

A Sermon for the Installation of Rev. Courtney Jones,
Associate Pastor, Hope Central Church

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Sermon by Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

Here's the cast of characters you need to know:

Esther is a young Jewish woman who was adopted by her relative **Mordecai** after losing her parents

Haman is an officer in the court of the Persian **King Ahasuerus** (ah-haz-you-air-us) - but Haman is making orders in the name of the king may not know about.

Hathach (hat-hack) is a messenger in the court.

Esther Chapter 3- 4

3:12 Then the king's secretaries were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language; it was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's ring.

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, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

4:1 When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai 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.

4 When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them.

5 Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why.

6 Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate,

7 and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasures for the destruction of the Jews.

8 Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.

9 Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said.

10 Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying,

11 "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days."

12 When they told Mordecai what Esther had said,

13 Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think that in the

king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.

14 For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

15 Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai,

16 "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."

17 Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Prayer

Sermon

I want you to know that the King does call Esther in - and she very carefully plans a banquet for him, and then a second one - she knows just how much the king loves a banquet - and loves her - and only then, she tells him of Haman's plot, and asks the king to spare the people. The story ends well for the Jewish people but poorly for Haman and his crew.

I want to talk this afternoon about Esther: The Reluctant Badass. [language alternate: The reluctant superhero]

Courtney and I sat under the trees in Newton a few weeks ago and talked about Queen Esther, who according to the story saved the Jewish people in her kingdom from certain destruction. In particular we talked about timeliness. “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this,” said her adoptive father, Mordecai. Our churches ponder what time we are in - and how we are called. Mordecai’s calling forth of Esther’s identity and power, and Esther’s courage and intelligence and ultimate victory in a time of great crisis seem an ideal topic for the installation of a leader.

I love Biblical stories about strong women. There is Miriam who danced and prophesied. There is Ruth - who needs no convincing to remain steadfast to Naomi. There is the Syrophenician Woman who would not let Jesus turn her aside and there is Tabitha who was generous and Lydia who took her plum-purple cloth and built a church. There is even Queen Vashti, from earlier in the book of Esther, whose very refusal was a courageous act.

But Esther...

When Courtney offered this text I must admit it took me a while to warm up to Esther. On your wall of portraits she is Courageous Esther.

Yes, she saves the Jewish people from destruction - she strategizes and plans and not only saves them but secures her own power and that of her family.

Yet. Esther is reluctant. Her courage and her victory are not apparent at the beginning of the story.

If you don't know this tale, I encourage you to read it in full but let me just summarize it the way one commentator does:

“The Jewish people are now in exile. Jerusalem was conquered, its people taken in chains into Babylonian captivity...there are diaspora Jews who have married, settled and made their homes in Susa the setting of this book, in the Persian empire. As a mirror image of the Hebrew people in exile, Esther is herself an orphan...She is taken in by her cousin, Mordecai, who becomes her foster parent. Then, after Queen Vashti is deposed, she is tapped for the king's harem...and thrust into the intrigue -- both political and sexual -- of the Persian royal court...Esther must decide whether and how to reveal her Jewishness within the dominant Persian culture.”¹

Mordecai discovers a plot by Haman to kill all the Jews - and he comes

¹Amy Oden, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2239 - very slightly paraphrased for clarity in this sermon

to Esther asking her to use her power as Queen to get King Ahasuerus to stop Haman - power Esther doesn't necessarily think she has.

Nelson Mandela once said, "Courage [is] not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it." Esther, indeed, is courageous by this definition.²

Last weekend I saw the new Avengers movie. Without spoiling too much for you, I was struck by two scenes. In the first, one of our heroes decides in the snap of a finger that he knows exactly what it is best for the world, and when questioned by one of his fellow heroes, bullies that hero into going along. What could possibly go wrong? Not thirty minutes later, when everything has gone magnificently wrong, our fair hero once again says: I know exactly what to do - and the same buddy questions him again, saying, "I'm in a timewarp. This is the same terrible idea again!" But once again our brave hero bullies his pal into playing along because surely he knows best.

