

Courage to Stand

A Sermon by Eric Dillenbeck
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Esther 7:1-10; 9:20-22

Our Old Testament lesson for this day comes near the end of the book of Esther. Before I read the passage it is important to understand the context in which this lesson falls.

Our story takes place in the city of Susa, which is located in modern day Iran, during the exile of the Hebrew people. The Persian Empire has conquered Israel, and has carried away all the Jews of importance, including Esther, a young beautiful girl who has been adopted by her older cousin, Mordecai.

In our story, the King has divorced his wife, Vashti, because she refused to parade her beauty for all of his court to admire. After searching the kingdom for the most beautiful maiden to marry, the king selects Esther, who has kept her Jewish heritage a secret from all who would need to know.

Quickly the plot thickens as Haman, the King's chief advisor and the worst kind of anti-Semite, convinces the king to carry out genocide against the Jews in the kingdom. Haman does so because Mordecai will not show him the respect he feels he deserves. When the King approves of the genocide, Mordecai, dressed in sackcloth, goes to the palace gate to wail and lament.

Mordecai sends word to Esther urging her to seek an audience with the king saying, *"Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."*

Knowing that to seek out the King and demand an audience could end in her death, Esther calls for a fast among all Jews. She bravely goes into the King's banquet uninvited and thankfully is greeted by a happy king who not only grants her pardon for the interruption but offers to grant her a petition.

This is where our story picks up. Let us listen for God's Word, speaking to us today from...

Esther 7:1-10; 9:20-22

7So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ²On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled."

³Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. ⁴For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated.

If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king."

⁵Then the King said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" ⁶Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

⁷The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him.

⁸When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining; and the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?"

As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. ⁹Then one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." ¹⁰So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

⁹ ²⁰Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of the King, both near and far, ²¹enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, ²²as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

"Courage to Stand"

In the scope of Scripture, Esther is a strange and wonderful book. If you think about it, it is pretty unusual for a book in the Bible to honor a woman. Ruth and Esther managed to have books named after them, but most women in the Bible are nameless, "the woman at the well, the hemorrhaging woman...the list goes on and on.

But here, ...here we have one book lifting up the actions of one woman and we see the beginnings of a Jewish holiday. Purim is one of the most joyous and fun holidays on the Jewish calendar. Some in North America actually call it the Jewish Mardi Gras.

We actually saw the beginning of Purim there in Chapter 9. It is an annual festival celebrating the Jew's relief from persecution and vulnerability. It celebrates the heroic actions of the beautiful, young, Jewish girl named Esther.

It's unusual enough that a book of the Bible bears the name of a woman; but it's even more unusual that this same book from the Holy Scriptures never mentions the name of God. Many scholars not only note the absence of God's name, but also any reference to prayer, the keeping of the Law and most other practices associated with observant Jewish life. It does mention fasting, which is a form of prayer, but there are no spoken prayers to God recorded, asking for guidance, or even intervention. How then, did this extraordinary book end up in our Cannon? This is almost certainly is owed to the fact that it celebrates one person's loyalty to her people, even to the point of risking her life to save them. This book celebrates a normal person's ability to have an extraordinary impact upon her world. But her contribution was not for her own self, but rather for the sake of her community.

Genocide had been declared, the Jews' existence was in mortal peril. "But here we see that deliverance of the Jewish people is not accomplished through amazing, miraculous events... but through the flawed actions of human beings who were probably never sure they were doing the right thing¹."

All of this seems so other worldly, so very far away from us, but in many ways I can see echoes of Esther's story in our lives. We too live in the midst of empire, though empire might be defined differently today. For centuries Christendom, or the collective culture created by Christians in power throughout the world, has given us a sense of place and privilege that is beginning to fade as the powers of multinational corporations have begun take a stronger hand in shaping culture.

We now find ourselves sharing the ancient Jewish need, present in Esther, to remain faithful people in the midst of values and pressures which are foreign to who we are as followers of Christ, who taught us to love our enemies, turn the other cheek, and lay down our lives. Like Esther, there are times when we are called to muster the courage to stand, not for ourselves, but for others. We too are called at times to take risks.

One of my new favorite television shows this fall is GLEE. It follows a group of high school students and their teacher who are trying to be faithful to who they are, who they have been created to be, by joining the Glee club, a musical group who sing and dance.

I know, it sounds like small potatoes, but for one of these kids in particular this is a huge risk socially. Finn is the quarterback on the football team, strong, handsome, and popular. But deeply unhappy and trying to come to terms with the joy he feels in singing. The others in the Glee club are wonderful, but are deemed social outcasts by the others in the school. They are the misfits. Near the end of the first episode Finn

has left the Glee Club. To celebrate his recommitment to the football team all the players have trapped a wheel chair bound member of the Glee Club in an overly full Port-o-Potty with the intention of flipping it over.

At that moment, Finn recognizes who he is and who he is called to be and he takes a huge risk. Instead of bowing to peer pressure and flipping the Port-O-Potty, he unlocks the door and rescues his friend. By his actions he demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice his own standing for the sake of others.

Again, I know this situation sounds like small potatoes, but it highlights a wonderfully flawed character who takes a stand even though he isn't sure of the outcome. Compared to Esther, the risk-taking most of us take IS small potatoes, but small does not mean unimportant. Even the example you set can mean a huge change in the life of another person.

It is not always easy to do those things we are called to do, it is not always easy to know how to be an instrument of justice, peace and reconciliation, and we're not always confident that we're the ones who are called to act in any given situation. Some scholars and tradition assert that Esther became Queen just to fulfill God's purpose, but in most cases we do not have the luxury of that knowledge. Even so, we are called to act, with profound hope that we are participating in God's vision for creation and with the assurance that God is present in every place.

Today we ordain and install a new class of Elders, Deacons and Trustees, a visible reminder for all of us that we have a part to play in God's vision for the world. "For such a time as this" they have been called to wrestle with God's Spirit to discern who God is calling us to be, where God is calling us to go, and where God is calling us to be agents for peace, justice and reconciliation.

Each of us has a part to play in God's story. Each of us, has been called to have the courage to stand and be witnesses to God's claim upon our life. How will you demonstrate that claim in your life?

Will you stand up for a friend or colleague?

Will you take the time to serve the least of these whose need is so great?

Will you be a voice for the voiceless?

Will you pray without ceasing for God's Spirit to fill you and guide your feet into God's vision for the world.

May each of us have the courage to stand not only for ourselves, but for the sake of the world.

ⁱ From Courage for Community (Sep. 21-27) by iucc on Friday, September 18, 2009