

## Courage: Week 3 July 19, 2015

Memory Verse: "Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage."

Mordecai told Hathach everything that had happened to him. He also told him the exact amount of money that Haman had promised to deposit in the royal bank to finance the massacre of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the bulletin that had been posted in Susa ordering the massacre so he could show it to Esther when he reported back with instructions to go to the king and intercede and plead with him for her people. Hathach came back and told Esther everything Mordecai had said. Esther talked it over with Hathach and then sent him back to Mordecai with this message: "Everyone who works for the king here, and even the people out in the provinces, knows that there is a single fate for every man or woman who approaches the king without being invited: death. The one exception is if the king extends his gold scepter; then he or she may live. And it's been thirty days now since I've been invited to come to the king." When Hathach told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai sent her this message: "Don't think that just because you live in the king's house you're the one Jew who will get out of this alive. If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this."

Esther 4: 6-14 The Message Translation

I sat in my car in the driveway of that house for a long time. I'd come to visit a parishioner who'd been diagnosed with a terminal illness. I sat in my car for - I don't know how long - and most of that time I prayed, "Please God, show up. Please be here. If you're not here, Lord, I've got nothing to give her. Please be here." Later I shared this with my spiritual director: the fear that I might go show up somewhere excruciatingly painful and scary and have God not show up. She reminded me what I already know... that wherever I am, God is. And that because we humans are so afraid, so vulnerable, and fragile, God came to be with us, to be one of us; to show God's presence, to prove God's love for us. God came to us in Jesus, who is called Emmanuel, God-with-us. She also said that it's normal to question the presence of God in times of fear and grief and sadness... that crying out *for* God is one of the ways we communicate *with* God.

This month I've been preaching about courage. I co-direct a United Methodist Family Camp in June, and this year our theme was courage. Every morning we started with a bible story about someone with courage. On August 16<sup>th</sup>, when we "Worship in the Park" many people from Family Camp will join us ~ which is a wonderful gift for me, to have two beautiful faith communities, both so dear to me, meet each other and worship together. Esther was one of the morning stories I told at Family Camp. I love this story and I didn't realize how much Esther had to teach me.

Yesterday I stood in a little cemetery in Ft. Jones, in Scott Valley; one of two pastors who stood at the graveside of a 43 year old, whose parents sat in the front row and whose friends stood together in the shade under the trees. I got up early yesterday morning and took a walk down Eastside Road, which is a beautiful country road, not far from the cemetery. I prayed the prayer that I'd prayed almost two years earlier, parked

in the driveway of a parishioner: “Please God, show up. Please be here. If you’re not here, Lord, I’ve got nothing. Please be here.”

Esther’s story seems to segue into the times I’ve prayed to see God. In Esther’s story God is silent... the only book in the bible where God isn’t mentioned. Esther is the story of a young woman who was taken from her home to be part of a king’s harem. The king’s wife had made him angry, and he’d banished her, and to cheer him up, other women were brought in to take her place. Esther was taken from her home, and for an entire year, she and other beautiful young women were secluded and schooled in how to please the king. Today we would call Esther a victim of human trafficking.

There was something special about Esther. We might assume that even in this situation (and although she was fed and clothed and housed she was still a virtual prisoner in the harem, and her only purpose to pleasure the king) but in this situation she was able to connect with people, to show kindness and care to others. She became friends with the eunuch who watched over the harem, and he watched out for her. Each one of the women in the harem was given one night with the king, and if he wasn’t pleased with her, she never saw him again. We aren’t told about it, but there must have been a lot of prayer in the harem.

Esther would charm the king as she charmed the eunuch, and the king made her his new queen. Esther had an uncle who raised her, named Mordecai, and behind the scenes (it doesn’t appear that he ever visited the palace) he advised Esther to keep it to herself that she was a Jew. The king had an advisor named Haman, who was an evil and paranoid man. (On Purim, a Jewish festival somewhat like Halloween that celebrates the story of Esther, when Jews hear Haman’s name they hiss and boo. We heard the story of Esther at “Backyard Worship” at the parsonage last Wednesday evening, and we booed and hissed at the appropriate places in the story.)

Haman hated Mordecai, because Mordecai was a devout Jew, and he would not bow to any man, including Haman. So Haman came up with a plan that would destroy Mordecai and all the Jews. The king was weak and he played into Haman’s hands, and his devious and evil plot, to annihilate the Jews. Mordecai got word of the plot, and asked Esther to plead with the King for her people. Esther was the queen, but she was not allowed to go to the king unless he sent for her. In fact, no one could; the penalty for approaching the King without being sent for was death. Esther was afraid, and reluctant to go to the king, but Mordecai reminded her that if all the Jews were killed, she would die too. Up to this point Esther had lived two lives; one as the Queen of Persia and the other as a Jew, the kingdom’s despised minority. Now she would have to risk “coming out” as a Jew and plead for the King to spare her life and the lives of her people. Mordecai said something to Esther that gave her courage to act. He said, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come [here] for just such a time as this.”

In our own lives, when we are called to take courageous and sacrificial action, may we remember Mordecai’s words (and hear them as words from God, meant to give us strength and courage.) “Perhaps you have come here for just such a time as this.” Mordecai’s words are meaningful to me when I am afraid and when I step out on faith. I encourage the Sierra Service Project missionaries to tuck these words into your hearts as you go to work, to learn, to listen, and to love. Take Esther’s story with you... look and listen for God... be aware of God even when God is silent.

Esther heard in Mordecai's words a holy call to deliver her people, so she and the Jews fasted for three days in preparation, and then Esther put on her crown and her royal robes and went to the King's hall. And he invited her to approach him. Esther played a dangerous and clever game (remember she was only a woman, and she had no power, and the stakes were deathly high) with the king and with his evil advisor, Haman, and the tables would be turned on Haman. Instead of Mordecai being destroyed, Haman would be, and the Jews were saved.

Esther put on her crown and her royal robes and went to the king, even though it meant death if he didn't hold out his golden scepter and invite her to approach him. Esther used the gifts she had: beauty, a quick wit, an advisor (her uncle Mordecai,) and courage. Courage was a gift Esther didn't know she had until she needed it. The Jews recognize God in the story of Esther, even though God is never mentioned. We too are invited to see that God is in the story: God has shown up, God is silent, and present. Part of the Christian journey is to see God, to be mindful that God has shown up, even if God is silent.

"Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage." This is our memory verse for July. Please find it at the top of page 3, and let's say it together, including the book and verse, so that when we need this scripture we'll know where to find it. "Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage." Psalm 27:14

Where in your own life do you need courage to act? When you find yourself in a situation that calls for you to use your gifts (including the gift of courage) - and we all have gifts God has given us, to help and serve and bless others - may you remember Mordecai's words to Esther that helped her find courage within herself that she didn't even know she had. "Who knows? Perhaps you have come [here] for just such a time as this."

What I find - what I continue to find - is that when I get out of the car I'm sitting in; when I stand at the graveside; *when I show up*, and act on faith (even if I am afraid, even if God is silent) I find that God is here. God shows up. In Esther's story, in my life, in your life... God is here. God shows up. God gives us courage we didn't know we had. "Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage." Amen.