It might be a little problematic to contrast Iron Man and Esther, but bear with me. Both of them, by some estimations, are at the center of fictional morality tales. Both of them take on the task of saving the people from catastrophe. Both of them will be the subject of costume parties over the years- Purim and Halloween...But they are very differ-

²Full quote: "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear." [Nelson Mandela](#)

ent. On the one hand, bravado, arrogance and flashy costumes are the story. On the other hand, we have the reluctant heroine.

But Esther is not just reluctant - she is thoughtful, strategic, practical, prayerful, and buoyed by the strength of her people.

Let me propose that the reluctant – or thoughtful, prayerful, interdependent heroine – is the rolemodel we need, and the action figure our kids should be playing with.

But then the question becomes, what moves Esther from reluctance to courage? What influences her to be compassionate and bold, wise and strong? To own her own identity and by doing so protect everyone else with that same identity?

It's Mordecai.

At the beginning of the story, Mordecai is Esther's protector - when her birth family is taken from her, Mordecai steps in, raises her, gives her community and gives her faith. Even when she becomes queen - he stays close by, because perhaps as many good parents and pastors know, the job is not done when the children leave home.

When there is a choice to be made, in such a time as this, Esther - initially unsure - values Mordecai's wisdom and challenge enough to risk everything. And she draws upon the strength of the faith community in which she was raised, to give her courage to stop Haman. The king listens to Esther, stops the destruction of the Jewish people, kicks Haman out and appoints Mordecai in his place.

It seems to me - there are such times when we are called to be Esther and times when we are called to be Mordecai. At such a time as this we are called to be courageous and ingenious - and at such a time as that, we are called to call out the courage and ingenuity in others.

This, Courtney, is the fine balance of the associate pastor for children and youth, I think.

For such a time as this, you are Courageous Esther, a prophetic witness, standing for racial justice, standing for LGBT rights, standing for inclusion, standing for children's rights, standing for climate justice, leading the charge.

But for any of you following along on Facebook, you know the picture of Courtney that headlined our invitation for today. She is kneeling down where she can talk to your children, your beloved children.

For such a time as this, too, you are Mordecai, you are pastor to a community of young'uns who don't know their tradition yet, aren't sure of their community, question whether they are loved, wonder to what they are called. You whisper in their ear: beloved child of God. You baptize them and serve them the bread of heaven. You make sure there is a hug, and a snack, and a story waiting for them. You listen for their bright voices and you wonder, what will show them the story of redemption. You tell them to be more courageous than they can imagine being. You nudge them forward with the offering baskets - it's time now. And you dance and sing with them.

If you read Esther closely, you discover that God is never once mentioned - and only alluded to once, as the "other quarter" that will act if Esther does not. *What is in Esther* is a story of human relationship, a story of community and tradition, a story of action. Esther is about belonging and behaving more than it is a testimony of belief.

I use these words, belonging, behavior, and belief deliberately because when Courtney and I sat under those trees, this, too was our topic. Diana Butler Bass has written well of a shift in the way we do things with children and adults, as we draw them into the progressive church. "Re-

relationships lead to craft [behavior], which leads to experiential belief.”³

And here I want to quote one of my very favorite Christian theologians:

“...I think relationships are where we find redemption in this world.” --
Rev. Courtney Jones, in her ordination paper.

Esther’s whole life would have been different if Mordecai and his community had not given her a sense of belonging.

She could not have acted on behalf of her people if she had not had a people.

And so it is, in churches.

This church has said to Courtney:

You belong here. You are beloved.

We will act with you.

We believe in the same things you do.

³Bass, Diana Butler. *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2012), p. 203, and all of Chapter 7.

Courtney, in such as time as this, turns to you and to your children and says:

You belong here. You are beloved.

This is how, together, we will act with courage. We believe in you. Let us praise God together.

But here is one more thing:

Perhaps, you will not stop with belonging, behavior, and believing. The time comes now to dream together about building.

Who knows? Perhaps you have come to this place where hope is central, for just such a time as this.

May it be so.

Amen.