6/22-23/19 The Power of Boldness Rev. Amy Haines

Esther 4:5-14, 7:1-6, 8:1-8

..When Senator Edmund G Ross of Kansas entered the Senate in 1866 he was considered the man to watch, the one who seemed destined to surpass his colleagues. Yet he tossed it all away by one courageous act of conscience.

In the wake of the Civil War, President Andrew Johnson was determined to follow Lincoln's policy of reconciliation toward the defeated South. Congress, however, wanted to rule the downtrodden Confederate states with an iron hand. Shortly after Senator Ross was seated,

the Senate introduced impeachment proceedings against the hated President.

The radicals calculated that they needed thirty-six votes, and smiled as they concluded that the thirty-sixth was none other than Ross'. The new senator listened to the vigilante talk. But to the surprise of many, he declared that the president "deserved as fair a trial as any accused man has ever had on earth." The word immediately went out that his vote was "shaky." Ross received an avalanche of anti-Johnson telegrams from every section of the country. Radical senators badgered him to "come to his senses."

The fateful day of the vote arrived. The courtroom galleries were packed. Tickets for admission were at an enormous premium. As a deathlike stillness fell over the Senate chamber, the vote began.

By the time they reached Ross, twenty-four "guilties" had been announced. Eleven more were certain. Only Ross' vote was needed to impeach the President. Unable to conceal his emotion,

the Chief Justice asked in a trembling voice, "Mr. Senator Ross, how vote you? Is the respondent Andrew Johnson guilty as charged?"

Ross later explained, at that moment, "I looked into my open grave. Friendships, position, fortune, and everything that makes life desirable to an ambitious man were about to be swept away by the breath of my mouth, perhaps forever."

Then, the answer came -- unhesitating, unmistakable: "Not guilty!"

With that, the trial was over. And the response was as predicted.

Due to his courage to take a stand and say what he believed was right, Ross' political career was in ruins. Extreme ostracism, and even physical attack awaited his family upon their return home. One gloomy day Ross turned to his faithful wife and said, "Millions cursing me today will bless me tomorrow...though not but God can know the struggle it has cost me." It was a prophetic declaration.

Twenty years later Congress and the Supreme Court verified the wisdom of his position, by changing the laws related to impeachment. Ross was appointed Territorial Governor of New Mexico. Then, just prior to his death, he was awarded a special pension by Congress.

The press and country took this opportunity to honor his courage which, they finally concluded, had saved our country from crisis and division.

--Adapted from Jon Johnston, *Courage - You Can Stand Strong in the Face of Fear*, pp. 56-58. Found on sermonillustrations.com:courage

Senator Ross was bold and courageous for doing what he believed was right at the time, amid intense pressure. Nowadays, how little do we see men and women speak boldly to truth in politics, the church, at work or in our own community?

So often fear holds us back and bids us keep silent. The fear of being ridiculed or ostracized, the fear of offending someone or being wrong, the fear that we are risking our reputations or the fear that no one will listen.

The only place I do not see fear holding people back is through social media, such as Facebook, when often people will reply before they think, reacting instead of responding. That is often more audaciousness rather than boldness as they may or may not be speaking truth, and certainly are not speaking truth in love.

When we think about boldness as a gift of the Holy Spirit, boldness is the strength of God that encourages us to act or speak, in spite of any risks.

Boldness includes courage and confidence, for one ought not to be bold without being confident in what we are taking a risk for, or confident in our God to guide us to be courageous, willing to do or say what is right.

I like how someone once wrote: “There is no courage without fear. Boldness overcomes fear.”

--found on google images

One of the best examples of God’s gift of boldness in the Scriptures is found in the story of Esther, which comes from the time of the Jewish exile in Persia, formerly Babylon.

Now, many scholars and church historians dislike the book of Esther, some because it lifts up a female protagonist, some because of its violence, and many because God’s name is not mentioned throughout her story. There is no mention of God, the Torah, religious customs or the Hebrew sense of justice, mercy and kindness anywhere in this book of the Bible.

