

The Courage to Risk
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22
October 1, 2006

The book of Esther is filled with action and intrigue; plots and subplots; heroes and villains. If published today, it might make the bestseller list and be made into a blockbuster movie.

The story begins with a seven-day banquet in a posh third century BC country club—the palace of the king of Persia. But all is not well in paradise. The rebellious queen Vashti refuses to come when summoned by the king. Some rabbinic traditions say this is because the king asked her to come wearing the royal crown and nothing else! King Ahasuerus is infuriated, and Vashti isn't seen or heard from again.

The king must have a queen and so King Ahasuerus arranges for a beauty contest. He calls in all the virgins in the kingdom. Here's where the plot thickens. Nobody in the palace knows that one girl is a foreigner, without a green card! She is one of the many Jewish people now living in Persia after they had been carried there by Babylonians. The young woman's name is not really Esther, but the Hebrew name Hadassah. She is an orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai.

Esther is taken with the other virgins and for a year they are taught how to put on makeup and wear fragrances so that they might win the king's favor. When the king summons Esther, she wins the beauty pageant hands down. She becomes the reigning Miss Persia, and her prize is not a college scholarship, but the king himself. She becomes Queen Esther.

Now the intrigue deepens. Two of the king's eunuchs plot to assassinate him. Esther's cousin, Mordecai, learns of the plot. Mordecai tells Esther to tell the king. The king is saved and Mordecai's heroism is lauded.

Then the real villain, Haman, enters. Haman has been given responsibility for all the affairs of the king. A proud and arrogant man, he asks the king to issue an edict that all people must bow down before Haman. It becomes politically correct to bow whenever Haman shows up.

But Mordecai, who worships only God, refuses to bow to a human being. Haman is enraged. Learning that Mordecai is a Jew, Haman plots his revenge and plans for the genocide of the Jews. The king gives his stamp of approval. The order is issued that on the 13th day of the month of Adar, all Jews are to be slaughtered.

Mordecai pleads with Esther to save her people. After procrastinating, Esther finally goes to King Ahasuerus and tells him she discovered a new recipe in the Persian Times that morning. She invites the king and the villain Haman to a banquet the next day.

Haman is thrilled to be the only guest to dine alone with the king and queen. He rushes out of the palace, only to find his delight turn to rage when Mordecai once again refuses to bow before him. Haman decides to exert his authority forcefully. He orders that a gallows be built and determines to hang Mordecai before the banquet.

Meanwhile, back at the palace, the king has insomnia and, like any good story, the plot reverses. In an outrageous and sometimes hilarious turn of events, Haman is hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai; the Jews in every province from India to Ethiopia defend themselves against their enemies, and it all ends in two days of celebration. It marks the origin of Purim, a festival to remember the victory of the Jews over their enemies. It is still celebrated today in playful ways by Jews. During the reading of the scroll of Esther, noisemakers are blown to blot out the name of the villain Haman.

Although a great story, Esther has also been the most controversial book in the Bible. There are no historical records to prove that these characters really lived. There are valid concerns about the treatment of women, the use of violence, and the fact that the name of God is nowhere mentioned in the book. So we wonder why the book of Esther was included in the Hebrew Scriptures and why it is important for us today on this World Communion Sunday.

We see in Esther's story a woman who can teach us something about having the courage to stand for what is right. Despite her fears, she summoned the courage to confront injustice. Esther risked her life to stand in the presence of the king and blow the whistle on the villain Haman. Through her actions she expressed solidarity with and compassion for those suffering injustice.

Esther was a woman of courage. Her courage seems to come from a call and from her conviction. Esther's call is not as clear as the call of many biblical leaders and prophets. At first she is reluctant to exercise any influence her role as queen may afford. Her cousin Mordecai pricks her conscience. He believes that as God's covenant people, the Jews will be saved from the ravaging violence to be inflicted upon them. Esther can keep silent and let someone else act. On the other hand, "Perhaps Esther has come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). Esther then becomes determined to assert the power available to her. If she dies, so be it. She seizes the courage to risk her life to save her people. She summons the support of the people by asking them to fast for three days, a spiritual practice with focused attention on God and God's will.

