

September 27, 2015

“Courage comes to us in bursts of twenty seconds at a time.”

Readings: Esther 7:1-6; 8:1-6; 9:20-22

Today, the lectionary reading we are given offers us a rare and lovely gift. This is the only Sunday in the three year cycle of readings, where we get a chance to take a look at a reading from the book of Esther. This book has always been a bit of curiosity. When the canon of scripture was being decided at the Council of Jamnia in AD 90, Esther was one of three books which were questioned for inclusion within the canon because nowhere in its pages, is the name of God mentioned; rather it is a historical account of the safe passage of the Jewish community from genocide under the Persian Empire. To this day, Jewish communities gather to read the book of Esther in a festival known as Purim. It is a day of feasting and storytelling. People dress in costume, and as the story is read, whenever the name of the bad guy in the story, Haman is mentioned, people boo and use shakers and rattles to drown out the sound of his name. It is a lighthearted and joyous festival in the Jewish calendar.

Incidentally, the other two books that were questioned for inclusion within the canon were the Song of Songs, which is erotic love poetry, and the book of Ecclesiastes, for its “que sera, sera” attitude.... Whatever will be, will be... so opposite to the rest of scripture which clearly speaks of God’s care and leading offered to the people.

The story of Esther begins with Queen Vashti, who is beautiful and charming, but she has a rebellious side to her, that causes not only trouble for her but for women’s freedom throughout Persia. Queen Vashti is married to King Ahasuerus. He loved to issue edicts and entertain lavishly. An invitation to one of his royal banquets was highly prized. In the third year of his reign, he decreed that a banquet be held for his entire court, all the officers, and troops, the governors and all who served under him. The festivities went on for 180 days, and the king sent messengers throughout the country ordering that the people be given holidays so they could organize small celebrations of their own to honour him.

The food was amazing. The wine flowed like a river, and the fifty thousand guests, dressed in their very best, ate and drank and amused the king. But that was not enough. After the 6 month banquet, another feast was organized for the men of the capital city of Susa. Queen Vashti had organized feasts for the women in her apartments. On the last night, the King sent an order, demanding that the Queen appear before the men to amuse them. He wanted everyone at court to admire his wife.

The Queen just thought it was a drunken request, so she refused to attend. The king was furious. He ordered Vashti to join them. In this time, it was compulsory for a woman to obey her husband. The men at the court began to grumble when they heard that Queen Vashti was deliberately disobeying the royal edict. “If our wives hear of this, then they won’t listen to us. We must keep things the way they are. Queen Vashti must obey you, Your Majesty.”

In order to save face, the King made a pronouncement. He banished Vashti from his court, and decreed that all women in the kingdom, of high rank or low, will now bow down to the authority of their husbands and obey their every word.

After the banquet was over, and everyone had returned to their homes, the King realized that he missed his wife. Rather than apologizing to Vashti, or admitting that he had been a bit too quick with his reaction, he decided to find a replacement. His servants were sent throughout the provinces and territories to find another wife, lovely and young, and she was to be brought to the palace. Four hundred women were brought to the court for the choosing. They spent their days primping and preparing for their audience with the King. Each one looked at the others and wondered, if she would be chosen to wear the royal diadem.

Among the selected maidens was Esther, the niece and adopted daughter of Mordecai, a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin and an official of the palace. Esther was cheerful and full of fun, and it didn't take long before she became the favourite among the women. Her uncle Mordecai kept close tabs on her, and reminded her not to disclose that she was Jewish.

On the day Esther was to appear before the King, the attendants helped her bathe in water scented with myrtle. They dressed her hair with silk ribbons and jewels. Her robe of finest linen was embroidered with threads of red and orange, yellow and blue. Layers of silk fringes fell from her shoulders, so that she shimmered when she walked.

She was led into the King's chambers. As she stood before the king, she was so nervous that her knees trembled, and she swayed. The king jumped up from his throne and rushed to catch her. He was smitten, and knew that this was the woman who would fill his life with sunlight. He ordered that the royal diadem be set upon her head, and a magnificent banquet was organized, where it was announced that Esther was to be his queen.

Even as Uncle Mordecai was celebrating with the rest of the court, he warned his niece not to divulge her Jewishness to the king or to any of the Persian courtiers.

