

**Message**  
**September 26-27, 2009 – 21B**  
**Esther 4:9-17; 7:1-6; Mark 9:38-50**  
**Hillary T. West**  
**Courage**

We have in the story of Esther today, an amazing tale of triumph and intrigue; a story of suspense. It has all the characteristics of a good historical romance novel: an inept, ineffectual king, a ruthless, revengeful first officer, two strikingly beautiful queens, and a determinedly, faithful administrator. This is a peculiar story to have in the Bible as there is no mention of God; there's no reference to ancient Judaic Law, no mention of the Temple, so essential in the Hebrew text. It's a story of exploitation, jealousy, trickery and fear, and violence. In fact, the story, written originally in Hebrew, was so problematic that Greek authors added to the text "to Bible it up" some. So, why is this story of Esther in the Bible?

Well, it's also a story of how God is working in our lives at all times, even when we have emptied God from our lives, and especially when our lives are messy and sloppy and when we just don't like our life; how God equips us to rescuing, heroic acts of mercy that result in joyful celebration. It's a story of hope and promise, a story of determination, dedication and untold faith; a story of God's providence and how we're called to respond and trust in that providence with conviction and courage.

The story takes place probably around the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. just after the Babylonian captivity. King Cyrus has released the Jews to return to their homeland and all are under the rule of King Ahasuerus (ah-hahz-yoo-ay'ruhs) of the Persian Empire which stretches from India to Ethiopia, most of the known world at the time. Not all Jews have returned to their homeland; and spread throughout the empire, they're known as the Diaspora. By now, they have, in fact, in many ways assimilated with the pagan culture. The story takes place in Susa, the royal capital, in what is now, southwestern Iran.

We open with the king hosting a lavish banquet for government and court officials, army commanders, people of nobility throughout the entire empire. Fine linen strung through silver rings hung on marble columns and couches of gold and silver adorn the royal palace. Wine served in golden goblets flows plentifully as the party reportedly goes on for up to 6 months. (I'm not certain how they're getting any work done.) Adding to the hyperbole is Queen Vashti who is hosting her own banquet, for the women in her court. It seems that Queen Vashti is quite beautiful and King Ahasuerus, living up to his name, "mighty man" is merry with wine from the festivities and is anxious to show off his stunning queen. He has her summoned to his court and she refuses. His dignity affronted, the king issues an edict banishing Vashti from the court. Queen Vashti's exit makes entrance for Queen Esther.

Esther is one of 400 potentials presented to the king for his harem. Oddly enough, Esther's not the shining star heroine we think her to be. She's an orphan. In other words, she's an outcast; and more so, as a woman, an orphan, and a Jew, she's powerless. Our

introduction to Esther gives us some insight into the Jewish population. Having been orphaned from their fatherland, living scattered, they too are now marginalized and powerless.

And yet, isn't this exactly how God works; entering into those places in our lives where we are most marginalized and powerless empowering us to act with conviction and courage? Also confounding is how the cultures seem to conflate. The king has in his court an official descended from Israel's King Saul, a Jew named Mordecai. Mordecai is the official guardian of Esther. Now, on the advice of her cousin Mordecai, Esther does not divulge her race or parentage. Nor is there any indication that she is making a sacrifice coming into the Persian court. We don't learn of her need or desire to eat kosher food, nor of her times of piety in prayer and devotion; and she appears to happily fraternize with Gentiles. Perhaps Esther is so assimilated into the culture that she's lost connection with her faith. We don't know. But, what we do know, is, God uses Esther, apparently a non observant Jew, to serve as the agent of deliverance for God's people!!!