Esther sees the impending suffering of her people and she responds. Moses saw the suffering of his people in slavery, and although also a reluctant prophet, he answered the call of God to lead the people out of bondage into freedom. God saw the suffering of the people under the Roman Empire, and God sent Jesus to empower the people to break the bonds of indifference with the force of love.

God often calls ordinary people like Esther and Moses, Mahatma Gandhi and Rosa Parks to stand against injustice and advocate for righteousness. God calls us to see what is wrong and grants us courage to right the wrong.

Last week our newspaper had an article about the Tent Cities emerging in the City of Richmond.¹ In the very dangerous sites of drug dealings and murders, community leaders are setting up camp, creating safety zones in the midst of killing fields. Victims of violence, people of faith, and ordinary citizens are standing up against violence and saying, “No more.” They are reclaiming their neighborhoods for the wellbeing of all the people. These Moses and Esthers are risking their lives to stand up for others.

There are times in all our lives when we may be called to be an advocate for ourselves and for others. Family members walk loved ones through the maze of our public systems in order to secure the health care, education, or legal rights they deserve. Citizens boldly proclaim their convictions through letters and phone calls to legislators and civic leaders. We serve on public commissions, community organizations, and corporate boards as ethical voices for the common good.

As Mordecai told Esther, we can keep silent and let someone else take responsibility. That would seem to be the easy, safe, and comfortable way to proceed. But is it the honorable way? I confess that too often I have been silent and chosen not to be involved. Too frequently I have not exercised my right to express my opinion in the face of injustice.

This World Communion Sunday is an opportunity to seize the courage of Esther and Moses and join in solidarity with suffering peoples around our globe. Bishop Shamana is urging us in this month of October to be mindful of continuing violence against church workers in the Philippines. Since May 2001, 20 church workers have been murdered in the Philippines, most recently our United Methodist local pastor Isaias Santa Rosa. We are asked to join in a concert of prayer for the victims, United Methodist pastors and their families, who have been murdered and assaulted. We are urged to write letters to our elected representatives asking them to pressure President Arroyo to take action on this matter. A sample letter is available in the Fellowship Hall.

Receiving more media attention is the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, Sudan. It is estimated that 400,000 men, women and children have been murdered since 2003 in an ethnic cleansing campaign by Jingaweit Arabs – recruited by the Sudanese government under the auspices of suppressing rebels. Another two and a half million have been made homeless, and untold thousands raped, tortured, and otherwise terrorized. This is a situation similar to the genocide addressed by Esther. Perhaps we are the ones who have been called to take a stand for justice in such a time as this.

Through the United Methodist Committee on Relief a reception center greets refugees coming to settlements and camps in South Darfur, where they receive shelter materials, blankets, and cooking utensils. An education program focusing on child development and protection will benefit 15,000 children. This program is largely sponsored by Ginghamburg United Methodist Church in Ohio.²

The issues, concerns and needs are not just global. Later this month the Children's Defense Fund is sponsoring Children's Sabbath. The number of children living in poverty in the United States has grown to 13 million. Children in poverty are more likely to be uninsured than other children. In California 800,000 children are uninsured.

Each of us will connect with different issues that arouse our passion for action. None of us can do it all, but if all of us remain silent, injustice will prevail.

The act of communing at a global table with our brothers and sisters around the world this day is an act of solidarity with one another. It is a means of joining our spirits with each another and with the Spirit of God. It is an opportunity to express our support for others who are suffering.

Beyond this global feast, some will be called to deepen our prayer life for the world. Others may be called to write a letter advocating for change. One may find themselves joining the tent cities in Richmond. One may join a Volunteer in Mission team to assist others in need. All of us can do something. At the very least we can pray for the situations we watch unfold on the television news or hear reported on the radio or read in the newspapers. Instead of shaking our head in powerlessness, we can imagine the healing light of God descending upon darkened alleys and devastated homes beaming rays of hope and encouragement. When we pray our hearts change, and the world changes.

With the courage of Esther, let us discern God's call upon our lives for such a time as this.

¹ *The Contra Costa Times*, Friday, September 29, 2006, p. A3.

² <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umcor/>

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