Shortly thereafter, Mordecai uncovered an assassination plot on the king's life. He told his niece, who informed the King. The conspirators were sent to the gallows, but the King didn't reward Mordecai. Instead, the King decided to promote Haman the office of Prime Minister, the second most powerful position in the empire. (Now, if we were at the synagogue hearing this story, this would be the place where you would start to boo and hiss). Mordecai was angry and offended. He vowed that he would never bow down to Haman. Day after day, Mordecai sat in the king's court and refused to bow when Haman passed by. The other courtiers laughed at his stubbornness. Haman was not amused. He called Mordecai arrogant, and he came up with a terrible plan. It wouldn't be enough to simply get rid of Mordecai. He decided to wipe out all the members of Mordecai's race from the empire. He issued a decree of destruction against the Jews, and he would show them. Every Jew was to be slaughtered, men, women and children, young and old. The day of the slaughter was determined by casting the pur, and the lot fell on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the twelfth month. Runners were sent to each province with orders to carry out the holocaust.

When Mordecai heard the fate of his people, he tore his garments, and put on sackcloth and ashes. As others heard the news, they joined Mordecai in a day of mourning. Their cries were heard throughout the land, for death was staring them in the face.

Mordecai knew that the people had only one chance for life. He implored his niece, Esther to save them by halting the royal decree. Esther was in turmoil. She knew she could not go into the King's presence without first being summoned. She remembered the fate of her predecessor, who had been banished, because she did not follow the rules, but Mordecai pushed her with severity of the crisis. "The life of our entire people rests in your hands", he said. "You have come to royal dignity for this particular time."

Esther spent a sleepless night, mulling over her uncle's words. In the morning, she sent word that all the Jews in the empire were to begin a fast, and offer prayers for three days. After three days, with the prayers of everyone surrounding her, she would go to the King, in spite of the law.

On the third day, she dressed in her finest robes and set out for the king's chambers. "Who dares disturb the king?," he shouted, his face ablaze with anger.

Esther dug deep and found the courage she needed. She made her request. Tomorrow, she asked to come to the King along with Prime Minister Haman. At that time, she would ask a favour of the King.

When Haman heard that he had been invited to dine with the King and Queen, he was very excited, for he was not only the second most powerful man in the empire, but certainly the happiest, for he figured he had found special favour with the King. The only person that got under his skin and niggled at him was Mordecai, who still refused to bow when he passed by. Haman ordered that a huge gallows be erected in the city square and Mordecai would be hanged at dawn the next morning.

Meanwhile the king was having trouble sleeping. He thought that a reading from a history book would be a good remedy for insomnia. He ordered that his scribes read to him of the plot made a few years earlier to assassinate him. As the story was read, he recalled that Mordecai had saved his life, and yet, he learned that no honour or dignity had been conferred upon Mordecai. Instead Haman had been given the title of Prime Minister.

Early the next morning, Haman was summoned to court. He ran past the huge gallows in the square, just waiting for Mordecai's neck. The king told him that he had not slept a wink the night before. "What is the correct way to treat a man whom the king wishes to honour?" he asked.

Haman thought the man about to be honoured was himself. He told the king that this man should be given the finest robes, a special horse, and there would be a parade and everyone would cheer.

“What a fabulous idea”, nodded the king. “It shall be done just as you have described, Haman. I want you to take the purple robes and the horse to Mordecai and you will have a parade and make a proclamation in his honour.” Haman left the meeting humiliated.

At the banquet, the King, and Queen Esther and Haman were present. The king asked his wife for her favour. Very simply, she asked for her life, and the lives of her people. She told him that she was among the Jews sentenced to death by Haman.

Let’s hear the lectionary reading... 7:1-6

<sup>1</sup> So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. <sup>2</sup> On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, “What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.”

<sup>3</sup> Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. <sup>4</sup> For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.” <sup>5</sup> Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?” <sup>6</sup> Esther said, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

Haman begged and Haman pleaded, but the King had made up his mind. He sentenced Haman and his sons to death on the very gallows he had built for the purpose of killing Mordecai.

Mordecai was made prime minister.

The next piece of the story.... 8: 1-6.

<sup>1</sup> On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews; and Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. <sup>2</sup> Then the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. So Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

<sup>3</sup> Then Esther spoke again to the king; she fell at his feet, weeping and pleading with him to avert the evil design of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews.

<sup>4</sup> The king held out the golden scepter to Esther, <sup>5</sup> and Esther rose and stood before the king. She said, “If it pleases the king, and if I have won his favor, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I have his approval, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote giving orders to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. <sup>6</sup> For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming on my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?”

When he left the court, it was Mordecai who was wearing the royal robes, and when the people saw him, they cheered. Feasting and rejoicing took place throughout the land, and the people offered friendship to the Jews, because they realized that they had found favour with the king.