Yet, somehow, it has survived throughout the centuries, is part of the Holy Scriptures, and so today we ponder what her story may say to us about the power of boldness.

Esther was a young Jewish woman who remained in exile in the Persian city of Susa, raised by her uncle Mordecai. When King Ahasuerus, also known as King Xerxes, called for young women to compete to take the place of Queen, after his previous Queen, Vashti, displeased him, Esther was taken from her home to the king’s palace to begin a long period of preparation before being presented to the King. Esther pleased King Ahasuerus enough that he elevated her to Queen, then gave a banquet in her honor.

Her uncle, Mordecai, caught wind of a plot to kill the king, brought it to the attention of Esther, who told the king, and thus Mordecai was honored. Yet Mordecai then upset the King’s head official, Haman, by refusing to bow down to him, and Haman plotted revenge on Mordecai by convincing the King to issue a decree that would eventually kill all of the Jews in Persia. Later on, even as Haman was plotting Mordecai’s death, the King was honoring Mordecai.

Our first passage today is when Esther found out about the decree from Mordecai, as relayed by her servant. He was distraught and urged Esther to speak to the King, even though the King did not know she was a Jew. In his words of encouragement, Mordecai uttered the most famous words in this story: “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.” (4.14 NRSV)

Have you ever picked up the phone or received an email or had an encounter with someone that would change the course of your life? Sometimes the call may be news of a death, or a change in work status. Sometimes the email is an unexpected acceptance letter or a new opportunity. Sometimes the encounter is a God moment that begins a new ministry or changes your perspective. While there are times when we become the victim of our circumstances, there are other times when we can clearly see God’s hand in our change of direction.

For such a time as this.

Mordecai’s words were a turning point for Esther. He begged her that perhaps she was now Queen for such a time as this, to bring deliverance for her people, to save God’s people still in exile.

Yet, although she was queen, Esther knew her limited power. She knew that Vashti had been demoted as queen for displeasing the king. She knew she risked her own life by sharing her Jewish identity. And she knew that as a woman in her culture, she lived or died on the whim of the king. If the king was not in a good mood when she approached him unannounced, it could mean the end of her life as well.

Yet, after days of fasting and we can assume praying, Esther drew up the courage and confidence to boldly go before the king. And she was politically astute in her plans. She did not go in demanding for the deliverance of her people. She did not go in with a specific plan in place to save her people.

Instead, she invited the King and Haman to a banquet. The king loved his banquets. At that banquet she invited them to another banquet. And at that banquet, when the King was in a good mood and even offered Esther up to half his kingdom, she then asked the king to save her life and the lives of her people, if he so desired. King Ahasuerus chose to do so, and in the process got rid of Haman, who was outed as the one seeking to end the Queen’s life, and the life of her people.

Esther then asked the king to change his edict, if he so desired, so that the Jews would not be killed. King Ahasuerus instructed Mordecai to write the change of decree, and there was great rejoicing from the Jews who survived.

That rejoicing continues down to this day, as the Jewish festival of Purim recalls Esther’s story of God’s deliverance. While her story is rarely shared in Christian worship, her story is celebrated once a year with dramatic readings and humor plays.

Ether was given the power of boldness, to speak out in an appropriate yet risky way to save God’s people and remind us that God is always at work in our midst.

Yet Esther is not the only story of the power of boldness found in our Scriptures. The book of Acts tells the story of the spread of the good news of Jesus, as the disciples found their voice to proclaim a crucified and risen Savior.

In Acts 4, the story is told that Peter and John healed a crippled man at the Temple in Jerusalem. This healing and their proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection landed them in jail overnight, until they were brought before the religious leaders and asked, “By what power or in what name did you do this?” (4.7)

Remember, these would be the same religious leaders who turned Jesus over to be crucified.

Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, spoke with bold confidence that their power to heal was through the name of Jesus. Although the religious leaders didn’t like what they saw and heard, they only demanded that Peter and John stop speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus, and released them after many more threats.

