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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
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Esther 4:9-17

### **“Courage”**

In order to understand the situation, you need to know the players. So in a nutshell, here are the players and this is the situation.

Meet King Ahasuerus, also known as King Xerxes, which is easier for me to pronounce. King Xerxes had an ego as big as the region he ruled, which stretched from India to Ethiopia. King Xerxes thought he was the greatest thing to hit the Persian world since sliced bread, so he threw a party in his honor that lasted 180 days. Six months of self-congratulation. He showed off all his possessions to everyone who came. All his wealth and grandeur. Part of the celebration included a 7 day banquet in the court of his palace. There were “There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of marble, mother of pearl and colored stones. Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. Drinking was by flagons, without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired.” Now that’s what I call a banquet!

On the seventh day, King Xerxes ordered his eunuchs to go and fetch his wife, Queen Vashti. The king wanted to show-off his wife, for she was a beautiful woman, and he wanted everyone to envy him for marrying her. But Queen Vashti, to her credit, refused to come. She didn’t want to be paraded in front of the boys as just another one of the king’s commodities. However, her refusal cost her; the king banished her in a fit of marital discord. He also used her as an example and decreed that every man should be the master of his house, so now you know where that ridiculous idea came from.

But the king got lonely without a queen, so he initiated a nationwide talent search to find a new one. This is wasn’t just any talent search, this search would put to shame The Voice, America’s Got Talent, and the Miss America contest. King Xerxes sent word to gather the most beautiful young virgins in his 127 provinces

and bring them to his palace, where they would receive spa treatments and a makeover before their one night behind closed doors with him.

Who says the Bible is boring?

Next, meet Mordecai, a Jewish man living under King Xerxes' rule who just happened to have a young cousin named . . . Esther, an orphan whom Mordecai had raised from infancy. Esther, as fate would have it, won the competition in her province and was a contender to be the new queen. But Esther also had a secret. She was Jewish.

But she decided to keep that secret to herself for the time being.

Well, as you may have guessed, Esther, as fate would have it – or perhaps God willing, was chosen by Xerxes to be the new queen.

Meanwhile, Esther's cousin Mordecai (stay with me now), heard some men plotting to overthrow the king. He quickly told Esther, who told the king, and Mordecai got the credit for the catch. The plotters were hanged and all was well . . . for a short time.

Until, finally, meet Haman, an official in Xerxes court who did not like Mordecai, because Haman didn't think Mordecai showed him enough deference and fear. So Haman, whose ego rivaled that of his boss King Xerxes, plotted to hang Mordecai for insubordination and to annihilate the Jews of Xerxes' kingdom as an untrustworthy lot.

But Esther, by wit and charm and courage, pleaded with Xerxes for Mordecai's life and to save all of her people, our people, and to have Haman hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

It's a story of Biblical proportions! With twists and turns and all sorts of intrigue, it rivals any modern day soap opera.

And, it's a story that continues to shape God's people today, because the story of Esther is told in her honor every year at Purim, the Jewish holy day of remembrance.

Loyal to God, loyal to Mordecai, loyal to her people, and at no small risk to herself, Esther saves her people – our people! In the face of a crazy king who

loved himself more than anyone else, she made herself vulnerable. After all, she was a Jew, not a Persian. She wasn't completely honest with the king. He could have banished her like he did Queen Vashti, or worse he could have had her killed on the gallows Haman had prepared for Mordecai. But instead, Xerxes protected her and her people.

Esther gives us an example of courage in the face of fear; strength in the face of danger, and determination in the face of adversity. Esther takes courage in hand and saves her people, and it is a remarkable thing.

Where does such courage come from?

What causes a woman or man facing overwhelming danger and odds to keep going nonetheless?

Meg Cabot, author of the Twilight books, says that "courage is not the absence of fear but rather the judgment that something is more important than fear. The brave may not live forever but the cautious do not live at all."

Karl Barth, that great theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century says "courage is fear that has said its prayers."

Courage. It's the emotion that comes out when all the other options have been played, and there's only the brave or the fearful thing left. It's dangerous to move when you can't see what the outcome will be, but it's deadly to stand in the road and do nothing.

Courage is what Esther had; it's the emotion Mordecai summoned in her to save her people. Everything rested on what she would do. "Who knows", said Mordecai, not pulling any punches, "perhaps you've come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Perhaps you're here for just such a time as this.

I'm struck, so totally struck, by that phrase, which seems to underscore the importance of location and moment.

