

Courage to Change

Esther 4: 9-14

February 3, 2019

By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady

San Marino Community Church
1750 Virginia Road
San Marino, CA 91108
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185
www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com

All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Minor characters, like you and me, can play outsized roles in God's redemption for the world. And women have always, and will always, play the role of midwives giving birth to a new way of living and a new, more just, and less violent world.

A few years ago, the Nobel Committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to three women for their efforts to bring peace in their war torn nations. Two of the three women were from Liberia in Africa. Leymah Gbowee was a 39-year-old woman who, according to the Nobel Committee, ". . . mobilized and organized women across ethnic and religious dividing lines to bring an end to the long war in Liberia, and to ensure women's participation in elections. She has since worked to enhance the influence of women in West Africa during and after the war." Gbowee has written a book since the war ended in 2003 entitled, *Mighty Be Our Powers*.¹ Esther might have written a book by that title.

Gbowee helped bring down the brutal reign of President Charles Taylor (who was on trial at The Hague for war crimes) after 14 years of Civil War in Liberia. She did it through non-violent protesting, picketing, prayer, and fasting. Gbowee worked as a trauma counselor, working among girls and women raped by the militiamen. (Life can be pretty gruesome!) Deeply affected by the violence she thrust herself into political activism. She brought thousands of women together to protest in the capital Monrovia, and for prayer. She is the central character in the award-winning documentary "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," urging women around Africa to campaign for peace. Did you know that Liberia was a nation established by the colonization society during the 19th century in America, sending freed slaves back to Africa? Thousands were shipped back as a perceived solution to the institution of slavery in this country.

Like Esther, Gbowee also found her own sense of agency in the world. When her society was at its worst, she was at her best, and that is why she received the Nobel Peace Prize. Do you

¹ www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15215312

think faith makes a difference? In every way! Do you think people of faith have a role to play in God's unfolding drama of salvation? Without any doubt!

Today many of us will watch the Super Bowl. (Go Rams!) Football is entertainment for most of us. However, life is not meant to be entertainment observed from a safe distance. Maybe it's time for us to get up from our chairs, from our passive seats of observation of life (as if the Lord has asked us to judge those on the field of play in human affairs) and get into the action instead. There is another generation of children growing up who need your involvement in their lives – so that they can be enabled to shape the future.

Many of you are familiar with the prayer of Reinhold Neibuhr, adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous: "Lord, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." It's often referred to as the "Serenity Prayer." Today we're exploring the second petition in that prayer, ". . . the courage to change the things I can."

The biblical story of Esther includes this important idea: In the midst of difficult and trying circumstances, God may just be inviting you and me to take action! Just as Esther was called into action, we too are called to action in difficult times. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to your circumstances "for such a time as this!" Divine intervention doesn't always come supernaturally apart from human involvement. In fact, it usually is through human involvement. Sometimes God calls us through other human beings in our lives. This is a hero story or, more accurately, a heroine story. But it's not like the television show *Heroes*, where the characters are endowed with special supernatural powers. This is a human story with an unlikely heroine who demonstrates the power of human courage when it counts.

The Book of Esther makes little mention of God at all. Yet God's unseen hand is evident behind the scenes. There is deliverance to be sure! The Jewish people still celebrate that deliverance annually at the Festival of Purim. The future and fortunes of God's people were completely reversed. And it all hinges on the courage and cleverness of a Jewish Queen; an orphan raised by her cousin, who also has the good fortune of being "drop dead gorgeous." Esther comes to understand that her personal story is unfolding as part of a much larger, grander narrative about the people of God. She has arrived at her place in life not only for herself, but to be in

a position to do something about the future of faith itself. Esther steps outside the expected behavior and changes history! This is a story of brave resistance. You know that we still live in a world of danger and tension. Who knows what brave resistances will be necessary “for such a time as this?”

Queen Vashti had had enough of power politics and gender discrimination in the Persian Empire. When asked to show off her beauty for her husband, the King, and a bunch of drunken men, she refused. Refusal of the king was not to be taken lightly! The advisors to the king all recommended that she be banned from ever coming before the king again, and the king sent a royal decree throughout the empire stating that “every man should be master in his own house.”² Apparently he had something of a temper! This action led eventually to Esther becoming Queen. But her faith and her Jewish heritage were kept secret.

