

## **Courage**

**August 23, 2020**

### **From the Book of Esther**

Whenever I agree to preach, I always hate myself for saying “yes”. After it’s over, I am always glad I did it. But in between, I am always grumbling. I feel so pressed for time in my life that it is fitting in the 8-10 hours required equates to an extra day I just don’t have. Well.... That’s when there isn’t a pandemic.

During a pandemic, it turns out, I have plenty of time.... Very little work, very little fun and lots of time....

Interestingly, though, I still hated myself for saying yes to doing this. Not because of I lacked time on this occasion, but because I lack anything to say. I don’t know how it has been for you, but for me the time since March 17 has been isolating, anxiety producing, and pretty depressing. The virus, the highlighted social injustice, the political ineptness from Washington, the lack of leadership around the country due to insane partisanship, the vilification of scientists, the rooting of conspiracy theories that damage democracy.... It just goes on and on. And then there is the fact that my dad is in hospice, my mom is quite ill, my kid lives in a hotbed of virus contagion and my business revenue is down 70%.

No doubt your have your own version of all of this. And, perhaps, you, too, would have a hard time coming up with an inspirational sermon during such a time.

As I struggled with this, I found myself asking for the first time in several months – what do I need? What do I need to feel better, to feel stronger, to get through the 6 months ahead?

I need courage. Optimism feels out of reach. But courage.... Courage would really help.

I turned to the book of Esther. Truthfully, I didn’t remember many of the details of the story. But I recall that the women clergy I have known name her in the list of Biblical women heroines. So I read her story again and I want to tell it to you this morning. I don’t have time to give you all the plot twists near the end – so if you want those you have to read it yourself. But

here is the gist for the purposes of trying to find some inspiration for courage.

Esther was a Jew living in Persia, which is modern day Iran. Her ancestors were among the Jews who had been carried into captivity to Babylon nearly 100 years earlier. Even though they had been set free, there were many Jews who didn't return to Jerusalem when it became possible, preferring instead to continue living where they were, in various places around the Persian Empire. Esther was among them.

Her parents died and she was raised by an older cousin, named Mordecai.

The King of the land was Xerxes, a narcissistic guy who lacked backbone and was obsessed with adulation. He demanded loyalty and was loved to show others how rich and powerful he was.

The story begins with Xerxes throwing a gigantic, opulent banquet that went on for days and days. All the people of the capital city were invited so that he could show ALL of them how wonderful he was. No doubt everyone was impressed because there was an open bar with spectacular wine and enough free food to make you ill from overeating.

In the midst of this spectacle, Xerxes calls for his Queen, Queen Vashti, to come so that he can show her off as well. Vashti was having a party of her own with the women of the city and when she got the demand through his servants, that Xerxes wanted her to leave her party and come prance around all the drunken men, she refused.

The King was enraged. He consulted the lawyers about what he should do because he didn't know the law of his own land. They suggested that he banish Vashti forever because if other women found out that she said no to the King and got away with it, there would be an uprising of women who would stop complying with their husbands demands.

No joke. That's the story. If it were happening in 2020, the pundits would say, "they said the quiet part out loud." Problem is, it wasn't the "quiet part" in the time of Esther. Women were property. They were spoken about and treated in just that way.

Vashti was more than a pretty face. She had a mind of her own. She had more backbone than her King. And in a moment of clarity about what she wanted and deserved, she courageously stood up to him.

Well, Vashti does, in fact, get banished. And these same men who got her kicked out, now suggest that Xerxes hold a year long beauty pageant for the most beautiful young women in the kingdom and choose from among them a new queen.

Enter Esther. It's not clear how she got pulled into this harem, but she did – without the recruiters figuring out that she was a Jew. Mordecai instructs her to keep that little detail quiet.

Fast forward, Esther wins the contest and is crowned Queen. By the way, Esther wasn't her name. Hadassah was her name. But when the King chose her, he renamed her Esther, meaning "star". He probably couldn't pronounce Hadassah.

One day Mordecai overheard two of the King's men plotting to kill him. He told Esther, who told the King that Mordecai was sending him warning. The plot was uncovered, and the would-be assailants were killed.

That doesn't put an end to the mean-spirited people around the King, however. His second in command, Haman, was as power-hungry and self-centered as was the King. He required everyone to bow down to him as he walked by. Mordecai refused. Haman's henchmen tried to talk Mordecai into complying so as to not make waves. But Mordecai stood firm.

