

Risky Business

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Esther 7:1-10, 9:20-22
Mark 9:38-50

Glen Ridge CC
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Our scripture this morning sounds a bit like a fairy tale. It is a story of palace intrigue and corruption in high places set in ancient Persia. Nothing like this could happen in our age or in our nation now, right? Hmm. Corruption by public officials, political plotting.. Oh yea, I forgot....Senator Menendez, Mayor Adams, Jan. 6th, and how many impeachments? And this passage foreshows the terror of antisemitic pogroms and Hitler's Final Solution – as well as genocide against too many other peoples. So maybe this really is good for us to hear at just such a time as this!

Queen Esther was faced with a terrible test. As young woman in ancient Persia, she was unexpectedly chosen for her beauty to be a queen. But soon afterward, she was told that Haman, a high official, had plotted to have her people, the Jewish population of Persia, exterminated brutally in a secret attack. Haman tricked the king into signing onto this plan. If she did nothing, the order would be carried out. But in order to speak to the king and to inform him of this deceitful cruelty, she had to risk the king's displeasure. The law said that if someone confronted the king without his permission, that person would be killed, unless the king changed his mind. (Quite a control freak!) Esther was forced to risk everything in order push the king to foil Haman's vicious plan.

But why should she be the one to stand up to the injustice being inflicted on her people? Most people didn't even know she was a Jew. Why shouldn't she hide behind her amazing prestige and power she had miraculously achieved? She could have just shrugged her lovely shoulders and shaken her curls, and said, "Oh no, not beautiful me." But she was challenged by her uncle Mordecai to stand up and to speak out – facing the risk of execution. Mordecai, her faithful uncle, said to her: *"Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 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."* (Esth 4:13-14) "...for just such a time..." Esther teaches us about courage & risk- taking. No one is safe if all are in danger.

Are we as willing to stand up to the challenge of living now "in just such a time as this"? In the conflicts or injustices in our own homes or at work or in our nation or in our communities, will we be able and willing not to look the other way, but to consider our own power to affect change? If we hear of dishonesty or corruption in our community or abuse in our family, do we remain silent? When we hear about

genocide, pollution or injustice, are we as willing to speak up and resist? There are times when we need to strive, as Esther did, to be courageous, to risk upsetting norms and to sacrifice when we are called.

Elaine had sat in the chair outside her boss's office many times before, but this time it felt especially hard and the florescent lighting especially cold and glaring. As her boss's secretary took a call and spoke with a clipped and efficient voice, Elaine remembered the many times she had waited with eager anticipation to meet with him about a project that he had assigned, or wanted to show him. Now, her palms were clammy and her head ached. She realized that this may be the last time she ever worked with him, since he may very well fire her after this conversation.

But now there was no turning back. She couldn't sit by knowing that her co-worker, Sam, was plotting to take the research they had developed about the new product and sell it to their competitor. Sam had been pretending to be holding high-level meetings with these executives of another company as a sales strategy, until he forwarded an email to her with a note to them at the end that he'd forgotten to erase, laying out his plans. She'd suspected this for months, but now she had proof.

Finally, the secretary beckoned for her to go into the office, and she almost gasped in surprise to see Sam in the office with her boss. Her boss welcomed her and told her to wait while Sam explained his idea. Sam was going on about this great collaboration that he was arranging with this other company and what a fantastic contribution he would make. She could tell that Sam felt the deal was all sewn up, and he was already counting the bonus that he would reap at the end of the year (along with the kick-back he would get from this other company).

Just as Sam was winding up his speech, with her boss in rapt attention, Elaine pulled a copy of the e-mail out of her folder and laid it on her boss's desk.

When we face a great test, will we be ready? Will we trust in our inner moral compass to do what is right and just – or will we fudge and back down – giving in to corruption or coercion. Esther became a role model for us when she risked her position, her standing and her life in a crucial time. She broke protocol and upended Haman's plot for mass killing. She was no porcelain doll or Desperate Housewife. No. She claimed her own power, values, and identity; confronted malicious maneuvering and won.