Perhaps you remember a scene in the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, when the women in the family are discussing an angry outburst by the father of the bride-to-be. The mother is instructing her daughter on the finer points of power dynamics between men and women. She says something like, “The husband may be the head of the household but the wife is the neck and she can turn that head anyway she needs to.” And then those women hatch a plan to get the Greek father to change his mind, planting ideas that he believes to be his own. Esther was a bit like that! Not only was she gorgeous and courageous, she was smart and clever. She used her feminine charms to beguile the king for the sake of justice.

In an additional text of this book from the Greek translation, a prayer of Esther's is included. She prays, “Remember O Lord; make yourself known in this time of our affliction, and give me courage . . . Put eloquent speech in my mouth before the lion . . . Save us by your hand . . . O God, whose might is over all, hear the voice of the despairing, and save us from the hands of evil-doers. And save me from my fear!”³

Brave resistance has been needed in every century. Martin Luther was called before Johann von Eck, who was acting on behalf of the Emperor Charles V. He presented Luther with his own writings on April 17, 1521 and asked if he still believed what he previously wrote. Luther

2 Esther 1:22

3 Add. Esther 14:11-19 as quoted in *Just Wives* by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld p.66

consulted friends and prayed, and then replied the next day, "It is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me."⁴ The Reformation of Christ's Church found traction in that stand. Countless women and men throughout history have taken difficult stands, finding the courage to overcome their fears by faith in difficult moments. This is the call to courage!

"Courage is doing what you're afraid to do," said Eddie Rickenbacker. "There can be no courage unless you're scared."⁵ The famous World War I American flying ace was the recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross and the Medal of Honor for his gallantry in air battle. Courage is not the absence of fear but resolve in the face of fear to move forward whatever the cost. In life, there are no safe courses of action, there are only decisions between dangerous courses. Maybe that is why Robert Frost wrote, "Courage is the human virtue that counts the most – courage to act on limited knowledge and insufficient evidence."⁶

There are no safe courses of action, only decisions between dangerous alternatives. C.S. Lewis once put it this way, "In a battle, or in mountain climbing, there's often one thing which it takes a lot of pluck to do; but it's also, in the long run, the safest thing to do. If you mess it up (my language), you'll find yourself, hours later, in far worse danger. The cowardly thing is also the most dangerous thing."⁷

No matter who you are there comes a time when you have to take a stand and act with courage! And there can be no doubt that "for such a time as this" there is a need for people of faith to bravely resist the self-serving nature of business, the erosion of our institutions, the "self-advancement-at-any-cost" culture and stand up for what is right and good for all people. What are you willing to stand up for? What ground are you willing to defend in life? Is there anything in your faith that helps you to stand up with Esther and Martin Luther? Can you say, "Here I stand! I can do no other, God help me?"

My grandchildren love to play superheroes. They have every costume – Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, and The Flash. We need to tell our children and

4 Luther Martin, Quoted in Kenneth G. Appold *The Reformation: A Brief History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) p. 68

5 Rickenbacker, Eddie, *Bits and Pieces*, April 29, 1993. P.12

6 Frost, Robert www.azquotes.com/quote/571695

7 Lewis, C.S., *Beyond Personality*, p.41

grandchildren better hero stories! All those superheroes have superpowers. What our children and grandchildren need is courage on the playground to stand up to bullies. We need to tell them better superhero stories like that of Esther and Ruth, of David and Samuel, because then they will find within themselves what they need – courage! Who knows? Perhaps we have come into our positions, our status, and our resources, for such a time as this? Let us, with courage, risk our time, talents, and treasures for the faith we hold dear, and for the future of our families and communities.

We Presbyterians are known for being educated, and for being educators, in the body of Christ. That is needed now more than ever! I propose we create a new effort to educate another generation in the language and concepts of faith. Let's change the future in our little corner of the world through education. We're so proud of our schools in this community – so why are our children and grandchildren so biblically illiterate? Let's do something about that! God help us! Amen