

Fallen Heroes Sermon Series
Esther – Esther 1:1-12
August 1, 2021
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

We continue our summer sermon series this morning looking at the stories about our Sunday School heroes and how we might hear them differently today as adults than when we were kids. The stories of people like Noah, David, and Adam and Eve look different when we drop the innocence filter of a child's eyes and hear the real stories of murder, adultery, and deceit. Is this the Bible or a "Game of Thrones" episode?

Last week, we looked at the story of Ruth, who gave up her identity as a Moabite to live with her mother-in-law Naomi in a foreign land, and we talked about how we balance the desire to be one in Christ with honoring the parts of our identities that makes us unique. Can we have different color skin and speak with different accents and vote differently and still come to this table as the one body of Christ? We can, if we are all willing to make space for each other just as we are.

Today's story is the other side of the coin from Ruth. While Ruth gave up her identity, Esther asserts her identity, her Jewishness, in order to save her fellow Jews from genocide. In order to do that, Esther has to make a choice that one commentator described as "audacious." I love that word. Audacious. Audacity. It sounds like something outrageous, over the top, even offensive. "Who would have the audacity to take 20 items into the 15-items-or-less lane?" "Audacious" sounds like a word we should reserve for professional wrestlers. The word means "willing to take bold risks." Esther's story is filled with people taking bold risks, and I'm going to argue that Esther isn't even the most audacious one.

You may already know it, but let's recap the story, because it's really interesting. In those days, there was a foreign king named Ahasuerus, who I'm just gonna call "the King." As you heard, the king loved to throw parties where he, and I quote, "displayed the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and pomp of his majesty." And this party went on for 180 days. You would think, after 150 days or so, the guests would be tired of crab cakes and bacon-wrapped scallops. But he's the King, so you do what he says.

At one of these parties, the story tells us the King was "merry with wine," which is a nice way of saying completely schnocked. While he's in the mood to show off his possessions, he decides to show off one of the favorite things he owns, Queen Vashti. So, he summons her to show off her beauty in front of his party guests. But she refuses. The King is angry, so he fires Vashti as his queen and conducts a weird kind of "Miss Persia" beauty pageant to find a new queen. The winner, if you can call her that, is Esther. Now, what know one knows is that Esther was a Jew who had been raised by her uncle Mordecai. Mordecai gets on the bad side of Haman, the King's right-hand man. When Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman, Haman makes a royal decree that all the Jews in the kingdom, including Mordecai, should be killed.

Haman is distraught and reaches out to Esther, telling the new queen that she has to approach the king and ask him to change his mind on the decree. One problem: anyone who approaches the king without being summoned can be immediately put to death. That's one way to discourage any interruptions. I usually just close my office door, but I bet the King's way was a lot more effective. Esther balks, but Mordecai reminds her that she is also a Jew and wouldn't escape death. Then he says to her, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Esther agrees, saying, "If I perish, I perish."

Esther makes the audacious choice to approach the King and invite him and Haman to a banquet. At the banquet, the King asks Esther what he can do for her, and Esther says he can rescind the decree to kill all the Jews and punish the person who issued it. The King agrees and Haman ends up being hanged on the same gallows he had built to hang Mordecai. Because of Esther's audacity, the lives of her people are spared and Mordecai ends up being appointed to Haman's position. Then there's a whole chapter about how the Jews got revenge by killing all their enemies, but I'll let Trish preach on that one.

At its heart, this story is about our willingness to make audacious choices. We may think we only have to make those decisions a few times in our lives – the really big, important decisions – but I believe every choice of consequence is fraught with a heaping measure of risk and the scary absence of security. On January 30 of this year, when I got down on one knee on the Isle of Palms beach in Charleston, SC, and asked Amy Treneff to marry me, I had a good idea of the risks – all on her part – and the absence of security in my question. Every choice of consequence comes with risks.

Esther has to make that kind of choice, whether or not to stand up for herself and her people and approach the king. Her decision could have led to her death and the death of her people, but she is willing to make it, recognizing that, as she said, "If I perish, I perish." She is willing to risk her own safety and security to benefit others because, as Mordecai points out, she may have been put in this position "for such a time as this," to embody God's light and convey God's message to the King. Despite her fear, despite the risks, she chooses to act.