When Peter and John returned to the fellowship of their brothers and sisters in Christ, they recounted the healing, the arrest, and the threats made by the religious rulers. Yet they also knew that it was not time to stop. The Holy Spirit was just getting started! So in response, the early church and its leaders prayed for boldness, boldness to continue to preach and teach and heal in the name of Jesus.

Acts 4:31 then states, “When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.” (4.31 NRSV)

Have you ever prayed for boldness? Or are you, like many before you and even around you, hesitant to pray that prayer, afraid of the ways in which God may call you to be bold and speak up for your faith in Jesus or courageous in speaking up for God’s ways of justice, love and mercy?

Esther was empowered to be bold to speak to the political situation of her day. Peter and John were empowered to continue to share their experience of Jesus’ risen from the dead.

As we consider how God is calling us to be bold, like Peter and John we all have a faith story to live, and to share. When was the last time you humbly shared your story of faith, how faith in Jesus makes an impact in your life? Did you share your story with family, friends or strangers? I am not talking here about a three-hour conversation. When was the last time you shared a three-minute story of God’s presence in your life?

Nowadays it takes courage to even mention Jesus’ name, let alone share why we are Christians.

Yet God calls us to boldly proclaim the good news of salvation through Jesus, through our stories as well as our actions.

There are also so many needs around us, so many ways we in this world are not living by love and mercy. Listen to the news on any given night and we catch a glimpse of the needs around us. Yes, many of our social struggles have been going on for years. Different needs get lifted up at different times by different groups for different political reasons.

*Children in detention centers. Racial bias. Systemic poverty. Lack of access to health care.*

Like Esther, whenever we in the church gain the courage to speak out to these needs, we are seen as political. Yet regardless of political affiliation, Jesus calls us to care for the children, the poor, the needy, the forgotten. Jesus calls us to recognize our own bias, and our own complicity. Jesus calls us to care for our community.

Some churches do this through outreaches that care for the practical needs of their local communities, like food drives and free meals, access to affordable medicine and access to advocates and attorneys. Some churches do this by writing to their politicians, protesting at the courthouse, and raising awareness of the issues close to their hearts.

However God calls us, however God calls you, consider the ways we are living in this time, in this place, and called to care for God’s children of all ages here and now.

Like Esther and Peter, we are called to begin in prayer and fasting, in listening for God’s ways and discerning God’s will.

Like Esther and Peter, we are called to be bold not by shouting in the face of others, not by screaming over one another, but by listening, by being respectful, by finding our common ground, by speaking the truth in love.

F Willis Johnson, a pastor from Ferguson, Missouri, would remind us as we seek to follow God’s ways in this time and place, that there are certain do’s and don’ts to follow, whatever our passion and concerns.

He reminds us not to quibble, not to major in the minors or get bogged down in the weeds rather than the big picture; he reminds us to not be quiet, but to begin in conversation instead of believing we know everything; and he reminds us to not quit, for now is the time to pray and to act. As Anne Frank once said, “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

He also reminds us to acknowledge that we don’t have all of the answers to life’s very complex questions; to acknowledge the presence of evil in this world; and to affirm that pain is real.

--F Willis Johnson “What To Say, What To Do” 7-8-16 ministrymatters.com

Whether we are speaking out on injustice or sharing our stories of faith, may the power of boldness be the power of God within us, “who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by his power at work within us.” (Eph 3.20 CEB) The power of boldness is the power of God’s Holy Spirit. Like the power of hope we pondered last week, like the power of obedience we will ponder next week, boldness and courage can be gifts of God for us, as we seek to live in holy communion with and for one another and our greater community.

We have a God who loves us, a God who cares for us, and a God who yearns for us to share our stories of faith. So even in the ordinary days of our lives, for such a time as this, may we be empowered by boldness, uplifted by courage, and confident in God’s Word in order to share both how Jesus has been good news to our lives as well as to speak out for justice and mercy for all God’s children. May we have the boldness to say and do what is right.

May it be so. Let us pray.