

“The Courage of Esther”

Esther 4:1-17

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We continue this week with the mini-sermon series on stories of women from the Bible. This morning we are going to focus on the story of Esther, a courageous woman from the Old Testament who risks everything for her people. But before we get to that, let's look at the book of Esther itself and some of the background to the story Judy just read.

One of the most unusual things about the book of Esther is that it is one of two books in the Bible that do not explicitly mention God. The other is the Song of Solomon. That fact, along with its lack of other overt religious references, led many people centuries ago to object to the book being in the Bible. As scholar Carol Meyers writes, "For both Jews and Christians, the most prominent reason for its disputed status is its lack of explicit religiosity." [\[1\]](#) I can see why people objected. It is strange that a book included in the Bible does not mention God.

I also want to tell you a bit about how the young Jewish woman Esther becomes the queen of Persia. Well, the previous queen, Vashti, was ousted by the king because she disobeyed him, and the male leadership in the kingdom feared that women across the land would be emboldened to disobey royal officials. So, the men freaked out and advised that the king remove her from her throne. The king then orders his underlings to gather all the young women of the kingdom so he can find a new queen. Esther is the one he chooses. She keeps her Jewish identity hidden from the king.

And a last bit of background, why are the Jews in danger of destruction? They are in peril because Mordecai, Esther's uncle who adopts her after the death of her parents, did not bow to Haman, who was a senior official in the kingdom. It made Haman so mad he wanted to destroy Mordecai, but Haman thought Mordecai was beneath him, so he decides instead he wants to wipe out Mordecai's people, the Jews, instead.

Courage is the theme today, so I better define that. Courage is the ability to do something that frightens one, or it can also mean having strength in the face of

pain or grief, according to Oxford Languages. Courage doesn't mean we aren't scared. It means we continue in the face of that fear.

And now, let's take a closer look at Esther. Esther is a remarkable character. She has been through a lot in her relatively short life. Her parents are dead, a catastrophic loss for a young person. Fortunately, her uncle takes her in. It takes courage for Esther to not wither under such pain and loss. She courageously faces these challenges and lives her life.

In our lesson earlier, Esther shows courage when she tells Mordecai to gather all the Jews and fast for her because she has decided to see the king. Now going to see your husband shouldn't be a big deal, but it is in this case. No one can come in and see the king without being summoned first. If you do that, you could be executed. "If I perish, I perish," she says. She shows up before the king knowing she could be killed, but the king extends the golden scepter to her, and she is spared.

Later in the story she shows more courage and asks Haman and the King to a banquet where she discloses who she really is, and she asks the king to save her people. It could not have been easy to reveal that secret to the king. What would

his reaction be? Would he be angry and cast her out for keeping a secret from him? The king doesn't seem to mind, and he ends up issuing an edict telling the Jews that they may protect themselves from anyone who will do them harm. Ultimately the Jews are saved, and they destroy their enemies.

Esther grows tremendously as a person, and she asserts herself as the story goes on. At first, she does what her uncle says. But later she takes control and is the leader. Mordecai and Esther's roles have reversed, according to scholar Adele Berlin.[\[2\]](#)

But how did she change so much? What were the forces that led her to change? I think it was a few things. Her people were in trouble, and she wanted to help but she needed some convincing to spark the courage that would emerge in her. Mordecai tells her that if she doesn't go to the king, her father's family will die. He also tells her that maybe she was made queen for just this moment where she could do something to save her people. When a lot is on the line, it can lead to courageous actions.

Her courage to lead shows God at work in her. God is inspiring her to a higher calling, giving her the strength to take the risk and ask for a fast and go to

see the king. God is here with Esther. This is born out by Esther's faith when she asks for a fast. Back then, people thought by fasting they could influence the Divine, according to scholar Mary Joan Winn Leith.^[3] Esther, by ordering a fast was seeking help from God. Otherwise, she wouldn't have ordered it. Esther had faith that if fasting occurred, it could help their cause before God. Fasting is an intensification of faith, an intensification of pleading and petition in prayer. It is holy. It is an action of sacrifice as part of a plea for rescue, to turn a situation around that is harmful. It is denying oneself, sacrificing the physical sustenance of food to grow spiritually.

Esther was a courageous woman who risked her life to save her people. Her courage can be an inspiration for us all.

We have so many examples of courage to draw from in our Christian faith tradition and in the people in our everyday lives.

The early apostles relied on God the Holy Spirit to supply them with courage in their missionary work to spread the good news. Surely the apostle Paul was afraid of what kind of reception he would get before he landed in a new city and started preaching in the local synagogue. How could he not feel some fear? He

was only human. But he did it no matter how he felt. He had his mission to share the good news and that is what he did.

Jesus was scared too. In the garden of Gethsemane, he weeps and asks God if God can get him off the hook, to please do so. In the gospel of Matthew, he prays to God, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want." Jesus knows what is coming, he knows grave suffering for him is on the way, and he's human. He doesn't want to suffer. But ultimately, he does God's will. He takes strength from prayer and reminding himself in that prayer that he must do God's will. In God's will, he finds courage.

Where do we show courage?

We show courage when we go into an infusion center to get treatment for our cancer. We show courage when we go on living our lives in the face of chronic pain. We show courage to go on in the face of all sorts of different troubles and challenges.

We pray before and through these times of woe. We act in faith that we will be taken care of, no matter the outcome.

We don't need to be faced with a life challenge to show courage. I invite you all to show more courageousness in living and learning about your faith. Go deeper into your faith, in your times of contemplation and meditation. Take more time in your prayer life. Concentrate and study with more depth than you have studied before. Pray with your spouse. Pray with a friend. Take time to absorb the words of scripture and the myriad of lessons you can learn from them. When it gets difficult, or you want to do something else, have the courage to say no to whatever else you were going to do and stick with the work of enlarging your spiritual life. It will be worth it, believe me.

Courage takes faith because we don't know what is on the other side of our action. These times of faith are times when we are called to see God at work when we cannot see God. We can still believe God is at work, and trust that God is acting. God is invisible and indivisible. It takes courage to have faith.

My favorite verse in the scripture lesson from today is when Esther said, "and if I perish, I perish." There is a great resolve communicated in those few words. Esther recognizes that she is about to take the biggest risk of her life, she's putting her life on the line. But she is committed. She has that resolve that she is

not going to back out or back down. She's going to be courageous, spurred on by the fasting and sacrifice of her people. Who but the divine can give that kind of strength and courage? It was about more than her. It was about her people.

May we all have courage like Esther. Amen.

[1] Carol Meyers. "16. Esther." *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, edited by John Barton and John Muddiman. (Oxford,

England: Oxford University Press, 2001), 325.

[2] Adele Berlin. "Esther." *The Jewish Study Bible*, edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler. (Oxford, England:

Oxford University Press, 2nd. ed., 2014), 1627.

[3] Mary Joan Winn Leith. "Esther." *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version With The*

Apocrypha 4th ed., edited by Michael Coogan, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010), 713.