

BRAVE: FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

Esther 4-5

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First Christian Church

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8 Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “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. 9 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.” 10 So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the enemy of the Jews. 11 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.” 13 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, and to plunder their goods. 14 A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation, calling on all the peoples to be ready for that day. 15 The couriers went quickly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion. 4 When Esther’s uncle Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; 2 he went up to the entrance of the king’s gate, for no one might enter the king’s gate clothed with sackcloth. 3 In every province, wherever the king’s command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Princess Merida from the Clan of Dun Broch represents every little girl who loves climbing trees more than playing with dolls. I grew up with two brothers and we were very democratic (small d) about the games we played. I would suggest something civilized and cultural and they would suggest playing army and the vote was always 2 to 1 against me. So I played a lot of army.

For Princess Merida, it wasn't army but archery. Her life changed forever when her father the King gave Merida her very own bow and arrow. Here's how it happened...

First movie clip: "Little Merida's intro" Length 2:44

You can already see a difference of opinion between the King and the Queen about how they are going to raise this precocious little princess. The Queen recognizes that it's her job to shape this growing girl into a woman ready to be the queen of her people. When Merida comes of age, the clans gather according to tradition so that the eldest son of the lord of each clan can compete for the hand of the Princess. These aren't the brightest of young men, and the situation appears hopeless, but Princess Merida has a plan!

Second clip: "Merida's Amazing Archery Skills" Length 1:24

Mother and daughter once again nose to nose, each one convinced that she is right. While Merida wasn't the easiest child to parent, her courage and resourcefulness becomes a life-or-death matter later in the movie. She pushes back against tradition, she challenges the expectations of others, and she proves herself to be a truly remarkable and courageous young woman.

Our scripture for today tells the story of two courageous women who will not be boxed in by the expectation of others.

The first is Queen Vashti of the Medes. In the book of Esther, chapter 1, Vashti stands up for herself in defiance of the King and loses her crown.

She is sent into exile, and is never mentioned again after Chapter 1, but she casts a long shadow over the rest of the story.

Queen Vashti's departure creates a vacancy that is filled by Esther, and it seems at first that Esther plans to learn from Vashti's experience and keep a low profile. Then the King's right hand man Haman launches a scheme to execute all the Jews in the kingdom. Esther is a Jew, but upon entering the court she kept her identity a secret.

It is Esther's uncle Mordecai, who calls Esther to her rise to the occasion. You will remember Mordecai from our earlier scripture. The Bible tells us Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes when he heard of the plan to annihilate the Jews. Mordecai sends a message to his niece urging her to go to the king of behalf of her people and plead for him to spare their lives.

Esther replies immediately, reminding her uncle that any man or any woman who dares to go to the king without being called is put to death.

This is Mordecai's response:

“Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?”

And just when it matters most, Esther rises to the occasion. Look at her response to her uncle:

“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 must die.”

Esther is clearly courageous, but she’s also smart. She knows that timing is everything. So she dressed in her most beautiful robes and placed herself where the king would be sure to pass by. When he did, she invited the king to a banquet, and at the end of that meal Esther begged the king to show mercy on her people.

There are a few more twists and turns but Esther is victorious. The book of Esther is only 10 chapters and it is quite a story--think Shakespeare meets “Law and Order.” Theologians criticize this book of the Bible because it never mentions God but it seems to me that God is continually at work behind the scenes through Mordecai and his niece Esther.

Given the fact that both Vashti and Esther rose to positions of power simply because of their great beauty, you can also imagine that feminist theologians have had something to say about this story. I was glad to discover that the feminist theologians of today now see the queens in a more realistic and appreciative light.

Leah Burkenwald, writing in her paper “Vashti is not a failure; Esther is not a bad feminist”

“Unlike the majority of Biblical women, Esther and Vashti were autonomous and they made their own choices. Vashti refused to obey and paid the price. Esther chose to play the system and get the job done.”

Wendy Amsellem, from the article “The Mirror Has Two Faces”

“Esther is more calculated, more subtle, more divinely inspired and ultimately far more successful than Vashti. Yet in order to triumph Esther must discover and incorporate the attributes of Vashti in herself.”

Perhaps we measure these stories by the opportunities God gives these women to take a stand. Queen Vashti must stand alone to defend her honor but she does so in spite of the risk. Queen Esther must risk revealing her true identity in order speak for her people who have been condemned to death.

Where do we see courage in the world today? Do we honor that courage when we see it even when the courageous person doesn't represent our point-of-view? Maybe you are here in this morning and you've been praying for courage to tackle something that's going on in your life. Here the words of the psalmist:

Be strong and take courage, all you who put your hope in the Lord.
Psalm 31:24

We are never alone when we seek to demonstrate courage. God is the source of our courage and it is God at work through us that makes the difference.

There's a wonderful resource in our church library called *The Family Virtue Guide*. It comes from a project to examine all the virtues that are shared by every major world religion. The book helps parents and grandparents teach those virtues to children.

Here's what *The Family Virtue Guide* says about practicing courage:

- You practice courage when you do what you know is right even when it is difficult.
- You practice courage when you face your mistakes, learn from them and keep trying.
- Practicing courage means you work to understand something that frightens you.
- We practice courage when we name our fears, and then let them go.
- We can also practice courage when we ask for help—from God and others.

May God give us the strength we need to live courageously in our world today.