*) be the boss of him. This made **Haman** (*booing*) very mad. When he found out **Mordecai** (*praying*) was Jewish, **Haman** (*booing*) decided to punish all the Jewish people by convincing the **king** (*bowing*) to get rid of them.

When the Jewish people found out that **Haman** (*booing*) wanted to destroy them, they were scared and sad. **Mordecai** (*praying*) begged **Esther** (*cheering*) to ask the king (*bowing*) for help. **Mordecai** (*praying*) said to **Esther** (*cheering*), "Maybe you became queen just so you could be in this position to save us all!" **Esther** (*cheering*) knew she had to be brave. She also knew she wasn't alone. **Esther** (*cheering*) responded to **Mordecai** (*praying*), saying, "Ask all the Jews to fast with me for three days. After that, I will go to the **king** (*bowing*)."

The Jewish community fasted together and prayed to God. **Queen Esther** (*cheering*) prepared a special banquet for the **king** (*bowing*) and **Haman** (*booing*). The **king** (*bowing*) enjoyed the meal and was in a good mood. He asked **Queen Esther** (*cheering*) if there was anything he could do for her. "Oh yes!" **Esther** (*cheering*) pleaded, "Please help me and my people. We are Jews, and **Haman** (*booing*) wants to destroy us!" **Haman** (*booing*) hadn't known **Queen Esther** (*cheering*) was Jewish. He became frightened. The **king** (*bowing*) became angry. He turned to **Haman** (*booing*), "I like **Queen Esther** (*cheering*), and you wanted to get rid of her! Well, now I want to get rid of you!" The **king's** (*bowing*) guards dragged **Haman** (*booing*) out of the palace, and the **king** (*bowing*) invited **Mordecai** (*praying*) to help advise him instead. Together **Queen Esther** (*cheering*) and **Mordecai** (*praying*) were able to save their community.