If we keep silence in the face of injustice, corruption and lying, we will pay the price eventually. We see too many examples in our society nowadays of people who bend the rules for personal gain, too many excuses for outright lying and bigotry, fostering division and cruelty. Norms of decency, honesty and kindness, expectations that used to exist for ethical action being ignored and discarded. Perhaps we, as people

of faith and morality, were put here “for just such a time as this.” Like Esther, we can claim the courage and the inner strength to push against the tide.

But doing this can be extremely daunting. It’s hard to say no, to stand out from the crowd, to refuse to just go along, when neighbors and others are quiet or keeping their heads down. People hesitate to object to blatant cruelty or selfishness out of fear of being targeted themselves. Esther found the resources, the courage, the conviction, the inner strength to take on her challenge. Where did that strength come from? How can we find the ability to stand up to the challenges we face?

Mirabai Starr encourages us to commit to discovering our hidden depths of courage and love in mundane situations. She writes: *“You can start right here, in the middle of your messy life. Your beautiful, imperfect, perfect life. There is no other time, and the exact place you find yourself is the best place to enter. Despite what they might have taught you at Bible Camp or in yoga class, you are probably not on your way to some immaculate state in which you will eventually be calm and kindly enough to be worthy of a direct encounter with the divine. Set your intention to uncover the jewels buried in the heart of what already is. Choose to see the face of God in the face of the bus driver and the moody teenager, in peeling a tangerine or feeding the cat. Decide. Mean it. Open your heart, and then do everything you can to keep it open. Light every candle in the room....”*

We need to pick our fights, to discern what are the battles that are our responsibility, and what are not. Like the prayer by Reinhold Niehbur: *“Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”* Inherent in this message is the need to cultivate inner wisdom and strength, a center of worth and power, so that when the time is right, we will be ready to foster change, to speak truth and confront evil. As people of faith we cultivate fruits of discernment, stillness, gentleness, compassion, self-control, and conviction. So then, when the time comes, we harvest these fruits and fight the good fight.

In our tradition we have thousands of years of worship, preaching, and teaching to foster resources of compassion and ethical wisdom. In church we find a spiritual center that reflects the will of God. We honor Christ within us, who offers us power and healing and unity with God, bringing joy and harmony. By serving others we grow the gifts of patience, compassion, and mastery of self that enables us to face the test. Faith sparks love in our relationships, our community life, our marriages and families. This integrity, humility, and strength are what we aspire to.

Tony Campolo tells a story about Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter. Once when he and Rosalyn were working on a Habitat for Humanity site, they were sleeping on cots in a tent, and at three in the morning Rosalyn shook Jimmy. Here was the former president of the US and his wife is shaking him awake. "Jimmy," wake up she said. Jimmy was groggy and asked what she wanted. "We forgot to put railings and handles up in the bathroom of the house we're going to dedicate tomorrow morning. That woman is 85 years old and she's going to need railings in her bathtub." So, the two of them got up off of their cots at 3am and put in railings. The woman, whose house they helped build, told them later that she hadn't been able to take a hot bath for years because she couldn't get in and out, and she told them that she took a bath that first day, and it was so enjoyable that at three in the morning, when she couldn't sleep, she got up and took another one. The Carters knew this lesson, that true living means self-giving love and letting go of prestige and status.

When it came down to a crisis, Esther was willing to lay aside her status and wealth and to risk her very life. Jesus shows us on the cross, by his faithful self-giving, that even the harshest of trials, bring light and healing, through the grace of God. People throughout the ages who may not be considered overly religious teach us this lesson time and time again – that great strength and meaning is found in self-sacrifice and dedication. Perhaps we can be one of those people, to step up to the challenges that we face today. Perhaps we too were put here "for just such a time as this." Amen.