After all, God only has us to work with most of the time. We are, as we've heard all month long, God's hands and feet and eyes and ears and brain and heart . . . if we allow ourselves to be. The gifts and abilities we have, even the faint-

heartedness and inabilities we have, God uses these. The question is, what will we do with what God has given us for such a time as this?

For Mordecai it was important to point out to Esther that the rules were changing all around her, and if something was going to be done it needed to be done by her.

I wonder if we aren't living in a time like that, where the rules are changing all around us, and if we're going to move forward we need to do so with courage. It seems to me that as Christians we're living in a similar situation as Esther in that some of what we've been hiding of our faith needs to come out and find a voice.

Friends, I don't know a minister worth his or her salt these days who isn't asking really big questions, that also happen to be really old questions, but are looking for new answers, because the old ones just won't do anymore. People are asking questions, like what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus Christ, in this time and place – in this location, at this moment. And I just mean this specific location and street address, and this particular day in time – though that conversation is certainly needed. I mean moment and location in a broader sense, a historical sense.

Just last week I read a blog post titled "Why Join A Church?" The blogger wasn't asking it to be snarky, and he wasn't asking it as someone who isn't churching. He's asking it as a Presbyterian minister, an associate pastor at one of our denominations largest churches. He was asking it because one of the young leaders at his church wanted to know, in response to a question a friend of hers asked, about the benefits of joining a church versus simply going to church.

Forty years ago, thirty years ago, maybe even 25 years ago, people didn't ask a question like that. It was assumed that a person carried out their life of discipleship within a church. One became a member and his or her life as a Christian was committed, fueled and guided from there. People would pledge their financial support, attend a nearly weekly basis, and readily serve on a committee of the church. They may even have felt a loyalty to being Presbyterian, or Lutheran or Methodist or Episcopalian.

Nowadays, for those who do join a church, it's more fluid – just like society as a whole. It's no longer assumed by people, especially young people, that their life as a disciple needs to be carried out in a church.

But these people are still spiritual, and they're still longing for something. To use the words of Robert Frost, people are still looking "For a place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." In other words, they're looking for a spiritual home. People want a place where arms are wide open, but not a place that tries to pour them into a mold into which they must conform.

So what are we to do in a time such as this?

What is God doing with us?

Where are we going?

Where are we being led?

Is this the season in the life of the church when we need to have courage to change the way we are? Is that what is needed?

In a time when 20% of Americans list their religious preference as none, and 30% of those are age 30 or under, it seems that for a denomination whose average age is 68, courage is what is needed.

Four hundred and ninety-six years ago, Martin Luther posted his ideas for the renewal and reformation of the church on a church door in Wittenburg, Germany. It was a very brave thing to do; an act of courage. Martin was a Catholic priest, after all, so posting those ideas made him very vulnerable – so vulnerable that his writings were burned, he was excommunicated from the church, and a price was put on his head.

But Luther's act of courage sparked a revolution and brought about great social change: reading the Bible in the vernacular led to schools and public education, something to this day Presbyterians champion; artistically it led to congregational singing and the chorales of J. S. Bach. But it also brought the new individualism and, with that, divisiveness in the church. Where two or three Presbyterians are, there will be two or three ideas about what to do next.

Traditionally, Reformation Sunday was a day to look back at our history, but I think the more important thing to do is think about our future, and where we, this church and the whole Church, are going. As Joe Marting said to me recently, it's good to remember – and be reminded – that the windshield of a car is bigger than our rearview mirror.

And, As John Buchanan recently wrote in *The Christian Century*, “The . . . Reformation . . . inspired courageous Christians, who often paid for their dissent with their lives, to imagine a new and more faithful way of being the church of Jesus Christ.” [\[1\]](#) That, in a sense, is what the Reformation—and being Protestant—is all about: to imagine new and more faithful ways of being the church that God is always reforming. We don't stop where we are. We go further. It may be dangerous to move when you can't see what the outcome will be, but it's deadly to stand in the road and do nothing.

These are days for courage in faith. We need courage. Like Esther, we are endangered and facing extinction; I sometimes wonder if there will be a Presbyterian Church for my children's children. Friends, we need to summon all the courage we have and give voice to our faith, because to stand in the middle of the road and do nothing is deadly.

Maya Angelou once said, “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”

Friends, on this Reformation Sunday, where do we need to be courageous?

Because, as Mordecai said, “Perhaps we are here for just such a time as this.”

Sources:

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