

10.31.21 Courage in the Face of Anti-Semitism Esther 2.1-11; 3.8-13; 4.9-17
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With each passing month we move further along in our worship series, *The Bible – A Story of Love, Belonging, Redemption, and Hope*. We began this summer with the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, and some **Choices that Change Us** including Choosing to Have a Relationship with God, Being Open to the Unexpected, Embracing Uncertainty, and Reverence for Life.

We moved on to The Historical Books with the theme of **Learning from History so We Don't Repeat it**. We heard the stories of faithful, devoted, men and women who wholeheartedly followed the Lord, like Caleb, Ruth, Samuel, Elisha, Ezra, & Nehemiah who stood apart in their lifetimes from the disobedience, selfishness, and idolatry of so many others whose examples we don't want to follow or repeat. The final person we're going to look at from the Historical books is a courageous young woman named **Esther**.

Who is a courageous person you admire? It could be someone you know personally, or someone whose courage changed history like William Wilberforce, Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Tubman, or Martin Luther King Jr. or many others. What do you especially appreciate about that individual?

This past week, Jill and I were in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania a special place we've visited numerous times. We walked for miles from one end of the battlefield to the other, covering the ground where over 150,000 men fought during the first three days of July in 1863 as part of America's Civil War. Going to a place like Gettysburg and reflecting on the hardship and suffering that people endured is helpful in giving you a sense of perspective whatever you're facing today. We read inscriptions on monuments and signs of so many stories of courage and there are many others that will never be known.

Courage includes mental, moral, and physical strength to resist opposition, danger, or hardship. In the Book of Esther, we meet two women, **Vashti and Esther, who each in her own way, demonstrate courage in the face of hostility, challenge injustice, and defend the cause of the oppressed.**

Esther is a book that has elicited strong opinions and some people have questioned whether it belongs in the Bible. No New Testament author refers to it and it doesn't contain a single explicit reference to God. The story in the Book of Esther is

constructed around the ancient hostility between the Israelites and the Amalekites which began in the time of Moses (Exodus 17:16; Numbers 24:20; Deuteronomy 25:17-19) and flared up in King Saul's day when he fought against king Agag and his Amalekite tribesmen (1 Samuel 15:7-9). This ancient hostility is reflected in two of the main characters of the story, **Mordecai a Jew, and a descendent of King Saul and Haman a descendent of the Amalekite king defeated by Saul**. Haman, the right-hand man of Xerxes I the King of Persia, (also known as Ahasuerus "a-has-WEAR-us" in Hebrew), planned to have all the Jews killed because he felt Mordecai disrespected him by not bowing down to him. Haman told Xerxes that the Jews refused to be assimilated, choosing instead to live by their own laws (Esther 3:8-13), and Xerxes gave him permission to issue an edict to massacre the Jews. **Esther 3:8-13,**

“Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus (a-has-WEAR-us) “There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, **so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them**. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, so that they may put it into the king's treasuries.” So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. The king said to Haman, *“The money is given to you, and the people as well, to do with them as it seems good to you.”*

Then the king's secretaries were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language; it was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's ring. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, **giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children**, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.”

The story of Esther opens in Xerxes' winter palace at Susa. **Xerxes** was one of the last kings of Persia and ruled from 485-464 BC over an empire that stretched from India to Ethiopia. Though he was the son of King Darius the Great, Xerxes' reliance on undependable advisors led him to make unwise decisions. His weak, poor leadership resulted in major military defeats. He's portrayed as a self-indulgent and vain man who resisted any kind of accountability. Lack of accountability leads to injustice and makes day-to-day living uncertain and dangerous as Queen Vashti, Mordecai, Esther, and Haman could testify. Xerxes was eventually assassinated, and his kingdom conquered by Alexander the Great.

It was after a week of eating and drinking that a boozed-up king Xerxes told Queen Vashti to show off her beauty for a crowd of drunken men in his palace. The queen in a remarkable show of courage and defiance refused. Vashti is a fascinating part of this story though she's only mentioned briefly in chapter one. She paves the way for Esther. Was Queen Vashti executed, or exiled? Did she live to see the courageous stance Esther took? Was Esther inspired by her example? Vashti is courageous, even though it costs her the prestige of being queen and could have meant her death.

The result of her decision was that she was deposed, and a search was made throughout the empire for the most beautiful young women from whose number the king might select a new queen. Esther, (or Hadassah – her Jewish name) was taken to participate in the beauty contest you didn't necessarily want to win because it landed you in the king's harem. We're told Esther was so lovely that without going through the year of prepping required by other young women, she was the one who caught the attention of the king.

Things are going okay for Esther until **Haman** proposes the terrible edict to kill all the Jews in the Persian Empire because one man, **Mordecai**, won't bow down to him. **Haman** is second in rank to the king. Haman wielded his power as a means to control and manipulate others. Let's pick up the story in **Esther 4:9-17**:

“So Hathach returned to Esther with Mordecai's message.
Then Esther told Hathach to go back and relay this message to Mordecai:
“The whole world knows that anyone who appears before the king in his inner court without being invited is doomed to die unless the king holds out his gold scepter.”

And the king has not called for me to come to him in more than a month.”

So Hathach gave Esther’s message to Mordecai.

Mordecai sent back this reply to Esther: *“Don’t think for a moment that you will escape there in the palace when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. **What’s more, who can say but that you have been elevated to the palace for just such a time as this?”***

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: *“Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. **Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day.***

My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I am willing to die.”

So Mordecai went away and did as Esther told him.”

Mordecai persuades his cousin Esther, who he raised as his own after her parents died (Esther 2:11) to risk her life on behalf of her people by going to the king, even though an uninvited visit was punishable by death. Esther, who was probably a teenager, demonstrated **courage, faith, and selflessness** to save her people when they were threatened by a man consumed with evil. Esther risked her life by taking the initiative of speaking to the king of Persia on behalf of the Jewish people.

