

“Courage from God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Esther 7: 1-10

What do we think of when we hear the word, “courage”? Most of us likely think of men and women in our military, who have acted with courage and valor in times of war and conflict. We also might think of police or firefighters who put their lives on the line for our safety each and every day. We might think of children and adults who are battling the long odds of terrible diseases. We might think of historical figures who were not afraid to hold fast to their convictions, even when it was unpopular or dangerous to do so.

We also might consider women and men from the Biblical witness who showed courage in their lives of faith. I remember several years ago, our theme for Vacation Bible School was “God’s Heroes,” and we focused on individuals from the Old and New Testament who stood fast for God’s people even in the face of great danger. Courageous figures from the Bible might include Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalene, just to name a few.

When you think of courage, would you think of yourself? Would you place yourself in the same category as these Biblical heroes? I’d imagine most of us would demurely say, “Of course not.” And yet, I would argue, that we should lump ourselves in with all of the heroes and heroines of the Bible. Because to be a faithful witness of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ, we must be instilled with a courage that comes not from ourselves, but from God alone.

Our story today is from the Book of Esther, and its namesake is indeed a heroine of the Bible, someone who acted with courage from God to bring hope to her people in what appeared to be a hopeless situation. The book has the Jewish people exiled in Persia, whose king, Ahasuerus, rules over all. I appreciated how John Holbert recounts, in his own words, the story line of Esther.

The tale is easily recounted. Ahasuerus holds a six-month drunken feast at the end of which he demands that his wife, Vashti, be brought before the inebriated mob to display her beauty to them. Vashti flatly refuses to be shown off in this repulsive fashion, and the enraged king, humiliated in front of his guests, tosses her aside. He is convinced by his courtiers that if news got around that the king’s wife has rebuffed a command of her husband, well, all wives might get the idea that husband-rebuffing is just the thing. So, Vashti is summarily deposed as queen.

But after a time the king grows lonely and misses his wife. Again, the courtiers suggest a plan. Why not have a Miss Persia contest and invite all the most beautiful girls to the capital to compete for the king's affections? Ahasuerus likes this plan immensely, and so women are collected from all 127 provinces of the vast empire. Among them is the gorgeous Esther, who has been raised by her uncle Mordecai. They just happen to be Jews.

Meanwhile, Ahasuerus has promoted Haman to be chief among all of his officials. It's just like the foolish king to choose a most unpleasant fellow for a position of great power. Haman immediately demands that all persons who encounter him bow to his greatness. Mordecai refuses to do so, and Haman is so enraged that he decides then and there to murder not just the Jewish Mordecai, but all the Jews to assuage the slight he has received.

Haman's rage causes him to convince the unobservant king to sign an edict allowing Haman to destroy the Jews. But while Haman's terrible plan moves forward, Esther becomes the queen and is urged by Mordecai to tell the king to stop the coming slaughter. Esther warns her uncle about the unpredictability of her new husband, and Mordecai responds in words that have rung down through the years: "If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place . . . Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:14).

Esther takes courage in hand and approaches the dangerous king. He fortunately is having a good day, and he listens to her simple plea to come to a dinner with her. She invites Haman as well. And then she holds another dinner, once again inviting her king and his most important courtier. Haman is so thrilled to be asked to dinner with the royal couple twice that he can hardly contain his sense of privilege and greatness.

But at the second feast, Esther reveals Haman's plot to destroy all of her fellow Jews. The king is furious, but in typical fashion cannot decide what to do, so he rushes into the garden to try to think. Meanwhile, Haman throws himself physically on the queen's couch just as the king reenters the room. Immediately, the king is convinced that Haman has recklessly attempted some sort of sexual contact with his queen and orders Haman to be hanged on the absurdly high (50 cubits or about 75 feet!) gallows he had built for Mordecai.

(This story) has served Judaism for centuries with a tale to provide hope in the midst of despair, and perhaps that is a far more important reason to reflect on it. All of us, in whatever exiles we are in, are ever in need of such stories when the flame of freedom is guttering and the spark of hope is dim. Who knows? Perhaps we too have come to our destinies for such a time as this? (<http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/To-Defend-to-Destroy-or-to-Hope-John-Holbert-09-24-2012>).

Esther had the courage from God to act for such a time as this, and to be the voice of God for her people: “If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me – and the lives of my people – that is my request” (7:3). She trusted in God and in God’s hope for her and her people, and believed that through God, all things are indeed possible.

Today, we have the joy of celebrating the sacrament of baptism for Reed Ambrose Pellett. Whenever we baptize a child, youth, or adult in the church, we are also called to “remember with joy our own baptism,” which has claimed us as God’s own, freed us from sin and death, and in which we are “made members of the church, the body of Christ” (Book of Common Worship, PCUSA, Baptism Liturgy). I also wonder if these waters remind us of the courage we have received from God to act with hope, grace, and love in such times as these.

We are given the courage from God to speak the truth in love, but to do so with compassion and grace, not haughtiness and arrogance.

We are given the courage from God to yearn for a deeper relationship with God and his Son, Jesus Christ, because we know our life depends on it, and not because it’s what makes us look better in comparison to others.

We are given the courage from God to step forward in faith when we are asked to serve as leaders in such times as these, rather than shrinking into the background because such commitments interfere with everything else we have going on.

We are given the courage from God to give of our finances first to God, trusting that our material needs will be met through God’s boundless grace.

We are given the courage from God to see in the face of the stranger not an enemy or an outsider or an immigrant, but a fellow child of God who is loved by our Creator just as we are loved by Him.

We are given the courage from God to grieve when our loved ones die, and to face the darkness of sadness with trust in the light of the world, who reminds us that grief is real and natural and healthy.

We are given the courage from God to live our lives every day with the grace, hope, and love we know in Jesus Christ. In the words of St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary, use words.”

As we live faithfully as disciples of Jesus Christ, may we trust in the courage we receive from God to walk humbly, live faithfully, and trust abundantly in God’s boundless love for us in Jesus Christ. And may we know these waters of baptism remind us of God’s ever-abiding presence with us all the days of our life, so that, in times such as these, we might be beacons of hope to those who are struggling in hopelessness.

Thanks be to God. Amen.