In time, Esther earns the favor of the king and he proclaims her his queen. In the meantime, loyal Mordecai uncovers a plot to assassinate the king. He tells Queen Esther of the scheme, who in turn tells the king and the plot is foiled. But, once again the story spins. We hear nothing of Mordecai being recognized or appreciated for his rescuing efforts. Rather, it's Haman who's heroed. Haman, serves as prime minister to the king. He is a descendant of the Amalekites, the very tribe who battled with King Saul resulting in his downfall. Consequently, Haman and Mordecai, are natural enemies. And, while it's Mordecai who comes to the rescue of King Ahasuerus, it's Haman, who apparently has done nothing to earn reward, who's promoted and honored. In turn Haman demands that all offer up divine honor and bow down before him and the king concedes. Mordecai refuses to engage in idol worship, prostrating himself in front of Haman. We don't know why. It could be that he's a faithful Jew. Yet, there's little indication this is the case. Haman, his power threatened plots to have not just Mordecai killed, but the entire Jewish population annihilated. The king submits and as the fatal edict is circulated, Haman and the king continue with their partying.

Mordecai, learning of the decree, frantically summons Esther to plead with the king to save their people. Esther balks, hung up on palace protocol that she can't talk to the king unless summoned. Mordecai drops the accountability gauntlet and challenges Esther, "if you persist in remaining silent at such a time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, but both you and your father's whole family will perish. Who knew? Perhaps you have come to the throne for just such a time as this." Now, we remember that God's name is not mentioned throughout the entire text of Esther. That doesn't mean that God is not at work. How often do we look back, only to chuckle at how God's been working in our lives all along and we simply fail to recognize his saving power? Surrendering to God's redeeming mercy can produce miracles. Clearly God has decided that Esther is the agent for deliverance for this chosen race. And the writer of this compelling story reveals to us how God works within and throughout our every movement, equipping us and sustaining us; and most especially when we're not so certain of our ability.

It is this very Providence that spirals Esther into her courageous acts. She sends a message to Mordecai, “I shall go to the king in spite of the Law; and if I perish, I perish.” She boldly takes action. Once again, it is the scene of a banquet and Esther, when asked by the king, finds the courage to speak the truth, “grant me my life – that is my request, and the lives of my people...” she says bravely (7:3-4). Again, the story flips as God’s grace pushes through. Haman’s wife and friends warn him, “you’re beginning to fall, and Mordecai to rise; if he is Jewish, you will never get the better of him.” The wickedness of Haman is exposed. He’s escorted to the very gallows built for Mordecai. Mordecai, in turn, is called into the king’s court, and appointed a position of honor. Esther is rewarded with the House of Haman and, more importantly, the king issues a new edict, liberating the Jews. All ends in joyful celebration with the Feast of Purim. But, not without a cost. The Jews take brutal revenge throughout the provinces of the Persian Empire. We have to ask, why does a book like this make it into the canon?

My guess is, because it’s our story as well; a story of bravery and courage, with a people trusting in the saving grace of God. It’s a story about the strength and courage of God within us that is revealed in the midst of turmoil; a story about forsaking our own selves for what is right and just and a trust in God that equips us to surrender and say, “I shall go and if I perish, I perish.” And, this is how God works: when our lives are turned upside down; when we’re at the ugly places, or even the dull places; when we don’t like ourselves very much in the mess of it all. God comes and prevails; turns our lives around, rescues us; restores our hope. This story of Esther is about God’s providence; about how God so loves us and so cares for us that he’s willing to come to us, as one of us, to die for us and emerge victorious from the grave, so that we can be the deliverers of love and courage. This is our God, who makes himself so known, our every breath is his name.

The setting of Esther, at an initial glance is not very familiar to us. But, take another look. There are powers and circumstances in our lives, whether in the Persian Empire or here today that can scatter us into wilderness times and isolation where we will forget our greatest strength and power of God in Christ. So, take a look once again at Esther and see again, how in our story, of our God within us who brings us strength and firmness in our minds and in our souls that springs us into action to resist opposition, danger or hardship; **and this is plain old courage.** Courage, the word stems from the Latin, coraticim, based on “cor” or from the heart, that place where we find our inner strength. We’re not all going to be called to deliver a nation to freedom. But, Jesus tells us that for each of us, there is a truth that is worth suffering, regardless of how big or how small.

What we learn in the story of Esther is change comes, even extraordinary change; and justice comes from regular, ordinary people, who, celebrate and stand for our truth that is promised to us in Jesus Christ. That in him, we are those people who are called to right the wrongs. Now is the time. We have come for just such a time as this. Have courage...(watch, video Courage (remixed) [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com))

