6-7-20 Living By Courage Rev. Amy Haines

Esther 4:5-17

During his years as premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev denounced many of the policies and atrocities of Joseph Stalin. Once, as he censured Stalin in a public meeting,

Khrushchev was interrupted by a shout from a heckler in the audience.

"You were one of Stalin's colleagues. Why didn't you stop him?"

"Who said that?" roared Khrushchev.

An agonizing silence followed as nobody in the room dared move a muscle.

Then Khrushchev replied quietly, "Now you know why."

 -Today in the Word, July 13, 1993 sermonillustrations.com:courage

Over the past two years, I have listened to the stories from my African-American clergy colleagues who are tired of being silent, tired of living in fear for their families that a simple comment many become a life-threatening moment.

This week, during an online continuing education retreat, I was reminded once again to not allow fear to silence my voice, but most especially, to not allow fear to silence my response to God’s voice.

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.

So often we describe fear as the feeling that we need to flee everything and run. Yet today, God invites us instead to live by courage in order to face everything and rise.

That is what I see happening in the peaceful protests in cities and small towns—the courage to face backlash and say enough is enough, black lives matter, and the time is now for systemic change.

That is what I hear as a yearning for the church of the future, that we have the courage to stand up and say faith is not about our preferences, but about reaching out to the world around us

with the transforming love of God.

Face everything and rise—that is what we are invited to do today, to face our fears with courage.

Jack Hyles proclaims:

Do not ask for fears to be removed; ask for courage equal to the fears.

- thepastorsworkshop.com:courage

I find it fascinating that Oxford Dictionary defines courage as

“The ability to do something that frightens one.” or “Strength in the midst of pain or grief.”

 -bing.com

Notice that courage is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to act in spite of fear.

The Old Testament lesson we have heard today is the story of one woman’s courage

that saved the remnant of God’s people living in exile in the Persian Empire.

Esther was a young Jewish orphan who remained in exile in the Persian city of Susa, raised by her uncle Mordecai. When King Aha-sue-rus, 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 Aha-sue-rus enough that he elevated her to Queen.

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 began an ongoing battle with the King’s head official, Haman, by refusing to bow down to him. Haman plotted revenge on Mordecai by convincing the King to issue a decree that would eventually kill all of the Jews still living in Persia.

Our scripture passage today tells the story of when Esther finds out about the decree from Mordecai, as relayed by her servant. Mordecai was distraught and urged Esther to speak to the King, even though the King did not know she was a Jew.

In Mordecai’s words of encouragement, he 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)

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 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.

After days of fasting and praying, Esther drew up the courage and confidence to boldly approach 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. That was the moment she drew up her courage to claim her identity as one of God’s chosen people, although they were but a maligned remnant in that time and place. King Ahasuerus accepted who she was and what she asked him to do. He got rid of Haman, instructed Mordecai to write the change of decree of his edict, and there was great rejoicing from the Jews who survived. That rejoicing continues to this day, as the Jewish festival of Purim recalls Esther’s story of God’s deliverance.

Esther lived by courage, facing her fears in order to speak out on behalf of others.

Who do you see living by courage today, in the face of the pandemics of COVID and racism?

Who do you see living by courage today, sharing their faith in Jesus through word and action

in spite of a dismissive world around us? How are you living by courage today?

St. Augustine of Hippo once said:

Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.

 *-Works and Biography*, thepastorsworkshop.com:courage

Courage isn’t always about systemic change. Courage isn’t always about the headliners stepping out and taking a stand. Rather, courage is often less the violent courage of Marvel superheroes and more the personal courage of everyday people willing to step out in faith and make a difference in the life of another.

..Lauren Hill was a high school basketball player in Cincinnati who ended up becoming a national celebrity. Lauren was diagnosed with a rare and fatal form of brain cancer. Yet she did not allow her diagnosis to deter her. At first, her goal was to be able to play in a college game. Hiram College adjusted its schedule, and the game was played before a sellout crowd at Xavier University. Lauren played and scored.

After that, Lauren had the courage to become a voice for people who had the same disease.

She began a foundation to raise funds for a cure and raised more than a million dollars. Her picture was placed on a Wheaties box; she earned an honorary doctorate, appeared on several TV shows, and won the Pat Summitt Courage Award.

One of her philosophies was “Playing to the final buzzer.” She did so in basketball and she did so in life.

 -J Michael Shannon “Courage” preaching.com adapted

..Rahul Dubey last Monday night found his DC neighborhood full of protestors running from the police after curfew. He opened his home to almost 70 people to protect them from injury,

and they spent the night caring for one another, sharing stories, and staying until it was safe to leave as curfew was lifted at 6am the next morning. Rahul didn’t stop to think that he might be in trouble for helping others. He simply had the courage to care for others by offering them shelter and safety.

 - taken from wtop.com/dc/2020/06/man-who-sheltered-protesters-it-was-very-instinctual/

Maybe you have seen courage displayed by others standing up to the school or work bully.

Maybe you have seen courage displayed by others who spoke out for justice.

Maybe you have seen courage displayed by mothers seeking to change sentencing laws.

Maybe you have seen courage displayed by a student publicly declaring that his faith in Jesus

was his firm foundation.

There are many needs around us, many ways we in this world are not living by love and justice and mercy. Racial bias. Systemic poverty. Lack of access to health care. Unemployment. The lack of valuing human life in all generations.

Jesus calls us to pay attention to these needs, to find ways to care for the children, the poor, the needy, the forgotten. Jesus calls us to recognize our own bias, and our own complicity in the -isms that divide us. Jesus calls us to care for our community with love and grace and voice and action.

For those of you who have been baptized in the United Methodist Church, how is God calling you to courageously live into your baptismal vows? At our baptism, we have claimed the following:

\*To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sin.

\*To accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.

\*To confess Jesus Christ as our Savior, put our whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as our Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations and races.

Friends, we need courage to live into those baptismal vows, which are reaffirmed when we claim membership in the local congregation! They call us to a full life following a loving God who went to great lengths to care for the widow and the orphaned, the poor and the oppressed; to welcome stranger and enemy, Samaritan and Gentile; to forgive and redeem and restore us to new life in Christ.

For such a time as this, we as the church, the people of God, the followers of Christ, are called to live into our baptismal vows.

How are we willing to live in ways that honor one another’s stories, that cherish one another’s lives, that use our privilege to give voice to the voiceless around us?

Like Esther we are called to live by courage- 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.

We live in such as time as this. May we follow in Esther’s footsteps; may we follow in Jesus’ footsteps; may we seek to live by God’s ways of peace and justice, of compassion and courage.

In closing, I invite you to reflect on these hymn words by Edith Sinclair Downing:

Come, let us honor Esther,

her courage we applaud.

When she could live with riches,

she dared to serve her God.

She could not rest with privilege

deny her people's fate.

She chose to live her calling:

serve those outside the gate.

God, grant that we, like Esther,

have courage for our quest,

and use our past experience

to serve those not as blessed.

Help us to trust you fully

that we may find our bliss,

and answer when you call us

for 'such a time as this.'

-Edith Sinclair Downing, “Come, Let Us Honor Esther”

© 2007 Wayne Leupold Editions, Inc., umcdiscipleship.org