He explained his non-compliance to the henchmen by saying he was a Jew. Jews did not bow down to other humans – only Yahweh deserved such an act.

The Brethren resistance to nationalism and the religious elevation of symbols like the flag are borne out of this understanding that our devotion and allegiance is to God alone. Nations are established to do good and we are to support them in that work. We do not owe the leaders of our nation our highest loyalty. The powers that be – no matter who they are – are to be held to account by us when they are unethical or don't act with compassion on behalf of the greater good. To forsake the easy route of acceptance and instead to protest, to speak the truth, to call into question

the unjust assumptions that become the norms of our society, this, Brethren believed, was the call of faith.

So Haman goes to the King and basically says – “We have foreigners among us. They have ways that are different than ours... they don’t follow the king’s rules... you should not tolerate them. I’ll make a big donation to your coffers if you let me have them exterminated.” The King with no backbone and seemingly no thoughts of his own, says “sure”, “whatever you think” and, thus, the plan to rid the country of Jews gains life again.

Mordecai, who seems to have his ear to the ground, hears about this and rips his clothes and puts on sackcloth and ashes. Jews around the Empire do the same when they hear the news. You see there is a date for extermination in the future – one arrived when Haman drew a “pur” aka a “lot” out of a hat – or however this was done. So the Jews are not in danger today but the day of their extermination is known.

Mordecai eventually tells Esther all that he knows and begs her to intervene with the King on behalf of her people. Esther points out that the main problem with this is that no one goes into the presence of the King unless they are summoned. And to do so can result in you being killed for insubordination. Narcissism does not tolerate disloyalty in any form. “Off with her head” would be the risk.

Mordecai responds, calling Esther to act with courage. He says – “Esther, if you keep quiet now, the Jews in another place will survive to carry on our traditions and live out the promise of God to us, but you and your family and your ancestors will all be annihilated. Who knows? Perhaps you have been put into the King’s palace for such a time as this.” Esther agrees, saying in the end, “I will go the King, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.”

Up to this point, the examples of courage in the story – shown by Vashti and Mordecai – are that of standing up in the face of unreasonable or unjust demands. Now, the courage required involves the initiation of an act.

So Esther, Mordecai and many other Jews fast for 3 days in preparation for courageous moment. Esther goes before the King. Thankfully, he accepts her bold gesture. She then employs this great strategy of inviting only he

and Haman to banquets two days in a row before bringing the King her request. At the end of the second day of feasting, she tells the King that she is a Jew and that someone has paid to have her and all the Jews in the land killed, destroyed, annihilated. The King is appalled and asks who would do such a thing. And in a dramatic moment made for TV, Esther points to the only other person in the room – Haman - whose color had no doubt drained from his face. The King hangs Haman on the gallows and the Jews are saved.

Interestingly, in nearly all the commentaries I could easily google, all written by men, the lessons of Esther were cited as the importance of trusting God's promises, the notion that God has a plan for all of us, the need to have confidence in our salvation, the need for faithfulness in difficult times and even the evils of opulence. All of these are good lessons and could be concluded from this story, I suppose.

But for me, as a woman, I think the main lesson is actually none of that.

The lesson is of courage. The courage to speak up, the courage to resist being subjugated, the courage to be fully who you are and not the shell of a person others might be more comfortable with you being.

The story reminds us that we are given moments – moments when we can speak courageously against unreasonableness, mean-spiritedness and injustice. When acquiescence and apathy is expected, we can instead speak up.

The story reminds us that we are called to be allies, standing up for and with, those who come into the cross hairs of those with power, especially if we are among the majority. We may not be the target of injustice or unfairness, but if we see it and know of it, we must have the courage to stand up.

I'm not seeing many people these days. I suspect that is also true of you. But I am going the grocery store, to Target, to the post office, to get my haircut. And in the process, I need to look for the moments that can make me feel alive again – the moments when I can stand up for what is right, when I can initiate a conversation with someone to convey that I am an ally, when I can speak my opposition in the face of comments that might denigrate someone else.

The Book of Esther reminds us that although our lives may be pretty routine, and at times like this pretty boring, there are defining moments, moments when courage can be lived. And we are called for the good of all, to look for those moments... to step into them or perhaps even to create them, following the example of Biblical women who showed us the way.