The final bit of the story.... 9:20-23.

<sup>20</sup> Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, <sup>21</sup> enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, <sup>22</sup> as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor. <sup>23</sup> So the Jews adopted as a custom what they had begun to do, as Mordecai had written to them.

And that is how the holiday of Purim came to be; a day of salvation for the people of Israel. But as important as that feast day is, this is really a story about courage. In the face of the rules of her day, rules that tried to limit and keep her silent, Esther dared to speak up for her people. She realized that the words of her uncle were indeed true. “You have been chosen for this particular time and this particular task,” he had told her. If she not acted, she likely would have been safe, but she would have witnessed the destruction of her people. She would have spent the rest of her life, wringing her hands because of her weakness.

There are pieces of Esther’s story that might help us when we are confronted with our own troubles. Probably not as big as the survival of a race of people, but none the less, troubles which keep us awake at night and leave us living with a knot in the belly.

Her story reminds me of the importance of talking about that which we fear. When we hold our fears up to the light of day, they have less power over us. Also, there is the wisdom Esther offers about staying in the moment. Fears are always about what lies ahead; they are not about things of the past or the present. For her, it was the fear of what the King would say when she showed up to his court unannounced. One of the best things we can say to ourselves when we are filled with “what ifs”, is the reminder from scripture to be still, to look for sources of light in the midst of the darkness, to remember that the faith we hold onto is about remembering that God is with us, especially in the moments when we are troubled and feeling pressured. We are called to remember that we are not alone.

One of our former moderators, David Giuliano, was diagnosed with cancer shortly after he was chosen to serve as the elected head of our church for a three year term. He ended up using his time in office to speak about fear and courage.

He said he realized that none of us are particularly courageous. But rather, we are often given the gift of courage when we are challenged with horrid experiences. He said that courage comes in bursts of twenty seconds at a time. I believe he is right, for I do not consider myself to be particularly brave, but there have been moments when I have found the ability to do things I never thought I could. I know you have had similar experiences.

David Giuliano reminds us that the words, “Fear not”, and “Be not afraid”, appear hundreds of times in scripture. He figures that is the most important message God is trying to get across to us. Do not be afraid. Instead, he recommends the importance of staying connected, with God, with your community, and with yourself. The things he did that encouraged him when he was going through cancer treatment, and feeling consumed by fear were: to pet your dog, go to

church and stay for the coffee time afterwards. Allow people to be kind to you. Say thank you. Pray. Visit with your neighbours. Ask them how their lives are going, and listen to what they say. Call someone from the church and say you need to talk. Go for walks with friends. Nap. Read the Bible. In the evening, sit on opposite ends of the couch with your beloved so you can hold each other's feet while you talk. At the table, hold hands and say a prayer. Phone people who make you laugh or cry. But most of all, remember that you are not your fear. Fear may be part of you, but it is an emotion you have-- it does not have to have you. You are more than your fears. You are so much more.

You are beloved. And yes, you can be faithful and afraid at the same time, but you have to choose, sometimes from moment to moment, between those incompatible masters, and allow faith to shape you.<sup>(1)</sup>

He also says, that courage is about going ahead when you feel fragile. The word "courage" shares its root with the French word, Coeur, which means heart. So to find your courage, is to find your heart. And then, he offers the incredible insight, that fear is the sign that God is wanting something of, or for us. Just like the angel whispering into Mary's ear when she learned she was pregnant, and the angel said, "Be not afraid", it signals God's call to be part of something new.<sup>(2)</sup>

Maybe, like Esther, we are being called to be part of something beyond our wildest dreams. Her story reminds us how the humble can be lifted up, how the haughty can be brought down, and how God is at work in the people who offer their encouragement and wisdom to us. A young woman in the court of a mighty king, a young woman willing to risk her own safety and security for the well-being of her people. She has only a few words at her disposal, words that must be very well chosen. Despite the knot in her belly, she decides to speak. History is changed. A people live to find their hope in the dawning of another day.

Faith teaches us that no good deed is ever wasted, and that in some way, perhaps at another time, perhaps in another place, the world becomes a better, cleaner, braver place, because one person decides to act.

Resources used:

Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, pages 98-013.

Miriam's Well: Stories about Women in the Bible, Alice Bach and J. Cheryl Exum, Delacorte Press, 1991, pages 106-124.

Postcards from the Valley, Encounters with Fear, Faith and God, David Giuliano, The United Church of Canada, 2008 (used direct quotes from page 21 referenced as #1 and page 9 referenced as #2).