Through a whole series of events and coincidences the tables are completely turned on the enemies of the Jews. Driven by pride and self-importance, Haman ultimately is the victim of his own hatred and ambition, and he ends up being hanged on the 83-foot-high gallows he had constructed for Mordecai. Haman’s 10 sons are also executed bringing the line of the Amalekites to an end and the Jews are given permission to attack their persecutors which they do successfully. While Haman’s edict gave those killing the Jews the right to plunder their goods, the Jews do not do that, they only kill their enemies, but they take no plunder which was the mistake King Saul made years before.

Reading Esther’s story, one of the things that enabled Esther to have courage is also available to us – that is having a community of support around us. This is one of the valuable aspects of being an active part of a faith community. Esther had a circle of support that included other women, the men who were appointed

to look out for her, as well as her uncle and members of her faith community. We could hear testimonies from some of you who are here or watching who could share about how your faith and courage were strengthened because of the presence and support of other people in your small group or this church. When you seek to be a means of support, encouragement, and strength **for others**, you also build a network of support that will be there for you if and when you need it.

God is never mentioned in the Book of Esther and yet it's included in the Bible, perhaps to remind us that sometimes God chooses to remain anonymous.

Similar to the stories of **Joseph (in Genesis) and Ruth**, God's presence is felt in the book's coincidences, such as the King's insomnia reminding him of Mordecai's unrewarded loyalty (chapter 6, 7:8). **Sometimes in our own lives, it seems God prefers to remain anonymous, but God is still with us in the midst of our struggles.** The lack of God's name in the Book of Esther does not mean a lack of God's presence.

Sometimes when God may feel or seem absent is when we need courage the most. "For such a time as this" for you may mean having courage in the midst of whatever you're facing that might cause you to be fearful or afraid. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt said, ***"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, "I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along." The danger lies in refusing to face the fear, in not daring to come to grips with it. You must do the thing you think you cannot do."***

Her husband FDR said, ***"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."***

Most of us will never find ourselves in positions of responsibility like queen Esther or a president or first lady or a soldier or commander on a battlefield with so much riding on our personal courage and our ability to make wise, intelligent decisions. Most of our battles are less terrifying and smaller. **One of the battles that can sap your courage is physical illness, infirmity, or disease.** I know that is a battle many of you are engaged in and it's very difficult. Our prayers are with you. **Author Robert Louis Stevenson** who coped with a variety of physical infirmities for years wrote, ***"For fourteen years I have not had a day of real health. I have wakened sick and gone to***

*bed weary, yet I have done my work unflinchingly. I have written in bed and out of bed, written in hemorrhages, written in sickness, written torn by coughing, written when my head swam with weakness - and I have done it all for so long that it seems to me I have won my wager... Yet the battle still goes on: ill or well is a trifle so long as it goes. **I was made for a contest, and the Powers-That-Be have willed that my battlefield shall be the dingy, inglorious one of the bed and the medicine bottle.***"

I can't speak about the courage of Esther without mentioning one other important point. **The Book of Esther reveals the ancient nature of the sin of anti-Semitism (3:8-17; 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22) and we need to continue to stand against it today.** Throughout history the Jews have suffered for being different because of their beliefs. At the turn of this century, "Soon after historian Deborah Lipstadt won a court victory over Holocaust denier David Irving, she went to hear the scroll of Esther read at her local synagogue's celebration of Purim. When she heard the words from **Esther 4:14** – "*Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this.*" She listened in light of her recent experience. "*I heard that,*" she said, "*and it made me think: Who knows if not for this very reason I got the education I got, I got the upbringing I got, my job – maybe we're all meant to do one something really significant. **And some of us do it on the public stage, and some do it by helping a child. Nobody knows of it, nobody sees it, but we're all meant to do something. And maybe this is the something I was meant to do.***" (The Jerusalem Post Magazine, June 2, 2000, p. 16)¹

Who can say but that you have been put where you are to show faith, selflessness, and courage for just such a time as this?

Harriet Beecher Stowe, another courageous woman who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book that had a huge impact on public opinion about slavery in the years leading up to the American Civil War after it was published in March of 1852, wrote, "***When you get into a tight place and everything goes against you, till it seems as though you could not hold on a minute longer, never give up then, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn.***"

¹ Quoted in *Esther* by Carol M. Bechtel, Interpretation Commentary Series (John Knox Press, Louisville, 2002, page one.

Blessing: **1 Corinthians 16:13, “Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.”**

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Who is a courageous person you admire? It could be someone you know personally, or someone whose courage changed history like William Wilberforce, Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Tubman, or Martin Luther King Jr. or many others. What do you especially appreciate about that individual?
2. How is courage displayed in the story of Esther? Who shows courage in the story? What risks are involved in acting courageously?
3. The book of Esther reveals that antisemitism, hostility to or prejudice against Jewish people, is an ancient problem. Why do you think the Jewish people have been targeted repeatedly throughout history for oppression, hostility, and even annihilation from Haman’s vile plan to Adolf Hitler’s “Final Solution” and the Holocaust that took place in Germany in the 1930’s and 40’s in which 6 million Jews perished?
4. Have you been exposed to any preaching, teaching, or scriptures that may have contributed to discrimination and even hatred against the Jewish people? If so, how did/do you feel about that?
5. Why is it important for Christians to speak out against and oppose acts of antisemitism?
6. Esther is supported by a faithful community and together they engage in fasting and prayer to seek God’s guidance, protection, and blessing. Have you ever fasted and prayed with other believers to seek God’s help? Do you think you could? Do you think it’s needed in our time?