Rev. Dr. Joan Brown Campbell says this about the important decisions we are faced with: "We are chosen by God, not because we can transcend the dilemmas and challenges of human nature, but because we understand that we can continue to be the messengers of the divine despite our weaknesses. Our lives are not devoid of blemishes and problems; our voices are not protected from wavering and cracking. But in our weaknesses lie the ability to speak with compassion and sensitivity, to respond to the turmoil and twists of history. It is within this very humanness that is embedded the challenge to remain obedient to God's calling."

Remaining obedient to God's calling in our life is our mission. We are here to be the people God has called us to be. That may include doing things like building a business, raising a family, volunteering for a non-profit, serving at a church. All those things are good, but they are meant to contribute to our mission of fulfilling God's purpose for us, to be God's light and love in this world.

That's not easy, as Esther learned. It could have cost her her life. Campbell says, "Real choices are a spiritual wrestling match. They are a refusal to give in to the false illusions of power, wealth, security, and influence." God's mission for us is not going to call us to stay comfortable, to keep quiet, to just take care of ourselves. At times, God's mission may feel impossible. As John Ortberg writes, "No one ever went to see a movie called 'Mission: Not Too Difficult'." And yet, in fulfilling God's mission, in obeying God's call, we find life, abundant and free, not just for ourselves but for others. Esther's choice to follow God's mission not only saved herself and Mordecai, but all her people. Such an audacious choice.

But I want you to consider that Esther's choice was not the most audacious one in this story. One of the people in this story who get lost amidst all the drama is the person who made it possible for Esther's mission to happen: Queen Vashti. We don't talk about her a lot. She's the woman who risked her place as queen...and lost. Her refusal to parade before the king and his drunken friends cost her everything. Everything. And yet, knowing all these risks, she said "No" to being treated like a piece of property, a possession to be trotted out and paraded around. Her

“no” was more important to her than wearing a crown. Would you say “no” to maintain your dignity, even if it meant losing a crown? Losing your status? Losing your reputation? What about losing a gold medal?

Gymnast Simone Biles has rocked the world during these summer Olympics by withdrawing from the all-around competition, citing pressures to perform and mental health issues. And she has been blasted for it. People have said, “How dare she disgrace her country by putting herself above national pride? She’s an athlete, she’s supposed to play through the pain, not to have weaknesses, not to let her personal problems take precedence over performing.” It’s the same argument made when athletes take a knee during the National Anthem or actors speak out on social and political issues during acceptance speeches. “Entertain us, perform for us, make us proud, but don’t have feelings or opinions or weaknesses.”

In a recent New York Times article by Kurt Streeter titled “Simone Biles and the Power of ‘No,’” the author writes, “By withdrawing from competition citing concerns over her mental health, Biles showed that resisting expectations can be more powerful than persisting through them.” Biles is quoted as saying, “Today it’s like, you know what, no,” she said, explaining to reporters her decision to withdraw to protect her mental and physical health. And yet, for her courage, her audacity, Biles has been crucified for her decision. A modern-day Queen Vashti.

Esther’s story teaches us that corrupt and destructive systems can be changed from within, like what Esther did. Or they can be changed from the outside, like what Queen Vashti did. But however it’s done, our mission to be God’s people in this world means working to change systems that don’t honor the value and worth of each person. When people are treated like property, when they are not allowed to express themselves, when they are used as means to an end, we are called to stand beside them, showing solidarity by honoring their audacious decisions to say “no,” or “no more.”

Today, we are presented two heroes: Esther, who confronts the king to call into the light the injustice and oppression of his political system; and Vashti, who turned down the privilege and prestige of being queen in order to preserve her own dignity and well-being. In both cases, the person made a decision fraught with bold risks. While we may not be given the opportunity to make decisions of such magnitude and consequence, we do have choices to make: to stand instead of be silent, to make space for the voiceless, to support those who are fighting the good fight against the powers that hold them down. We don’t have to do anything, do we? That’s our choice. But maybe, just maybe, we have been put here for just such a time as this. In the cross of Christ, God pronounced an emphatic and definitive “NO” to anything and everything that would hurt, oppress, or threaten the safety of the people of God, our brothers and sisters. Thank you, Esther. Thank you, Vashti. Thank you, Simone. May your audacity inspire us to be God’s people in this world.